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AMMU'S TRAGEDY: AN ALIENATED VOICE OF ARUNDHATI ROY'S
THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

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ABSTRACT

The futile confrontation of man's existence with absurdity and nothingness and the nebulous nature of human life have become the major trends in modern literary arena. The wounded and afflicted individual develops an attitude of dissatisfaction towards the established social norms and values. There is almost no aspect of contemporary life, which has not been discussed in terms of alienation. Moreover, it is one of the most outstanding features of this age; it would certainly seem to be its watchword. With modernisation expanding its tentacles, squeezing the traditional social and family system, breaking them apart, man is engulfed by an identity crisis and man's greed for material possession has made him migrate to different lands, uprooting himself from his culture and society to re-root in an alien land. Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* is a successful attempt to evaluate the abnormal psychology of human beings. She believes that the mind of man is so complex that it is most often a daunting task to examine it properly. The central character, Ammu, of the novel suffers from traumatic experiences caused by the harsh and cruel situation in which she is placed. The traumatic psychological experience can be seen during the course of her life. The story of her life is more bizarre and horrendous than the 'honour killings' in India. In the former case the lovers are killed in installments with an unforgiving heart even by the religious priests while in the latter case the death is meted out in a few strokes of ruthlessness.

Key Words: Alienation, Modernism, Trauma

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The very notion of alienation depends for its meaningfulness upon the conceivability of a contrasting condition of some sort of identification, participation, involvement, possession, control, or (in a word) unity [...] Much of our lives revolve around such conditions, and so to alienation.— **Richard Schacht**

My research paper argues that Ammu, the central character of Arundhati Roy's Man Booker Prize Winning novel *The God of Small Things*, whose tragic and alienated life is ubiquitously echoed throughout the novel and her life and destiny are akin to those whose voice always gets muffled.

Man suffers spilt within himself via-à-is the society in which he is accidentally born. It is this breach or displacement that occasions many a tension and lifelong struggle. Industrial revolution and the advancement of technology intensified this struggle. As man grows, he finds himself in a dubious situation as far as his relationship with himself as well as his relatedness to his society is concerned. An alienated individual suffers chain-reaction of debilitating symptoms the worst of which are powerlessness and the depressive psyche which may lead to suicide. Many scholars have dealt with this malady throwing light on various aspects of life. Hegel used the term '*Entfremdung*' or 'self-alienation'. While elaborating the concept, he says that it is an essential characteristic of finite mind to produce things, social institutions and cultural products and every objectification is, of necessity an instance of alienation. He believes that alienation is a phenomenon of consciousness, involving an inherent disassociation of man as subject and object. It is interesting to note that while Marx discusses four aspects of "alienation" – alienation from the object produced; alienation from one's work process itself; alienation from one's work; alienation from one's fellow men, the Freudians hold that it is society that creates an emaciating effect upon man's raw energy. Erich Fromm, like Hegel, explained "alienation" more than a sociological phenomenon. He discussed four main ways in which a person can experience alienation: from nature, from others, from society, and from the self. While discussing the concept of alienation, Karen Horney talks about 'real self'. Her main focus is on understanding the psychic processes which ensue when a person loses touch with his 'real self' or is self-alienated. In Durkheim's phraseology, "alienation" as the consequence of a state of "anomie" exists when people believe that there is a breakdown of societal behavioral norms, and the cultural goals are achieved primarily through deviant behavior. F. H. Heinemann, the continental philosopher who coined the term *Existenzphilosophie* in 1929, explains that the existentialists wish to make man aware of the fact and problem of alienation; their aim is to liberate him from estrangement. The plight of modern man has been summarized by Melvin Seeman under the set of six interrelated optional conditions, viz. Powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, cultural isolation, and self-estrangement.

