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## **Veritas in the Portrayal of Women in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things***

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### **Abstract:**

'Women' occupied an interesting and indispensable part of Literature from time immemorial. Since writing was in the domain of 'men', he was at liberty to portray women from his narrow perspective endowing the women with a set of ideals as he supposes she should possess or else she is presented as wicked, a temptress or capable of anything negative. Later on, women writers began to feel that they have been misrepresented. Men were misogynists in their representation of women in literature. The paper tries to see how far Roy's women characters in *The God of Small Things* come to a true representation of women in general and she is misandry or misogynist and whether the stereotype women still exist in her novel.

**Keywords: Women, stereotype, misogynist, representation.**

### **Introduction**

Men have dominated the field of Writing as he had in almost all other areas of life. He was at liberty to depict her as he wished and as he viewed. His opinion stands supreme and correct for centuries until much later when Women began to write. It is hard or near impossible to dismantle the thoughts planted and ingrained in society and in Literature for centuries. Women have been the subject of many writings for centuries. Both men and women have made her the principal focus to discuss the various facets of her life in relation to different conditions, relationships, position in society etc.

Many critics believe that because men and women have different life experiences, the writing of male and female authors will differ as well. Some believe that male authors are not able to write accurately from the female perspective or present feminist ideals because they have not experience life as women. Most of the time, life from the female point of view is portrayed in literature by women authors, but male authors have also taken on the female perspective. When writing about women, it is possible that authors will describe them differently depending on gender, nationality, and culture. In a male dominated society, being a man means not being like a woman. As a result, the behavior considered appropriate to each gender becomes severely restricted and polarized. The effects of patriarchy are apparent in what a woman under patriarchy writes.

### **Portrayal of women in the Medieval Ages and later on**

It is observed that medieval literature is notoriously misogynistic. The Wife of Bath, that robust and unabashedly honest creation of Chaucer's double-edged satire, explodes with contempt at the portraits of women in literature. She scoffs at books written by men depicting (or rather deprecating) women as addicted to lechery, treachery, shrewishness, and greed.

Referring to Aesop's fable about a lion puzzled by a sculpture which shows a man killing a lion, the Wife emphasizes the moral of the tale (that the result of the combat would have been depicted differently by the lion), thus drawing the parallel between the fable's moral and the medieval literary view of women.

An artist's creation (or rather, the verity of his perception) is conditioned by his personal experience, his personal sympathies, inclinations, and his sex, and that, consequently, stories told about women by the very class that knew least of them and was taught to fear them most, the clergy, could hardly be realistic.

In a way, the Wife is correct in suggesting that women writers would, if they had the chance, create less stereotypical women characters and would describe, like the painting lion, reality from their own perspective. That dimorphism in the Middle Ages is most pronounced between religious and lay writers: medieval monastic writers (be they women or men) tend to promote the same feminine ideal of excellence namely, the ideal of chastity. Secular writers, both male and female, tend to diverge from the ideal, but here again, women offer less stereotyped depictions of women. Hrotsvit of Gandersheim was a tenth-century monastic author of the Saxon Imperial abbey of Gandersheim accused Terrence of misusing his poetic talent to tell fiction (*figmenta*), rather than truth. Terence's women characters are often seductresses, usually harlots, almost invariably involved in love-affairs, frequently avaricious, and, unless married, weak. Hrotsvit's comedies are about women, often virgins, who are not only bulwarks of strength and endurance, persistent in their Christian faith, successful in resisting all temptations or glorious in their repentance, but who, as chaste wives and mothers, become catalysts of virtue and salvation for their husbands and lovers by converting them to Christianity. The canoness's male characters, on the other hand, are usually lascivious, cruel, devious, unjust, and greedy; they are often powerless. This inversion of the Terentian roles in Hrotsvit's comedies is, of course, an exact manifestation of the metaphor of the lion as a painter.

The confluence of the two alternate models of female excellence (i.e., the secular and the religious) and the emergence of a new, composite and well-rounded female ideal occurred in urban setting with Christine de Pizan. She, not only showed great concern for social, domestic and moral injustice, reflected in misogynistic literature, but she also made an attempt at a self-definition and self-valuation. Christine's objection to Jean de Meung's *Roman* was chiefly based on its many misogynistic passages which she labelled as unrealistic, dangerous and untrue. In her works, Christine creates praiseworthy and admirable women but does not simply paint a gallery of admirable female chastity triumphing over male wickedness and lust, rather she depicts a wide range of qualities of feminine excellence, some of which are independent of chastity and even extends to the universal ideals transcending sex as, for example, courage, strength, courtesy, wisdom, and learning.

