



**GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S
*THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS***

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ABSTRACT

Arundhati Roy is an Indian novelist, social campaigner, cultural critic and a popular political figure who has been fighting a non-violent war through words and protest against violence done to the human beings all over the world. *The God of Small Things* deals with the horrors of the gender discrimination in India and how women in general are marginalized and oppressed at the hands of patriarchy. The novelist gives exposure to the caste difference, gender discrimination, colour and racial distinctions through social institutions and she strongly professes how they influence human relations and individual behaviour of people. The old traditions gave rise to rebellious thoughts and Roy has raised a voice of protest through her characters and the way injustice is done to these socially downtrodden people because of their gender is emphatically portrayed.

KEYWORDS

Gender Discrimination, Patriarchy, Male-dominated Society, Marginalised

RESEARCH PAPER

Arundhati Roy enters into the sphere of literature with the publication of her debut novel *The God of Small Things* which won the prestigious Booker Prize for Literature in 1997 and it is worthy to mention that Roy is the first Indian woman who has achieved this milestone. Moreover, she has been also awarded the Sydney Peace Prize for her social work and especially for the human rights. She is an Indian novelist, social campaigner, cultural critic and a popular political figure who has been fighting a non-violent war through words and protest against violence done to the human beings all over the world. In this paper, I have tried to highlight the gender discrimination in a orthodox and narrow male dominated society where women have a marginalised role and they are deprived of the basic rights of getting the education and are totally at the mercy of the men-folk.

Pramod Ambadasrao Pawar remarks:

Broadly speaking, women are held subordinate to men. However, in fact, women are powerful human resources in development of the nation and unfortunately, their contributions go unnoticed and neglected as they have to play different roles like a daughter, wife and mother. She is stuck in a unique social framework, that is, to cook and produce children. She has to do all the household and domestic chores. This is nothing but a gender role difference in the socio-cultural context (Pawar 35).

The God of Small Things is a telling account of the women's struggle for getting a respectable place in the society which is deliberately denied to them by the traditional norms of patriarchy. There is no doubt that the social structure of an average Indian woman is full of many ifs and buts and this aspect has been realistically presented through the women characters of the novel like Ammu, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, Margarate Kochamma. Michael Kenny proclaims about *The God of Small Things*, "Both the novel and its author were celebrated - in the English-speaking world and more widely in translation - as the novel was sold in eighteen different countries, within weeks of being published" (Kenny 1).

The God of Small Things deals with the horrors of the gender discrimination in India and how women in general are marginalized and oppressed at the hands of patriarchy. The novel is amazing in its capability to deal with so many layers of thoughts that regard the personal family history of each member of the Kochamma family along with even more broad concerns about Kerala in India. She presents both the miserable condition of untouchables and also the

resistance of women trying to have fulfillment in life. Jason Cowley says, "*The God of Small Things* is undoubtedly a unique novel in the history of Indian English literature which fulfills the highest demand of the art of fiction" (Cowley 28). The novel is also a bitter indictment of the communists of Kerala during the sixties where petty politics of power played a major role. The novel is rich with Indian family relationships, social convention and racialism, political beliefs, and human emotions. At the same time, it is a fascinating as well as tragic mystery, a love story, and a realistic picture of gender discrimination and shows how women are meant to suffer endlessly of no fault of their own.

In this novel, Roy presents the tragic tale of Ammu who is the female protagonist and strongly points out that since childhood, She has to face discrimination of being a female and is often considered as a worthless member of the family when education is denied to her on the basis of his gender. It is important to mention that education is the fundamental right of every human being living in India and it must be given to both men and women without any gender discrimination because in this modern age, only education enlightens the outlook of a person. Thus women who are equally a worthy member of the society should not be deprived of this privilege but in this novel, the situation is entirely different as the parents of Ammu think that higher education corrupts a lady. As a result of this orthodoxy, Ammu, the only daughter of Pappachi and Mammachi is unfairly debarred from continuing higher studies by her parents on the belief that higher education degrades a woman. This traditional misconception governed the mind of Ammu's parents who intentionally deprived her of college education. But they on the contrary facilitated their son Chacko to continue his further studies at Oxford, although his academic performances were disappointingly poor and unsatisfactory. But Chacko avails himself of the scope for higher education because of his being a male but his sister is not allowed the same platform being a woman. Arundhati Roy castigates this kind of gender discrimination as gross injustice and tyranny. She condemns this shameful tendency of parents who sustain the conventional outlook of debarring their daughters from having higher education and shockingly, this narrow and orthodox tendency still persists even in the twenty first century. In this context of the novel, the comments of Meena Usmani have great relevance:

The woman have frequently been ruthlessly exploited in our society and the problem is growing day by day. The case of eve teasing, sexual harassment, abduction, rape and wife battering in public and at the work place etc. have been more regularly reported

since the 1960s and early 1970s. The issue of violence against women has become the public problem as the women are discriminated at work, home and are denied their due in every field. The constitution of India promises freedom, equality, opportunity and protection to women and give them several rights. In spite of that they enjoy an unequal status. (Usmani 13)

Arundhati Roy gives exposure to the caste difference, gender discrimination, colour and racial distinctions through social institutions and she strongly professes how they influence human relations and individual behaviour of people. The old traditions gave rise to rebellious thoughts and Roy has raised a voice of protest through her characters and the way injustice is done to these socially downtrodden people because of their gender is emphatically portrayed. The treatment given to women for their basic necessities and passions through the character of Ammu is condemnable as the new waves of change, with the independence of India and equal rights to women in the constitution, are gaining strength. In such a closed atmosphere, Ammu began to feel like a captive in the big Ayemenem House whereas she wants to fly high in the sky like a free bird and thus she got a chance to visit Calcutta to attend a marriage function where she met her future husband who was on the post of Assistant Manager in a tea estate in Assam. Ammu wanted to get married at the earliest but soon after her marriage she came to know that her husband was a drunkard but by that time, the twins Rahel and Estha were born. In a male-centred social set up, the male thinks that they are free to do anything according to their own choice against the opposite sex and that is why the husband of Ammu wanted that she should have physical relations with his senior i.e. the Manager of the tea estate so that he may get promotion in the company. As a result of this unbearable torture, Ammu returned to her parents' home along with her children but to her misfortune, she is tortured physically and emotionally by her parents and brother Chacko without remorse. Thus Ammu suffers like Shakespeare's Cordelia in *King Lear*. She is punished for being a divorced woman separated from her husband. It is an irony that a divorced daughter is oppressed upon by her own parents, who welcome and bestow their love and affection on their estranged son. It is a matter of social injustice and discrimination that the estranged son Chacko is kindly treated by his parents but on the other hand the same parents turn biased against their daughter on account of her helplessness and homelessness. In this context baby Kochamma's jealous comment directed towards Ammu is worth quoting that "a married daughter had no position in her parents' home. As for a divorced

daughter...she had no position anywhere at all. As for a divorced daughter from a love marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochamma's outrage" (45).

In *The God of Small Things*, there is another notable example of gender discrimination and social injustice depicted in the novel is women's deprivation of parental property. Chacko, the brother of Ammu proudly exercises and asserts his full right as the inheritor of the property of his parents, but his sister Ammu cannot claim any property of her parents, as a woman as a daughter has no claims to her father's property. Chacko arrogantly asserts his power before his sister every now and then by saying: "What's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine" (57). This haughty claim of his property hurts the sentiment of his sister but Chacko does not mind hurting her emotionally. The next example of Chacko's claim of property is cited by his partnership with Ammu in his running the pickle factory named Paradise Pickle. Although Ammu works in the factory as much as Chacko did, the latter always claims the factory as his own. His frequent assertion of his claim of property is suggestive of social injustice meted out to Ammu. Arundhati Roy condemns this kind of gender discrimination not only as an act of injustice but also a kind of social oppression to which she gives vent. Thus gender bias and patriarchy are the major discursive practices which form the backdrop of the tragic drama unfolded in *The God of Small Things*. Ammu was such a character that she was deprived of any sympathy and compassion in her days of adversity and misfortune, her kith and kin who came to see her on the pretext of showing sympathy, shed crocodile tears on her miseries and she gradually learnt to study their hypocrisy and hate them. Alex Tickell remarks, "*The God of Small Things* is a book where you can connect the very smallest things to the very biggest. Therefore the chain of connections delineates the multi-layered pattern of big and small in the novel, originating from the very title which challenges the tyranny of big things and enunciates creative potential of dissent" (Tickell 10).

