



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 3. Issue 1.,2016 (Jan-March)



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

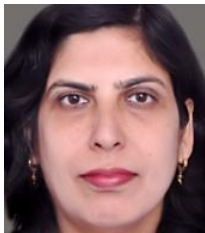
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

AMMU'S FRANTIC QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*

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ABSTRACT

The patriarchal assumptions prevalent in the Indian society have led to marginalization of women depriving them of their rights as a human being. Several female writers like Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy etc have tried to describe the feeble attempts of females to fight for their individuality. The protagonists of these writers have been tutored that their greatness lies in their sufferings and therefore, happiness of others is always given a top priority. Their perceptions of their aspirations and expectations are within the framework of Indian social and moral commitments. Arundhati Roy is one such writer who is mainly concerned with the psyche of an individual and its relation to social values rather than the society. Since Roy deals with psycho emotional situations, her theme is the individual against himself and the surroundings. Her protagonists are hypersensitive, mysterious and eccentric who neither belong to the common rung of the society nor do their problems deal with food, clothing and shelter. Instead they are rebels and their rebellion is directed against individuals not so much against society. This paper describes how Roy's women characters in '*The God of Small Things*' are exploited and how they are torn between their individuality and social obligations. An attempt is also made to study the lot of Ammu who sacrifices her life in her quest for identity. The paper also discusses the sufferings of Ammu's mother and her daughter. It exhibits a strong contrast wherein Mammachi accepts domestic violence as her fate while Ammu dares to tread a path where she can have an identity of her own.

Keywords: Conservative, identity, eccentric, orthodox, patriarchal, tread

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INTRODUCTION

In India, evils of class and caste along with patriarchal oppressions rely and feed on each other. Roy's booker prize winning novel '*The God of Small Things*' deals with the struggle within the self, the murky and melancholic moods of men and women. The novelist fathoms the depths of human psyche against the chaotic social back drop. The novel voices the hidden and suppressed emotions of subalterns and is an encapturing vista of Indian social life depicting the unremitting struggle of women and untouchables for inscribing their identity in this cruel, conservative and male dominating society. They are vulnerable as well as deserted and so have to suffer at the hands of law makers. Arundhati Roy, being a social activist, raises the existential

questions of subalterns and their impassioned quest for identity with a silent voice in this new, democratic and intricate world.

Her novel presents the constant struggle of women against their persistent exploitation, torture and struggle which they undergo because of the male dominated conservative society. It talks about the absurdities and injustices of domestic and social life of women. Roy mainly discusses things that every individual aspires for- the nerve to live and the ability to love as well as to be loved. Characters such as Ammu, Velutha or even Rahel and Estha are characters without roots. It is their estranged state that propels them from one crisis to another, sucking along several other characters. They are presented mainly as seekers-questers for love and identity. Disturbed emotionally as well as psychically, both Ammu and Velutha are persistently and maniacally driven by undefined hunger and vehement lust which brings about their doom. Incapable of silent submission and ungrudging suffering, they somehow pull through life. Ammu defies patriarchal domination, class and caste prejudice in public and pays with her life. Roy's protagonists suffer from lack of parental love, disturbed infancy, broken homes and are dissatisfied with their existence and often choose to go out of the mainstream of life. This alienation generally manifests in immoral ties and activities. Alienation from their selves leads to a frantic search for their identity in the milieu through self-discovery and self-identification. The novel deals with sufferings of three generations of women-Mammachi, Ammu and Rahel's who react in their own ways to the situation that they are confronted with. The three generations of women hold different views on life and react in their own ways to the situation that they are faced with.

MAMMACHI

Mammachi is a true representative of the old generation of women who gracefully submits herself to the patriarchal society. She is an 'adarsh bhartiya naari' who believes that a woman's primary duty is towards her husband and she should submit herself to the whims and fancies of her husband at all costs. Mammachi has been a victim of her husband's brutality throughout her life. She is either beaten with a brass vase or an ivory handled riding crop by her husband. Mammachi had exceptional talent for music, especially violin but her husband Pappachi is jealous of her. The climax is reached when violin trainer makes the mistake of telling him that his wife is "exceptionally talented" and "potentially concert class". Later he breaks the bow of the violin one night and throws it in the river. A feeling of 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". Thus their marriage is devoid of understanding, love and co-operation. Mammachi's blind submission to patriarchy is a defensive gesture rather than an honest agreement with hegemonic powers.

