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ARUNDHATI ROY: A CHAMPION OF FEMINISM IN “THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS”

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ABSTRACT

Feminism is often described as a struggle against all forms of patriarchal and sexist oppression. It has also come to mean a movement in support of the principle that the women should have the same rights and opportunities-legal, social and economic as men. A reference to it in the treatise *Half the Sky* reads:

“By Feminism we mean, both, the awareness of women’s position in society as one of disadvantage or inequality compared with that of men, also a desire to remove those disadvantages.”<sup>1</sup>

Arundhati Roy established herself as a novelist par excellence with her masterpiece *The God of Small Things*. This maiden novel attracted considerable readers across the world. Roy reveals the position of woman in the family and society of Kerala as well as India. The novel is written by a woman and women characters are the focal point of the novel. The novelist does not pretend to be feminist but the novel has feminine aspects indeed. All her female characters suffer but fight for their rights in this male dominated society. Roy critiques the deep-rooted social conceptions of exploitation of female living on the margin and has been neglected for decades.

“...The most remarkable thing about *The God of Small Thing* is that it has been narrated with candidness and detached objectivity. We are reminded of Jane Austin’ view of fidelity to experience. The novel tells of her own experience of life but the novel never becomes sentimental or autobiographical in the ordinary sense of the world.”<sup>2</sup>

**Keywords:** Feminism, discrimination, patriarchal, exploitation, conservative, Oppression etc.

Feminists identify the deep-rooted causes leading to oppression of women and an endeavor to remove them. They try to bring about a change in the social milieu in which women are accepted as equals, in all respects to men in the equal sharing of rights, opportunities and responsibilities in the process of evolution of human society. Some restrict their demands to equality in matters relating to education and work with emphasis on financial independence. There are others, among the feminists, who call for a metamorphosis of the entire society with a view to completely removing the tradition-bound, deep-rooted beliefs in the moral

superiority of man over woman. Their purpose is to eradicate the persisting gender discrimination in all its manifestations in the society.

There is, however, some change in the attitude of the woman herself as an individual in her own right. It is in this context that Indian women writers like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Kamala Markandaya, Arundhati Roy and Jhumpa Lahiri, to name only a few, depict the anxiety of the educated, independent, middle-class Indian woman searching for a balance between her traditional role as daughter, wife and mother in a predominantly patriarchal society and her new-found sense of self-longing freedom and private space. Slowly becoming aware of the injustice heaped on them, women began to raise their voice in protest and this led to the birth of Women's Liberation Movement in the early seventies.

Elite women living in major cities were initially drawn into the vortex of the feminist movement and their main role was to bring home to the women of diverse sections of society, how they were subjected to iniquitous and humiliating treatment in this custom-bound "male dominated environment. With the passage of time, more and more votaries of feminism joined the ranks of the movement.

Indian woman's identity is one that is usually connected to and defined by societal and cultural norms of a patriarchal familial structure. Her identity is defined within the parameters of her social relationship to man. The Indian woman is a metaphor for purity, chastity and sanctity of the ancient spirit that is Indian. This essential spirit of India lies in its religion, spirituality, culture, tradition and family.

Arundhati Roy arrived as a public figure on the larger Indian literary stage like some dramatic unforeseen comet. John Updike compared Roy's arrival in fiction to that of Tiger Woods in golf. Commenting upon the unique success of Arundhati Roy's as novelist of *The God of Small Things* at a very young age, Kamala Das says, "She is Lucky. We are not. But she is our child and we wish her well. We are very happy for her. Because she is young to enjoy it." The novel is about love and hate, body and sex, marriage and divorce, conflict and struggle and, above all, it is about women.

"We're prisoners of war... Our dreams have been doctored. We belong nowhere. We sail unanchored on troubled seas. We may never be allowed ashore. Our sorrows will never be said enough. Our joys never happy enough. Our dream never big enough. Our lives never important enough. To matter."<sup>3</sup>

The above lines said by Chacko is well matched and symbolically fit for the women characters of the novel – Baby Kochamma, Mammachi, Ammu and Rahel. Roy concept of feminism can be seen by the way the women characters who faced crisis and how they reacted with dilemma and obstacles in the novel.

In my present paper, I will try to establish the fact that Roy has introduced some revolutionary and new approach while writing this novel and her treatment of women characters. The novel is the tale of three generation of women. It revolves around women and presents the true position of womenfolk in India. It displays the struggle of the women against their incessant exploitation, torture and struggle which they face in the male dominated conservative society.

"It can be called the story of sufferings of Baby Kochamma, Mammachi, Ammu and Rahel. They all suffer in different ways. In a country like India where patriarchal system is very strong, women suffer mentally, physically and sexually."<sup>4</sup>

The novel deals with the confrontation between The Haves and Haves not of the society, between the High and the Mighty and Low and the Weak, "Big man, The Laitain and the Small, the Mombati, between *The God of Big Things* and *The God of Small Things*.

