

## **Feminine, Feminist and Female: Portrayal of Women in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things***

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### **Abstract:**

Arundhati Roy's Booker Prize-winning debut novel, *The God of Small Things* is widely acknowledged as a protest novel. A searing critique of the brazenness of power, it is as much a poignant portrayal of the pangs of the powerless. The novelist has chosen three of the most abject victims in a world where power rules – women, Dalits and children. This paper will strive to figure out how Roy, in narrativising the history of a family, has portrayed the trajectory of the evolution of women through three generations. It sets out to argue that Roy's is a womanist rather than feminist novel in that it dramatises women's response to patriarchy through three different, though one leading to the next, ways, namely, to use the terms of Elaine Showalter, feminine, feminist and female. The three terms apply to women, according to the way they react to patriarchy. The feminine reconciles with patriarchy; the feminist resists it; and the female rejects it.

**Keywords:** Protest Novel, power, Dalits, womanist, feminist, patriarchy.

*One is not born a woman; one becomes one.* - Simone de Beauvoir

*The God of Small Things* portrays three generations of women representing, in the Showalterian sense, the three phases of women's history: feminine, feminist and female. The first generation of women, Mammachi and Baby Kochamma, are shown to have internalized the inferiority of the female to the male, an ideology that is a patriarchal construction. Though they themselves are its victims, they become the unpaid cadre of patriarchy. Ammu the protagonist belongs to the second generation, who rebels against the oppressive and repressive patriarchal code. Her rebellion is trashed brutally, but her courage to transgress the limits laid down by patriarchy makes her a true feminist. A non-conformist, Rahel represents the contemporary

generation. Though she shares with her mother the rebellious streak in character, she, unlike her mother, refuses to play into the hands of patriarchy.

*The God of Small Things* is “a novel by a woman about a woman seen through the eyes of a woman”. (Roy 60) It is Rahel who recounts the sad saga of their life, with Ammu, her mother being the central victim of a culture ridden with ideologies of patriarchy and caste.

In the throes of patriarchal prejudice, the protagonist, Ammu aches for freedom and identity. She along with her mother, Mammachi has suffered physical violence inflicted upon them by Pappachi, her father. A typically traditional male, her father denies her opportunity for higher education that he grants his son. Left with little to look forward to in life in terms of a career, Ammu feels incarcerated in the Ayemenem House. She grows rebellious against her family. This explains why she chooses to marry someone her family would never allow her to. However, she soon realizes that she has unwittingly settled for another patriarchal male bent on squeezing her out of whatever little pleasure she derives from her existence. Her husband only replaces her father in inflicting violence on her. She walks out on her husband. However, she returns to her parental house from which she had sought to flee, undone as she is, with her twin babies.

Patriarchy is an ideology that validates the idea that the male are the superior sex. As an ideology, it works so insidiously that it can even convert its victims into accomplices. In her growing years at her parental home, Ammu, along with her mother, has suffered the patriarchal prejudice of her father. Upon her return post marital discord, she finds that her mother and aunt, Baby Kochamma have become the unpaid patriarchal cadre. To Baby Kochamma, Mammachi and the women visitors who come to see the divorced Ammu, divorce is, at least metaphorically, a form of death:

a married daughter had no position in her parent's home. As for a *divorced* daughter, according to Baby Kochamma, she had no position anywhere at all. And as for a *divorced* daughter from a *love* marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochamma's outrage. As for a *divorced* daughter from an intercommunity love marriage, Baby Kochamma chose to remain quiveringly silent on the subject. (Roy 45-46)

Struggling with dejection and desolation, Ammu falls for Velutha, a Dalit seeing through him a hope for her in life. Her family looks at this affair as a double rebellion threatening to

subvert both ideology of patriarchy and caste. What Ammu enters into is an extramarital affair initiated from a woman's side, that too, with a Dalit, someone her society considers untouchable. Ammu asserts her right over her body through her marriage out of her community, her refusal to succumb to the demands of Mr. Hollick and her husband, and later through the way she seeks her loved one. Her love for Velutha may be seen as her right over her body. In Brinda Bose's opinion:

In asserting her own 'biological' desire for a man who inhabits a space beyond the permissible boundaries of 'touchability,' it appears that Ammu attempts a subversion of caste/class rules, as well as the male tendency to dominate by being, necessarily, the initiator of sexual act. (92)

A host of critics, however, have sought to problematise the feminist reading of *The God of Small Things*. Prof. Chhote Lal Khatri, for instance, refuses to consider Ammu a feminist character when he argues that to be called a feminist, the woman should either dominate or fight against all odds with fortitude and assert her identity. Ammu, according to him, shows some courage in walking out on her husband but makes no attempt to carve out an independent identity for herself: "Ammu always remains dependent upon her parents. She along with her twins are the target of negligence, hatred, severity not only of society but also of family." (295) Similarly, T. Vinoda avers: "The feminist impulse, as is generally understood, would make it imperative that there is, at the basic level at least, an aspiration or struggle for dignity and independence for woman." (27) Kh. Kunjo Singh's denial of the feminist label to Ammu is emphatic. He says that Ammu 'accepts her lot unprotestingly at every stage in her life and makes no attempt at a bold and independent life of her own against the odds she faces'. (269)

All such voices as above converge into the criticism of Ammu's resistance on the ground of its futility. It is the cause rather than the consequence that lends legitimacy to a fight. Moreover, there are as many feminist survivors as there are feminist martyrs. Ammu is a dispossessed gendered subaltern in confrontation with patriarchy colluding with police and politics. She is forced into an unequal fight and therefore doomed to destruction. Unlike her counterparts in other feminist novels, Ammu is disarmed with the denial of higher education to her. As a consequence, she fails to create a space of her own in the society. In the novel, patriarchy acts not as an insidious agency but as an overarching power that appals with its suddenness of onslaught. It is this appalling nature of the onslaught that leaves women ill-

equipped as rebels. Consequently, women either perish, or fight and perish. Ammu does the latter and thereby becomes a feminist rebel.