The other man who dominated Mammachi's life was Chacko, her privileged and Oxford educated son. When he returned home after his divorce from Margaret, he takes over Mammachi's pickle factory and referring to the factory as "..... my factory, my pineapples, my pickles" (57) without regarding Mammachi who had started and developed the factory before Chacko returned home. Mammachi did nothing but accept it passively. Whatever her husband did, being a righteous woman, she accepted it because it was endorsed by the society.

AMMU

Ammu belongs to the second generation of women. She is, in fact the new woman who tries to strongly protest against the patriarchal system prevalent in the Indian society. She is doubly marginalized by men as well as women. As a child, she is deprived of the love and care because of her gender. She was beaten mercilessly by her father 'with iron-topped riding-crop, a treatment arising from the traditional patriarchal family structure, where the birth of a girl child is unwelcomed and considered a burden on the family. In contrast to this, her brother Chacko, is privileged in every aspect of family life purely because he is a male. After schooling, Ammu is denied further education, while her brother is sent to Oxford for higher education because "Pappachi insisted that a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl. So Ammu had no choice but to leave Delhi and move with them". (38) Thus her own family becomes an obstacle between her freedom and future progress. When her family shifts from Delhi to Ayemenem, Ammu's life is engulfed by

dullness, seclusion and waiting for marriage proposals. She feels captivated in her house at Ayemenem and she desperately yearns for her identity:

“There was little for young girl to do in Ayemenem other than to wait for marriage proposals while she helped her mother with the housework... All day she dreamed of escaping from Ayemenem and the clutches of her ill tempered father and bitter, long-suffering mother.” (38-39)

Her father agrees to let her spend her summer with a distant aunt in Calcutta. There, at some wedding reception, she happens to meet her future husband whom she marries without any hesitation or sense of guilt thinking thereby that she would be able to put an end to her unbearable relations with her parents. But unfortunately, to her bad luck, “her husband turns out to be not just a heavy drunkard but a full-blown alcoholic” (40). Here Simone de Beauvoir remarks that:

There is a unanimous agreement that getting a husband-or in some cases a ‘Protector’- is for her (woman) the most important undertaking... She will free herself from the parental home, from her mother’s hold, she will open up her future not only by active conquest but by delivering herself up, passive and docile, in the hands of a new master. (352)

When Ammu moved to Assam with her husband, she became the centre of attraction of the Planters’ Club. She wore backless blouses with her saris and carried a silver lame purse on a chain. She also smoked long cigarettes in a silver cigarette holder and learned to blow perfect smoke rings thereby breaking the patriarchal domination prevalent in the Indian system. Ammu, being a new woman, does not yield herself before the clutches of the male chauvinist societal structure. She escapes the asphyxiating home of her parents by her unsuccessful marriage, it ends when her drunkard husband offers her to his English boss for his career prospects. She does not bow before her new master (husband); on the contrary, she divorces him to protect her self-respect and identity. Unlike her mother, she cannot accept the bad attitude and actions of her husband and prefers divorce than blindly sticking to her marriage, thereby breaking the communal mores of India. She returns unwelcomed to Ayemenem “to everything she had fled from only a few years ago, except that now she had two young children and no more dreams” (42). Marriage for Ammu is a horrible experience; her husband is a reason for her physical and psychological suffering. But she rebels against such social structures and challenges marriage that rather seems to be a ‘disciplinary institution’(according to Michael Foucault), working towards silencing and controlling the one who stands apart, as if a non-conformist/ lunatic who needs to be reasoned/imprisoned.