Exile, migration and expatriation are not a physical condition but also a state of mind. It does not matter where the one is, in one's native or in an alien land. The sense of exile results in a deep feeling of loss, ache, and separation yearning for recuperation. "Home" is the axis on which the entire discourse of migrancy revolves. It is home that determines one's identity, defines or redefines one's belonging. With modernization expanding its tentacles, squeezing the traditional social and family system, breaking them apart, man is engulfed by an identity crisis and man's greed for material possession has made him migrate to different lands, uprooting himself from his culture and society to re-root in an alien land. But the striking one's own root is a painful process, involving mental, spiritual and emotional trauma leading to cultural and self alienation, because to feel uprooted is against man's nature, for, a physical being man needs to be located in space. As Ashley Montague points out: "No living organism is either solitary in its origin or solitary in its life. Every organism from the lowest to the highest is normally engaged in some sort of social life. The solitary animal is any species, is an abnormal creature" (Montague 77).

In the contemporary world, the wounded and afflicted individual develops an attitude of dissatisfaction towards the established social norms and values. Man is completely astounded to find himself quite helpless and feels estranged when he realizes that he cannot be the master of his own destiny. There are certain forces beyond his control, like Frost said once, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall" (Frost 48).

Ammu suffers from extreme sense of alienation. She is often dragooned by the society to live a life of separation and estrangement. Ammu's alienation takes place when she ceases to identify her surroundings just like Hegelian "social substance" i.e. estrangement from the social, political, and cultural institutions. Ammu, the novel's adolescent central character, is the daughter of Pappachi and Mammachi and the sister of

Chacko. She is misbehaved and ill-treated by the members of her own family, badly treated by the police, and abandoned by her brother. Thus, she remains fundamentally anomic, withdrawn, and isolated.

Ammu belonged to an elite family but disapproved Aristotle's conception that man of high ranks alone can have tragic grandeur. Actually, Ammu had her first encounter of alienation and dejection when she was just a little girl. In the author's terminology she is a "Mombatti" of a big house. During her growing years, the Ipe family has seen the brutal behaviour of Pappachi against Mammachi. Being too familiar with the violent scene, Ammu understood it as a deviational version of children's fairy tale. "As a child, she had learned very quickly to disregard the 'Father Bear Mother Bear' stories she was given to read. In her version, Father Bear beat Mother bear with brass vases. Mother Bear suffered those beatings with mute resignation" (*God* 171). There were no happy 'Father Bear and Mother Bear' in the Ayemenem House, it was only an ill-tempered father and a "bitter, long-suffering mother" (*God* 38). Knowing well that she could not ever change her 'Bear story' into a better one, Ammu tried to be familiar with that. She learned to coexist with it and even find her own fun in it. The "lofty sense of injustice and the stubborn reckless streak that develop in Someone Small who has been bullied all their lives by Someone Big" (*God* 172-173) taught her to cultivate a more tolerant attitude towards the misfortunes in her life caused by the patriarchs.

Ammu became victim of some hellish experiences as she saw the tyrannical face of her father Pappachi who used to beat his wife Mammachi. Ammu could not mask her feeling of humiliation as she was deprived of getting higher education. She wanted to fly high in the sky just like a free bird. "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 the distant aunt who lived in Calcutta" (*God* 38-39). There, in wedding, Ammu's sense of alienation found a greater chance of escaping the entanglements of her life. She met a person who was an Assistant Manager of a tea estate in Assam. Ammu was in hurry to marry that man: "Ammu did not prevent to be love with him [...] She thought that anything, anyone at all, would be better than returning to Ayemenem. She wrote to her parents informing them of her decision" (*God* 39). Thus, Ammu, as a prisoner in the family walls, turned rebellious youth from a frustrated teenager. Ammu's husband, the man the author does not even name, made his first appearance in the novel as "a small man, but well built" (39). He was not that perfect for Ammu in terms of looks, but at least he has pleasing personality. The marriage did not go well. Soon after the elaborate Calcutta wedding, Ammu found that the pleasant-looking man had made their marriage completely unpleasant because of his serious alcoholic addiction. When Ammu was about to give life to the newly-coming babies, who later named as Estha and Rahel, this man was "stretch out on a hard bench in the hospital corridor," and he "was drunk" (*God* 40). His addiction to liquor aggravated to the extent that it had not only consumed his vitality, but also "had driven him into an alcoholic stupor" (40). One day he was summoned to the manager's office and was given an ultimatum: either he has to take his beautiful wife to sleep with the lecherous boss, Mr. Hollick, or lose his job. Ammu's husband conveyed this indecent proposal to her. This extreme sense of humiliation generated deep hatred in the heart of Ammu. Thus, a series of fierce physical conflicts between the husband and wife broke out:

Ammu watched her husband's mouth move as it formed words. She said nothing. He grew uncomfortable and then infuriated by her silence. Suddenly he lunged at her, grabbed her hire, punched her and then passed out from the effort. Ammu took down the heaviest book she could find in the bookshelf – The Reader's Digest World Atlas – and hit him with it as hard as she could (*God* 41-42).

The recurring violence followed by a brief moment of reconciliation, with violence and comfort, formed a cycle which "fell into a pattern" (*God* 42) in Ammu's marital life. Thus, Ammu experienced alienation as a result of her fragmented marital life and decided to break it off. The sacrilegious tie of marriage ended in fiasco, and Ammu along with her twins returned to the parental home i.e. Ayemenem house. Though in her parental home, Ammu and children are subjected to all kinds of indignities and sufferings, yet her decision was a sheer revolt against the binary standards and male chauvinism prevailing in Indian society. Roy, in words of A. N.

Dwivedi, prefers revolution against the pervading sense of alienation: "Arundhati Roy raises her banner of revolt against a male dominated patriarchal society [...] Through Ammu, Arundhati raises a strong protest against the old-age agonies and sufferings of the suppressed class of women" (Dwivedi 55).

Ammu's return to Ayemenem does not provide any relief from alienation, rather in her own house, she is treated badly. Chacko, her brother used to taunt her twins and said that "Estha and Rahel were indecently healthy. And so was Sophie Mol. He said it was because they did not suffer from inbreeding like most other Syrian Christians" (*God* 61). Thus, Ammu developed a permanent sense of alienation from her family. Tortured by her insensitive husband and persecuted in her parent's home, Ammu's life transformed into an estranged individual in the society. Roy writes, "She spoke to no one. She spent hours on the riverbank with her little plastic transistor shaped like tangerine. She smoked cigarettes and had midnight swims" (*God* 44). In other words, she became virtually untouchable. Baby Kochamma, the Lady Macbeth of the novel, jeered at Ammu. "A married daughter had no position in her parent's home. As for a divorced daughter, she had no position anywhere at all" (*God* 45). But, Ammu decided not to be obedient, submissive, according to patriarchal demands of the society. She cared for no "Love Laws," when she decided to surrender herself to Velutha, who is an "Untouchable Paravan" at Ayemenem. Ammu loved Velutha from her childhood because he was a talented craftsman. Moreover, it was the secret charm of opposite sex which attracted her attention towards the well-built stout body of Velutha and naturally her suppressed womanhood revived again after a gap of several years. Ammu and Velutha started their love in such a way:

Ammu saw that he saw. She looked away. He did too. History's friends returned to claim them. To re-wrap them in its old, scarred pelt and drag them back to where they really lived. Where the Love Laws lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much. Ammu walked up to the verandah, back into the Play. Shaking. Velutha looked down at Ambassador S. Insect in his arms. He put her down. Shaking too (*God* 168).