For the purpose of this paper, I propose that the difference in the depiction of women by women writers depends on the writer's perception of the woman as "the self" or "the other". The best among the women writers perceive the woman's essential self—the uniqueness of gender and sameness in humanity—and construct it, with its many, many ramifications, in language. They forge a new consciousness about the woman in readers of both genders which need no feminist interpretation to explain their message; excel in authenticity, spontaneity, and literary craft; and, naturally, invite the wrath of the status quo. Men writers, and numerous women writers, on the other hand, perceive, and depict the woman in her socially constructed image, "the other." These writers are either not in touch with "the self", or do not articulate it.

The presentation of women in a literary work depends largely on the author's gender and perspective as well as the literary period. If an author's approach is a sort of controversial to the age, that means s/he tends to break the norms and create a different type of character according to the plot's demands. For example, in Austen's novel, women are protagonists and depicted as very brave and courageous characters at least in the social context of Austen's age. Besides, the female authors, especially in modern time, focus on feminist aspects more than a male author.

Male is the norm; humanity is viewed as masculine. On the one hand, what male and female have come to mean at the present time is changing our definition of society. These changing roles and impressions are quite visible in what we read, in what is being written. If, in fact, literature is a reflection of our reality, that despite individual perceptions it mirrors social manners, then women's changing roles, be they social, political or emotional, in life and literature, must not be ignored. While male characters have been given free reign to be and become what they like, even to fail if they choose, women characters have been written to play and re-play the same themes, limited as they are. Thus, when the female character deviates from the norm, from these stringent stereotypes, more attention is then called to the purity of what the female character is supposed to be. The narrowness, the confining nature of the women's stereotypes in literature is as nullifying as are the imagined strictures on her in real life. Women strive to be more man-like and are condemned when they take on male characteristics, aggression, ambition, etc.

Like other women writers of more recent times, Arundhati also writes demanding her rightful place in home, at workplace, against injustice towards women etc or simply, against patriarchy. There are some similarities in the texts from both male and female authors. In all of the works, tragic events occur in the women's lives. These include rape, abandonment, divorce, forced marriage, and war, and many happen because of actions by men. The older women in the novels tend to agree with traditional ideas of gender, while younger women expressed more contemporary ideas. All of the authors displayed sympathy toward their characters and the female condition. The female characters shut themselves off from each other when they have traumatic experiences. Ruth Robbins, in her *Literary Feminisms*, agrees with many other feminist critics that inaccurate portrayals of women in literature are detrimental.

The paper tries to prove that Roy in *The God of Small Things* presents a realistic picture of the characters without being mysandric or misogynistic as was the case in the medieval times.

### **Roy's portrayal of women**

The *God of Small Things* talks frankly of sex and marriage as well as women's desires for independence and fulfillment. It also reveals the traps of conventional marriage, including the condition of marriage which tolerated marital rape, compulsory or enforced motherhood, and the double standard of sexual morality. Women are victims of marriage, family and society. Roy presents a sensitive picture of women in her novel *The God of Small Things*. It would be impossible for a male writer to have written her female characters, especially the portrayal of Ammu and Rahel as very sensitive beings when met with situations they faced, could only be grasped in a realistic manner from a woman's perspective accompanied by the nuances, the nitty gritty, the sarcasms, the emotions etc. The writer's wit, humour, irony and a very personalized form of the language used, all combine to make the novel a great work of art of the times. Like many women writers, Arundhati Roy too looks at her characters from the woman's point of view. Different types of women exist in her novel. There is the subservient, submissive woman in Mammachi; a jealous, wicked, flimsy and scheming woman in Baby Kochamma and there are Ammu and Rahel who wanted to live life in their own terms. Feminist images of the single woman now included widows, divorcees, and women happy to be single. We have a divorcee in Ammu and a single woman in Baby Kochamma.