If Ammu has shed the feminine and acquired the feminist, then it is her daughter Rahel who evolves into the female. Rahel represents the modern emancipated woman, free from caste, religious and patriarchal ideology. Rahel has none of the conditioning that a normal middle class Indian girl would have. Many critics consider Rahel as Roy's surrogate persona. Roy depicts Ammu's life as seen through the eyes of Rahel who comes back to Ayemenem after a gap of two decades for a reunion with her twin brother Estha. Rahel, the mature adult can now have a better understanding of the vicissitudes of the life and death of her mother, and help heal her brother's trauma by sharing his hideous grief. Arundhati Roy's adroit use of a character's perspective through a third-person narration defines her feminist agenda. The novel relates a story not as it happened but as it affected a character. It is a survivor's account of a tragedy. Rahel's perspective of Ammu's suffering is shaped by her being affected by it. Her mother succumbed to the tragedy while she survived it, both literally as well as metaphorically. Thus, Ammu's rebellion against it has anticipated Rahel's rejection of patriarchal repression. The feminist in Ammu has metamorphosed into the female in Rahel. In Roy's narrative, there is a perceptible linearity in women's reaction to patriarchal onslaught, from Mammachi's acquiescence to Ammu's resistance to Rahel's rejection.

One fateful day, Rahel's world is shattered: "Things can change in a day". (Roy164) Her twin brother, Estha is sent away from Ayemenem House to their estranged father as a punishment for the death of their English Cousin Sophie Mol, in which they were unintentionally instrumental. The twin's pied piper, Velutha is killed because of his sexual transgression with their mother, Ammu, who is driven away from the Ayemenem House. Rahel is left pining for her brother and her mother at the Ayemenem house. Living as a neglected, unwanted child with Mammachi and Chacko, Rahel grows up being insensitive. Roy writes: "They (Chacko and Mammachi) provided the care (food, clothes, fees) but withdrew the concern." (15) Rahel is nearly eleven when her mother dies at the age of thirty-one. She alone grieves the death of Ammu, and witnesses her cremation with an immutable numbness that has developed in her by that time.

With her childhood forced out of her, Rahel grows into a rebellious adolescent, her rebellion consisting in her sheer non-conformity to all social codes. Neither her relatives nor the

nuns of her convent are compassionate enough to understand her psychic wounds. Even her teachers consider her guilty of moral perversion. She was blacklisted and expelled from schools on account of her eccentricities. Rahel the student was punished but Rahel the rebel could not be tamed. Her teachers said about her: “...she didn’t know how to be a girl.” (Roy 17) It is through this sentence that the novelist points to the rebellious streak in Rahel’s character.

Rahel refuses to be anything that patriarchy prescribes for a girl. Unlike her mother, she does not suffer the scar of rebellion. While Ammu has to fight off the sympathy of neighbour women with her divorcee hood, Rahel’s casual statement about her marital status, ‘we are divorced’ (Roy 130) leaves Comrade Pillai too shocked to sympathize her. Ammu has illusions about her marriage while Rahel has none. For Ammu, hers is a disastrous marriage while for Rahel, hers is a failed marriage. Roy writes: “Rahel drifted into marriage like a passenger drift towards an unoccupied chair in an airport lounge. With a Sitting Down Sense”. (18) Rahel has no regrets about her marriage, unlike Ammu who regrets having married the wrong man all her life. She seems to echo Arundhati Roy’s convictions about a woman and her role in the male dominated society. She has the power to look beyond the institutional hegemony of family and break the axis of gender. Committing incest with her brother does not create guilt or fear in Rahel.

The most controversial incest scene in the novel is explained away by many critics as the inevitable culmination of the desire for togetherness of the two Siamese twins separated for twenty-three years. Brinda Bose says: “Rahel offers Estha her body as an unnameable balm”. (59) Another interpretation is that the incest is not only a balm for Estha but therapy for Rahel as well. It is the twins’ consensual exploration of something that would heal the trauma afflicting them from childhood to adulthood. All such interpretations appear to have taken their cue from how Roy describes the incident: “Only that there were tears. Only that Quietness and Emptiness fitted together like stacked spoons.....Only that what they shared that night was not happiness, but hideous grief”. (328) A womanist/subalternist reading of the incestuous act, however, derives its impetus from how the novelist concludes her narration of the episode: “Only that once again they broke the Love Laws.” (328) The incest therefore can be seen as their involuntary attempt at subverting the so-called Love Laws. The novelist might not have intended incest to be the desirable or logical conclusion to the suffering of the twins. But she certainly

appears to have shown through the act of incest that unnatural repressions engender unnatural outbursts.

Compared to her grandmother and her mother, Rahel has greater confidence and a clear perception of life with which she achieves fulfilment of the self. The contemporary generation of women is represented by Rahel, who is a rebel and a nonconformist throughout her life and proves herself. She is strong willed, independent, and never considers herself a victim, which prompts Mohit K Ray to remark: "To a large extent, Rahel is an emancipated woman." (60)

The last word of the book, 'Naaley' or 'tomorrow' promises hope. Ammu utters this word as a parting message to her lover, Velutha during their short-lived nocturnal adventure. The concluding word of the book used in a situation which is the chronological middle of the narrative sounds prophetic. What Ammu looks forward to in her life is lived by Rahel: women exercising their freedom of choice in deciding who to love, how and how much.

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