As per my opinion, Roy also presents a deep contrast between man and woman. For centuries man has been dominating over the family, society and as well as over the woman. The life-course, action and mission of woman has been controlled and guided by man. Man has been the maker of life of woman. Symbolically, at some extent Man is Laitain and woman is Mombati. While Man, i.e Laitain is strong, powerful, protected and free in the society. Even Man gets full freedom from parents and societal mind set-up to do whatsoever he likes. He is entitled to get good education and favors while woman is still lingering on the will of man. In the same house and by the same parents and in the same society, woman is treated differently. In the novel, Ammu and Chacko are brother and sister of the same parents. But Ammu is not allowed to get proper education and go abroad while Chacko is admitted in Oxford. After the divorce of Ammu, she is not welcomed

warmly by her own parents. Meanwhile Chacko is heartily received by the family members after the divorce from an English woman, Margaret. He is always trying to show his manhood and throwing his weight around. He boastfully tells his sister:

“What is your is mine and what is mine is also mine.”<sup>5</sup>

Pappachi, father of Ammu, was a frustrated man. After his retirement, he was a changed man, becoming ill-tempered and difficult to adjust with. Once again, dominance over woman by man is shown in the character of Pappachi. He used to beat his wife with brass flower vase violently. He torn the shoes of Ammu and threw away. He was a monster for his own family—a Laltain, a man for a women, Ammu and Mammachi, Mombattis before him.

Chacko came back to Ayemenom, started “Paradise Pickles and Preserves” keeping his mother neutral partner and at last hijacked all parental wealth, house and factory under him. So, he is a true representative of “wonderful male chauvinistic society.”

What a shocking and disgusting matter for woman, Ammu, would be when her own husband forced to have sex with his boss, Mrs. Hollick, to save his job. A man is making prey to his own wife for another man to satisfy his need.

Ammu revolted against so called dogmatic foundation of the society. She married with a Bengali against her conservative parents; she challenged the supremacy and authority of her brother, Chacko. She dared to take divorce from her husband and left him. By Ammu Roy tries to give a stern message to Indian women to challenge the bad custom or tradition that is harming their lives and follow their own way of lives and decide the course of lives. They should allow man to control their lives and fate instead they should believe that even a single hair has its own shadow.

Marriage is considered a pious and important aspect in life of Indian woman. Marriage is a social and emotional bond for man. An Indian Girl dreams for a better life and social security through marriage. Family and society also play vital role in Indian girl’s marriage. Through the centuries, marriage for Indian girl has been one-way road. She enters into the marriage easily but there has not been easy to come out from the marriage if it fails for a Indian woman. Here once again Roy’s woman characters proved themselves ultramodern and revolutionary. Ammu and her daughter, Rahel realized after a short while that their marriage was just a mistake and tragically disaster for them.

“Rahel drifted into marriage like a passenger drifts towards an unoccupied chair in an airport lounge, with a sitting down dense.”<sup>6</sup>

Both Ammu and Rahel took a very bold decision. They broke their marriage and came out from this so called social and pious bond-marriage. They wanted to live their lives as per their choice.

“Anything that makes you weak physically, intellectually and spiritually, reject as poison.”<sup>7</sup> (Swami Vivekananda.)

Destiny placed Roy’s woman characters in a very dogmatic, conservative and orthodox Christian Ipe Family in Kerala. Every woman in the family has to suffer due to old prevailed custom and tradition. The novel is the story of the suffering of women and their response to some certain crisis.

But the most promising quality of Roy’s women is their will power and choice of love-life or love partner. Baby Kochamma, when she was a young woman, fell in love with a handsome Irish monk, Father Mulligan. She was so blindly attracted to Father Mulligan that she had tried every ways and means to seduce him. Even she converted to Roman Catholic against wishes of her father. She entered in a convent in Madras as a trainee non to come very close to Father but in vain. But she did not marry in her later life. Instead she used to write “I love you! I Love you” in her personal diary. She felt that “her memory of him was hers. Wholly hers. Savagely, fiercely hers. Not to be shared with faith, far less with competing, co-nuns, and co-sadhus or whatever it was they called themselves.”<sup>8</sup>

Ammu broke and deny the parental control and married a outcast Bengali Tea Garden Assistant Manager knowing that her family members in Ayemenom would never accept her marriage. She always hoped to be free from the clutches of her cage like family. All day she dreamed of escaping from Ayemenem and the clutches of her ill-tempered father and bitter, long-suffering mother.