Ammu, being a victim of a marriage that does not work out, is treated as an interloper in her own family and this clearly defines her position in the society. It is quite paradoxical that a daughter estranged from the husband is tormented and oppressed in her parent’s house because ‘a divorced woman is considered non-virtuous’. Contrary to this, an estranged son, chacko, not only receives a warm welcome but also remains the rightful inheritor of the family wealth and fortune. When he flirts with a low woman, he is encouraged by Mammachi in the name of ‘man’s needs’, (268) whereas Ammu’s love with Velutha, a paravan, is considered illicit, untraditional and sinful. Irrespective of all this, the new woman in Ammu breaks the four walls of the house which confined her existence and takes a critical decision to ‘love by night the man her children loved by day’. Ammu’s infatuation with Velutha and thereby violating the “love laws” which her community has imposed is a transgression of the caste, class and religious boundaries and it mounts a rebellion of a kind against her marginalization as a woman. Ammu’s rebellion against maternal and marital conventionality and finally, her liaison with dark-skinned and untouchable Velutha constitutes a violation against a determinate social order, sponsoring the immutable “love laws”. According to Tirthankar Chanda, “her rebellion (quest for identity) is an attempt at repossessing, renaming, reknowing the world”, but it “appears doomed from the very beginning because of the nature of the society where she has had to seek refuge with her twins after her divorce and also because of the incapacity of her kin (mother, great-aunt Kochamma) to provide an adequate model for redefining the Self” (Chanda 1997:40)” (2006, p.16). Though Ammu is well aware that the society in which she dwells is conservative, she dares to establish relation with Velutha. This shows Ammu’s desperate quest for love which neither her parents nor her husband could provide. Velutha is the best companion of the children, who feel chocked in Ayemenem because of their divorced mother. The few moments the children

spent in the company of Velutha could afford them real happiness. But unfortunately, the secret love affair of Ammu and Velutha is reported by the latter's father to Mammachi. Mammachi could not bear Ammu's cross-caste affair, as a result, Velutha is grabbed by the police and killed on false case of rape. When Ammu goes to the police station to set the matter right, she is badly insulted:

"Kottayam police does not take statement from Veshyas (prostitutes) and their illegitimate children."(58).

But she rebels against such social structures and challenges marriage. In this regard, Debjani Gangulay rightly comments:

"Mammachi's own marital experience has not enabled her to empathize with her daughter's brutalized married life. Rather, she sees Ammu's failed marriage as just retribution for her daughter who dared to marry outside her community. Her firm emotional investment in the hierarchies of class, caste and gender is illustrated at several points in the novel." (Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity)

Thus, Ammu is brutally treated at the hands of police-considered to bring the law breakers on to the right path. She is also cornered by the family structure and inheritance laws customarily prevalent among the Syrian Christian community in Kerala. In the end, Ammu is exiled from her home by her family members. She is separated from her children and not allowed to visit Ayemenem. She desperately tries to seek good job in anonymous places. This shows her quest for true identity but fails in her endeavours. Tired, exhausted, sick and finally defeated, she is found dead in a grimy room in Bharat Lodge in Aleppy. After death, her humiliation does not end, the church refuses to bury Ammu. Finally she is cremated in electric crematorium where only beggars, derelicts and police custody dead are cremated. Before Ammu's acceptance of such doom, in frantic attempts of self-realization, she becomes a symbolic personification of all subalterns, especially women, who challenge power structures of the social order. "Roy expresses her disillusionment with the social conditions of the postcolonial world in which the untouchables of the past still face a hostile society that does not let them live as free and independent individuals. Velutha, the God of small things, the outcast can never co-exist peacefully with the "touchable" communities for as long as the stigma of untouchability is attached to him and countless others like him. Ammu, another "untouchable" within the "touchable" cannot pursue happiness because doing so threatens the existing order, and the society takes every possible step to stop change." Thus, Ammu is severely marginalized by social institutions like family, marriage, religion and police and not only men but women like Mammachi and Baby Kochamma have equal share in her meeting the doom.