When Mother is being angelic, she is meek and submissive as in the case of Mammachi. When she is angry or devilish, she becomes a shrew, a nag or witch-like as in Ammu. The women in Arundhati's novel are very close to reality. She tries to capture different sets of women characters who live and breathe as real human beings. The three women namely Mammachi, Baby Kochamma and Ammu, in the novel, are forcefully placed on the margin of society and intentionally deprived of human rights. They are severely marginalized by male dominated society. Social institutions like family, marriage, religion and government are responsible factors for their marginalization.

### **Mammachi**

Mammachi is a significant character in the novel, representative of old generation of women. She is mother of Ammu and Chacko. She was victim of her husband's brutality throughout her life. He beat her constantly for no apparent reason "the beatings weren't new. What was new was only the frequency with which they took place" (P.47-48). Mammachi is beaten either with a brass vase or an ivory handled riding crop by her husband. Mammachi had exceptional talent for music, especially violin; that arouses jealousy in the mind of her husband. The climax arouses when violin trainer makes the mistake of telling her husband that his wife is "exceptionally talented" (P.50) and "potentially concert class" (P.50). Later, Pappachi breaks the bow of the violin one night and throws it in the river. The same jealousy is expressed again when she started pickle making business, Pappachi refuses to help her because pickle-making is not "a suitable job for high-ranking ex-Government official" (P.47). Thus, the marriage of Mammachi with sadist Pappachi lacks understanding, love and co-operation.

After Pappachi's death, Chacko, her son, took over the factory from her and in losing her factory, Mammachi was marginalized in terms of both clan and gender. She was made a sleeping partner. According to Chacko's philosophy 'what's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine.' (P.57). Mammachi, however, does not resist her tyrannical son, she concedes to his "Men's Needs" (P.168) as Chacko flirts with "pretty women who worked in the factory," (P.65) forcing them to "sit at table with him and drink tea" (P.65) much to the dismay of his own mother. She submits to Chacko's desires and becomes a part of planning the evil designs. Unlike Ammu, Mammachi never questions the conditions and accepts the reality passively and with a strange 'resilience' in her character. Her acquiescence is a defensive gesture of her sense of 'endurance' to undergo the torture and trauma without speaking it out.

### **Baby Kochamma**

The character of Baby Kochamma is typical of a woman frustrated and victimized by fate. She comes very close to the concept of the old maid in literature. The Old Maid is usually defined as someone ---unattractive, asexual/sexually frustrated, ridiculed/pitied, cold/queer/weird, unhappy, nosey, alienated from real society, a frustrated mother, sometimes a surrogate parent, extremely passive as she never chooses her role, a tragic figure. The old maid in literature carries a negative connotation. She is the ultimate in rejection. She is sometimes seen as a maiden aunt type where she falls in and out of the Mother role of being a surrogate parent to some stranded niece or nephew. She, most often, reeks of frustrated motherhood and always of frustrated sexuality. She may manifest great religiosity or piety, but not spirituality.

Baby Kochamma is Pappachi's sister who is a victim of circumstances in the novel. She receives the shock of her life when her dream of marrying father Mulligan, an Irish priest gets shattered. To win him, she converts herself to Roman Catholic faith but ultimately she is a failure and starts living in isolation in the Ayemenem house. She cannot bear the thought of Ammu being loved by an outcaste. There is an element of jealousy and hate generated in Ammu's closeness towards another man. It is not surprising that Baby Kochamma conspires with the inspector and puts Velultha behind the bars, where he is severely beaten to death. This attitude of negativism is perhaps due to the unjust and malicious treatment meted out to her in her life. The fear of being dispossessed is ever present. She felt that she had the "fate of the wretched Man-less woman" (P.45). Thus, like Mammachi, Baby Kochamma also apparently submits to the patriarchal social norms without any hesitation. She is responsible for toxifying the minds of Mammachi and Chacko, fabrication of a false case against Velutha, deceiving the children into betraying Velutha, advising Chacko to return Estha to his father and forcing Ammu to leave Ayemenem. All these manipulations isolate Baby Kochamma to a wretched life where her only companion is TV. As a subaltern, she belongs to the lower middle class in terms of her power and is quite unstable in terms of class loyalty. She abandons the Syrian Christian community and joins Roman Catholicism, for the sake of her love for Father Mulligan and adheres to that faith even after Father Mulligan's newly appropriated avatar of a Hindu Sadhu as well as adopts celibacy. Roy, in the portrayal of Baby Kochamma, had tried to show to what extent a woman can go against another of her

own. She is not the kind that the writer idealizes but there may be characters like Kochamma in real life and Roy has captured a true to life character in Kochamma.