This is usually how a love story begins; there are two persons looking into each other's eyes, and suddenly they realise that they are in love. The lovers stand silently and transfixed unaware of how much time has passed by. May be a century or even longer! Nothing really matters at this moment of ecstasy. The whole world quiets down, and time is condensed. There seems to be some kind of telepathy between the two. Without saying a word, they know exactly that they share the same feeling and they are thinking about the same thing. However, in the significant scene when the male and female protagonists, Velutha and Ammu, looked at each other and realized that there was a mutual attraction between them. Roy immediately shifts the focus of the smooth-sailing love story to the social-historical taboos that commanded the characters to love or not to love. The turning point in the story is that her love story begins not with the lovers transfixing each other once they have made eye contacts, but their turning away from the contact out of hesitation rather than embarrassment as soon as they found their gazes meet. The couple's first reaction to the new found love was to conceal their emotions and then they retrieved to the places they belonged. One was a respectable woman in the upper class, and the other was a man of the untouchable caste. Roy in the novel introduces an oxymoronic condition by combining love with law to convey a realistic point of view that there are, in fact, social, traditional and historical reasons affecting every individual's behaviour as one cannot have his own way in every matter related to life. Thus, love has to face many hindrances. This confrontation is a serious matter, especially in India, where the love and laws, a strange mixture of patriarchy, are the very foundation upon which the Indian society is able to stabilise and work itself. Roy does not only examine love from its psychological underpinnings, but in light of social mores that instruct Indian men, how to love. It is just to highlight the clash between the individual and the complicit cooperation of the deep-rooted patriarchy and caste system in India along with the colonial force. Arundhati Roy in one interview with Abraham Taisha claims that "*The God of Small Things* is not a book specifically about our culture – it's a book about human nature" (Taisha 91).

The character of Ammu is like Shakespeare's Cleopatra, who can flirt with Antony with her infinite variety and can go to any extent for the fulfilment of love even in the time of war. Cleopatra's love crosses the boundaries of time and space but Ammu and Velutha's relationship crosses the borders of caste and creed.

Shakespeare's Cleopatra is naughty, fickle in flirting with Antony but Roy's Ammu is simple, sober and faithful in her relationship with Velutha. As a tragedy of love, the character of Ammu and Cleopatra bear resemblance in the sense that their love is altogether sincere, intense and irresistible. Ammu is unsatisfied both physically and mentally, and her desire to come closer in the life of Velutha with her sexual passion is irresistible:

Ammu, naked now, crouched over Velutha, her mouth on his. He drew her hair around them like a tent. [...] She slid further down, introducing herself to the rest of him. His neck. His nipples. His chocolate stomach. She tasted him, in her mouth. He sat and grew back to him. She felt her belly tighter under her, hard as board. She felt her wetness slipping on his skin. He took her nipple in his mouth and cradled her other breast in his callous palm (*God* 336).

After her affair with Velutha had come to light, her social status dropped even lower because for one she was a widow and secondly that she had been "defiled" by a member of the untouchable caste. Inspector Mathews taps on Ammu's breasts in the police station, and it was a "premeditated gesture, calculated to humiliate and terrorize her" (*God* 246), rather than a single isolated instance of sexual harassment. And thus, her love is shattered and enhances her sense of alienation and disillusionment. As Ammu transgresses the love laws, one finds the result is the loss of two lives – Ammu's exile and subsequent death, Estha's silence, and Rahel's inability to engage in intimate, socially acceptable relations. Ammu's alienation leads her on to utter desolation as the lady was declared 'defiled' by society. She becomes totally destitute when even her brother bares his fangs. She was thrown out of the house before condemning her to a solitary cell while her heart touches the depths of despair which led to rebelliousness in her nature. She becomes invisible in the eye of puritans and at the very young age of thirty-one breathes her last and even the church refused to bury her.

Thus, my paper found that there have been unexpected gains as well as losses in the wake of this recent upsurge of globalization, which appears like a hydra-headed monster to some while to others it serves as an opportunity to realize their dream. Since one cannot escape alienation, it seems wise to have an empathetic and somewhat lenient attitude towards it as this constant reality. The more one would resist it, the more would it persist and one would only go the way of Hercules, who while attempting to remove his shirt tore his skin. Therefore, one has to learn to widen the scope of his tolerance, thereby extending his existential, mental and spiritual horizon towards greater and still greater acceptability. Whatever the future has in store, one should realize that alienation has come to stay and human spirit must ensure the perpetuation of co-existence through tolerance and co-operation.

The peroration after the study of Ammu's character is that the invisible Gods are not hostile to human race, but rather it is man who is the enemy of man. The tragic relatedness of a Man to Man have created untold sorrow and suffering. If the reason dawns upon man he would naturally have strong urges and make a powerful effort to live together in harmony. Feeling of empathy can go a very long way if the different institutions and people realize their responsibility of forging a long chain of bonhomie.

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