RAHEL

Rahel belongs to the third generation. She is less marginal character in comparison to Ammu and Mammachi. Unlike them, she never faces domestic violence, still she remains at the periphery because of being a daughter of neglected Ammu. She too experienced insult and humiliation in the childhood as her mother witnessed. Her life is totally disturbed and deserted because of tormenting memories of past. Everytime, Rahel protests against the adults, they threaten to send her away (148) and tell her that it makes "people love her a little less" (112). This scolding contributes to Rahel's self image as someone who may not be lovable. Ammu, who has learnt neither to love nor to trust anyone since terror can hide behind the façade, is frightened by her children's "willingness to love people who didn't really love them..... and (it) sometimes made her want to hurt them-just as an education, a protection" (43). Ammu's distrust of other people teaches Rahel that love is nothing to take for granted, that it is something conditional and limited, thus leaving Rahel with insecurity and anxiety. The fear of not being loved is constantly reflected in Rahel's character and her eagerness to receive punishments can be seen as a prolongation of this. "Ammu", Rahel said, 'shall I miss dinner as my punishment?' she was keen to exchange punishments. No dinner, in exchange for Ammu loving her the same as before" (11). When Ammu doesn't give her any punishment, Rahel is distressed and does not eat, "hoping that if she could somehow effect her own punishment, Ammu would rescind hers" (115). This shows Rahel's impassioned quest for love.

Rahel is a woman who does not find any room either in her family or society. Living in her grandparent's house, she witnesses the stark injustices met out to her mother. As she grows up unwanted, she

becomes a free woman, who unlike her mother, is not restricted by the confines of traditional values. Rahel too could not lead a successful married life as a result of the obsession with her twin brother Estha. Thus the novel depicts the desiccated souls of women of a particular social setup.

The novel also exhibits attempts to break the patriarchal norms. Rahel and Estha's reading the posters backwards is the breaking of patriarchal conventions. The novel itself persuades the readers that it be read backwards. The characters dare to transgress their boundaries in several ways. Velutha dares to forget his untouchability; Ammu crosses the norm of womanly virtues and also dares to forget the very fact that she is a touchable who should not allow an untouchable near her. 'Locusts Stand I' (Locus Standi) is forgotten and Ammu dares to feel at home in Ayemenem. The norms of patriarchy are broken and this brings disaster. Only Chacko knows the norms: "What is mine is mine. What is yours is also mine." (28) This, in essence, is the law of patriarchy that must be obeyed. Roy's protagonists dare to break this law but not without paying a heavy price. The History House is the lawgiver; it punishes all misdemeanor that takes place in the Ayemenem House. In one sense, Roy defines her feminine aesthetics. Ammu breaks the boundaries of how much and who – she defies all phallogocentric discourse only to be a harbinger of a new epoch when women will make their own choices, even if it involves death in isolation, in a despoiled place.

CONCLUSION

Thus, Ammu, aspiring to take control of her life (that is so much suppressed by a social order) is faced with a system where Chacko her "Marxist" brother exploits the poor women labourers in his factory, both monetarily and sexually and goes unchecked. Ammu witnesses characters such as Mammachi, being appropriated and smothered by patriarchy; Velutha being accused of the fortuitous drowning of Sophie Mol; Pappachi, Ammu's father, is skeptical of the fact that her Bengali Hindu husband wanted to prostitute her in order to please his white boss. The authority of the colonial rulers is challenged by Ammu-a subaltern who is both economically and socially marginalized. Stifled by social injustice, Ammu rebels against the very social norms that constitute the Syrian Christian community in Kerala. This insurgence is an act of resistance against the very foundations of this society. Her most significant act of becoming sexually involved with the "Untouchable", lower class Velutha, cannot be taken at its face value as an act of sexual transgression only. In brief, Ammu as a woman and as a subaltern resists the domineering and exploitive political and social structures. Though she fails in bringing about any substantial change, she puts up a brave fight for realizing her dreams. Ammu's uniqueness lies in the fact that she may not have deliberately worked for other subalterns but all her actions were directed towards the liberation of different kinds of subalterns.

Thus, Roy's protagonists are women with great courage and gumption. They represent the litheness of tradition thereby challenging its imposition as a closed phenomenon. On one hand, the narrative takes up a cross-caste love relationship and its consequences and on the other hand, it tackles such issues as the daughter's right to inheritance in her parental property. The three generation of women depicted in the novel have their own views about life and they deal with their lives differently. The different treatment given to males and females in the novel creates imbalance in the society resulting in much of the unhappiness and discontentment prevailing in the families and the dilapidated lives of children. The outcome is a paralytic society unable and unwilling to grow.

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