### **The valorization of the independent spirit in Ammu and Rahel**

At Ayemenem, Ammu felt like a captive lady. She is forced to quit her education because Pappachi felt that college education for a girl is an unnecessary expenditure. She gradually begins to grow desperate. "All day she dreamed of escaping from Ayemenem and the clutches of her ill-tempered father and bitter, long suffering mother. She hatched several wretched little plans. Eventually, one worked. Pappachi agreed to let her spend the summer with a distant aunt who lived in Calcutta (P.38-39). Here, she marries a man in a fit of desperation, "she thought that anything, anyone at all, would be better than returning to Ayemenem" (P.39). Ammu is shocked beyond words when her husband offers her to his officer in order to reinstate him in his position. Ammu is not a "fallen" woman. She is pained to see the inability of her husband to protect her self-respect and, therefore, decides to leave him. She returns to the same dark cellar "Ayemenem" from which she wanted to run away. Destiny, once again, brings her to the place of perpetual suffering. This reflects the sensitivity of woman who tolerates everything merely for her children's sake.

However, her brother Chacko, is privileged in every strata of family life. After completion of schooling, Ammu is not allowed to take further education, while her brother is sent to Oxford University for higher education. Ammu's return as a divorcee woman earns no place and respect in the traditional family. Thus, the family members were hostile, neglectful and unfriendly to her and her children. She receives mental torture from the ladies of her family. In spite of all these sufferings, she loves and cares her innocent children. As a mother, she wanted the best for her children. She plans for their future, their education and perfection of manners. She becomes mother and father both for them. At this stage, it is observed that mother in her character is predominated than a woman. The free nature of Ammu forces her to rebellion. The woman in her revives. She is also fully aware of the conservative mindset of the members of her family and the society of which she is an integral part. Still, she enters "into forbidden territory" (P.31) to love and being loved by an untouchable- Velutha. Sexuality was not something to be hidden and ashamed of. This seems to be the writer's view in the case of Ammu and her daughter Rahel. At this act, she becomes unpardonable and makes herself susceptible to the deliberate humiliation to which she is subjected by the police Inspector as well as her own family. When this disastrous affair is revealed, Velutha is grabbed by police and killed on false charge of rape. At the end of novel, Ammu is exiled from home by her family members. She is separated from her children and not allowed to visit Ayemenem. to the death of Velutha and Ammu. Tired, exhausted, sick and finally defeated, she is found dead in a grimy room in Bharat Lodge in Aleppy. Even after death, her humiliation does not end, the church refused to bury Ammu. Ammu's life is observed as severely marginalized by social institutions like family, marriage, religion and the police-supposed to be the custodian of the public. Ammu's sufferings are not only brought about by men but women like Mammachi and Baby Kochamma have equal share. Mammachi did nothing to save her daughter while, on the other hand, she made arrangements for Chacko's needs. Though a woman herself, she clung to the patriarchal mindset of the society. Baby

Kochamma, another woman member of the household, was responsible for aggravating Ammu's situation. She insinuated Chacko to throw out Ammu from Ayemenem. She gave a wrong statement to the police that ultimately led

### **Rahel**

Another sensitive woman character in the novel is Rahel, Ammu's daughter. Rahel is the offspring of divorced parents, daughter of Ammu who is deprived of conventional parental love. She lives with the stigma of a mixed parentage, both religious (as her father was Hindu and Ammu a Syrian Christian) and ethnic (as father was a Bengali and Mother is a Keralite). She never faced the domestic violence and suppression as Ammu and Mammachi did. Still she remains marginal character because she happens to be a daughter of neglected Ammu. She too experienced insult and humiliation in her childhood as her mother. Her life was totally disturbed and deserted because of tormenting memories of the past. For Rahel, her sorrows are her past memories which are associated with her mother.