But the real tragedy of Ammu begins when she comes in contact with Velutha. Though there was huge caste difference between Ammu and Velutha yet they indulged in sex act because of their passion and they did not pay any heed towards the code of conduct of their respective castes. Such illicit affair was not permitted and was considered a societal crime to be punished severely. Even Mammachi thought, "Ammu had defiled the generations of breeding and brought the family to its knees. For generations to come, forever now, people would point at them at weddings and funerals. At baptism and birthday parties" (258). So this is the irony of this novel

that on one hand there is gender discrimination at all levels but simultaneously it is quite stunning that even women are against the women. Ultimately, both of them are physically separated as Ammu is locked in her room and Velutha is forced to leave the town. Brinda Bose comments, "The Ammu-Velutha relationship must end in death because while the affair is conducted secretly, it is also done so in full visibility" (Bose 67). Ammu is compelled to live in loneliness because she has transgressed the boundaries of her high caste and as a result, she is unable to bear this agony and separation and ultimately dies in isolation. The prevailing social structure does not ensure justice as we see that Ammu and Chacko both are guilty of breaking the love laws of the society but severe punishment is given only to Ammu and Chacko remains unpunished. The clear double standard is emphasized by Susan Stanford Friedman in the following words, "how Chacko receives no punishment for his transgressions, whereas Ammu and Velutha do, proves why panoptic operations are resisted" (Friedman 255). Thus Arundhati Roy has graphically and realistically portrayed this evil of gender discrimination in her novel *The God of Small Things*.

The next hapless target of gender discrimination is Ammu's daughter Rahel who like her mother also develops a sense of isolation and aloofness in a male centred social set-up and she is always treated by her own family members as an outsider. She is devoid of any love, affection and care of the Ayemenem House and for this very reason Rahel feels like a fish out of water. After the death of Ammu, she faces the most troublesome period of life whether she is in school or at home. The treatment of the family made her sadistic and even abnormal in her attitude. She is even blacklisted in her convent school and expelled on the basis of repeated complaints from the senior girl students. Rahel went to study in a school of architecture in Delhi, even got married to a research scholar Larry Mc Caslin but her married life is totally eclipsed by her divorce.

Mammachi is another sufferer of gender discrimination whose married life is also not very peaceful and happy as she is always a puppet in the hands of her husband, Pappachi. He often beats his wife with a flower vase and from the first date of her marriage, she is a silent sufferer to the atrocities of her husband. Though he is a well educated man yet he is a very jealous husband who wants to abuse and insult her wife without any sufficient cause. Margaret Kochamma is another character of the novel who is the wife of Chacko and the mother of Sophie Mol. Like the other gender victims of the novel, she also suffers much at the hands of her husband Chacko and her life becomes horrible and scary. Like Hardy's Tess, she is also a poor victim in the hands of

fate as she faces a series of misfortunes i.e. she gets the divorce, her daughter Sophie Mol dies and thus becomes a pathetic character who earns our sympathy.

Now I arrive at the conclusion that Arundhati Roy has illustrated the gender discrimination in a very striking and comprehensible manner in the novel *The God of Small Things*. The novel presents the undesired sufferings of women who have to face the endless torture silently and meekly. It is the valiant attempt of the novelist to evoke social consciousness among the females and the subalterns and through the struggle between the powerful and the powerless, Roy has delineated the miserable plight of women in a male-dominated social set-up and strongly supports the female cause in her novel *The God of Small Things*.

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