She has a hard time in School and was expelled three times as she refuses to abide by the rules. She is disliked by her relatives-Baby Kochamma, Kochu Maria and even Chacko. It is only natural to consider Velultha a father figure with whom she plays and receives love and kindness. "She knew his back. She'd been carried on it. More times than she could count". (P.73). When Rahel discovers about the sexual liaison of Ammu with Velultha, she locks herself in the bedroom. Being the victim of a dysfunctional family, she fails to connect with the people around her and lacks self-confidence. The most unnatural act of social transgression committed by Rahel is her incestuous love for her twin brother Estha- which is perhaps her implicit resistance toward the social order. "Rahel watched Estha with the curiosity of a mother watching her wet child. A sister a brother. A woman a man. A twin a twin" (P.93). The only person with whom Rahel has harmony, an empathetic link is her own twin brother Estha, eighteen minutes her senior. Their personalities balance each other like the two halves of a circle; complementing each other.

She is a girl with an active imagination. For instance, when she feels scared, she imagines that Pappachi's moth is crawling on her heart with icy legs. While attending Sophie's funeral, she imagines Sophie Mol turning over in her coffin. Like a lost soul, Rahel wanders in her life. She takes up architecture program in Delhi without any thought or interest, there she meets Larry McCaslin the researcher, marries him and goes to the U.S.A. She drifts into marriage, "Like a passenger drifts into an unoccupied chair in an airport lounge" (P.18) But soon divorced she returns to Ayemenem, her birth place. Like Ammu, Rahel at a young age also learns to dream and imagine and like her she is ultimately disowned and rejected by the society. While Ammu has an illicit relationship with Velultha, Rahel indulges in a sexual relationship with her own brother. Both in a way transgress the social norms of the traditional Ayemenem society. Their transgression is perhaps a deliberate act to defy and to challenge the society where in, they have to survive as the oppressed victims. Rahel in a way, tries to be man-like for which she is condemned.



## Conclusion

Ammu's marriage and divorce presents a woman's radical views concerning marriage and the bondage that is associated with it. If the relationship lacked affection and trust, why should one get trapped? Society may talk but it is not they who are leading their life. Ammu and Rahel offer this view when it came to their marriage and divorce. The writer valorizes their spirit of independence and freedom. Ammu is independent, radical, revolutionary and reactionary. In Ammu, Roy shows a non conformist or a rebellious woman. She seems to opine that the female body is to be celebrated even if it means breaking age old fences (taboo). Ammu fights against traditional perception of woman as 'angel in the house', and challenged the old codes of conduct and morality. But anything that punctures the woman's stereotype also invades the male's sacred territory.

Margaret Kochamma rushes into marriage with Chacko and very soon divorces him and marries Joe. Velutha, the son of Vellyapappen, an untouchable is portrayed as a talented young man, who has a spirit of protest. Ammu sees a great personality in him because he articulates everything which she could not herself express. She feels he is the God of small things. On the other hand, Pappachi's treatment of his daughter highlights how his bestial violence affected Ammu's psyche. Pappachi is an orthodox, jealous husband, a fanatic and terrorizes his own family. He is a habitual wife beater who whips his wife pitilessly either with a brass vase (P.50) or his "Ivory handled riding crop" (P. 181).

So it is not only books written by men that depict women as addicted to lechery, treachery, shrewishness and greed. Roy's woman in the person of Baby Kochamma possesses these traits. The male characters are patriarchal stereotypes that we find in Pappachi, Chacko and even Comrade Pillai. Velutha though a Paravan, is the only compassionate soul. Mammachi is a typical Indian wife who endures all pain and sorrow stoically. Women like Ammu, Rahel and Margaret Kochamma show no qualms of their divorces. Ammu and Rahel are two ultra sensitive women created by the author. They are independent, freedom loving, strong women of the world.

Roy's creation of characters, her perception, sympathies, inclinations all depend on her own personal experiences, the time, the society, religion and also her sex. Thus, her view of women in particular is very different from medieval literary view of women both by male or female writers. She does not accuse or support a particular gender but instead valorizes humanity and general goodness in both genders while criticizing everything evil existing in both the sexes. Her sympathies are for the weak, poor and outcaste of the society. In doing these from a sensitive outlook and an impartial stand is able to eradicate Figmenta (fantastic lies) by confronting it with Veritas (truth) which is synonymous with truth of life itself.

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