“To reign is worth ambition, though in hell,  
Better to reign in Hell, than serve in heaven.”<sup>9</sup> (John Milton)

Rahel, daughter of Ammu, took the same way as her mother. She also drifted into marriage like a passenger in an airport lounge. She is bold and modern. She leads her life as her choice. Her marriage and her life partner is her choice, not the family and society. Above decision taken by women regarding love and marriage can be well established in words of great Indian entertainer novelist, Chetan Bhagat:

“So please don’t kill yourself in trying to have it all. Just be normal, admit you won’t be excellent at everything every day and smile through life.....When you have reasonable expectations from yourself, you can be happy. And being happy is, above all else, having it all.”<sup>10</sup>

For ages woman has been under control of man. The condition of the Indian women through the ages and the rules of Manu in holding women under bondage on the plea that a woman is from birth to death dependent upon the women’s has psyche to the extent of turning them, at first, into mute servile creatures who could not even articulate their views or emotions. Down the ages, the place of women in the tradition-bound, male dominated Indian society had been pitiable. Women were treated as no more than mere puppets; they were confined to the four walls of the house. Different fields of activities were considered a male prerogative and therefore denied to woman.

One main reason behind weakness of woman before man is her financial dependency on man. She is economically not strong so she cannot protest any atrocity by man. So most woman characters in *The God of Small Things* try to prove themselves and establish economically themselves independent to be strong before so called manliness in the society that is full of paradoxes and contradictions. Mammachi, in spite of her husband objection, started “Paradise Pickles and Preserves”, a small pickle factory, in her own house. Ammu worked in her mother factory as a worker and later she went to the Bharat Lodge in Allepy for a job interview for the post of secretary. Rahel, daughter of Ammu, worked as a waitress in an Indian Restaurant in New York. She also worked as a night clerk in a bullet proof cabin at a gas station outside Washington.

Roy has been severely criticized for her portrayal of sexual aspects which look absurd and they could have been easily done away with. But she wants to show emphatically that woman should have the same right as man even to choose the life or sex partner. All her references of sex or erotic scene in the novel which often degenerates to gentle and soft vulgarity is on her past a need to probe the reason for one’s behavior, mood and attitudes. Through such sexual descriptions she probably tells herself that everything that might concern the interplay of innumerable pleasures, sensations and thoughts which through the body and soul had some affinity with sex.

Sex is a fascinating subject of the strong feeling involved because of its potential for pleasure, and because of the deeply held cultural beliefs surroundings. Ammu is a brave woman who challenges the defied social order by marrying of her choice and then breaking that marriage and getting entangled in a forbidden love with Velutha who was an untouchable and a parawan in Kerala society. A common reader may surprise and object her decision to have love and sex with Velutha. But Roy has given such freedom to her woman to select and decide her partner.

“We will not allow our bodies to be owned and controlled by men in government or men anywhere for that matter. We will not allow our compassionate souls to get stepped on.....”<sup>11</sup>

Roy’s fictional art is remarkable for the innovations in language. Her language embellishes, communicates and strives for visionary effects. She uses Indian brand of English that deviates from the standard convection. She brings English under the influence of the vernacular. She substitutes the power-structure, colonial and patriarchal concept by Indianization(Use Of Kerala or Malayalam words, phrases, sentences and accent.) of English. Untranslated Malayalam words are used to give a truth of culture into the text. She used many Malayalam words directly in the novel to connect with readers with south Indian touch as follows;

| Malyalam word        | English meaning |
|----------------------|-----------------|
| *Chhi-chhi poach     | Shit-wiper      |
| *Mundu               | Dhoti           |
| *Onner,runder,mooner | One,two,three   |

\*Velutha

White

\*Naaley

Tomorrow

Roy takes up classic Indian materials but delights in verbal innovation and linguistic experiment. It is indeed a brave and bold step by woman writer who is going to write her first novel and experimented tremendously on language in such a vast amount. She has stretched language and imagination to recreate the fun-filled, magical yet anguished world of childhood with poignant simplicity, directness and wit.

### Conclusion

Roy is modern feminist novelist whose maiden novel highly praised and acknowledged. She treats some revolutionary concept of feminism in her novel. Her women characters are ultramodern and dynamic. They dare to break their unmatched marriage as per their will and love the person whom they like, breaking the bondage of society. They have the courage to challenge the man's supremacy over woman by protesting parents and male members of the family. They try to come out from the shadow of man by establishing themselves economically independent. Roy points such women characters who decide to allow have sensual passion with the person as per her choice. She brings English language under the influence of the vernacular and extensively used direct Malayalam words to give a truth of culture into the text.

"I think it's an important landmark which cannot be overlooked, not only because it brings home a Booker but also because it records Mombattis' brave though unfortunate struggle to survive against crazy winds of caste, class, and gender in independent India."<sup>12</sup>

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### A Short Biography of the corresponding the Author

**Dr. Rakesh Yadav** is a permanent assistant teacher in Garulia Mill High School (H.S). He has been the research scholar of English literature particularly in Indian writing in English. He is associated with many schools and organizations for academic betterment. He is also a motivational speaker and participates in social seminars and meetings. He believes, "Always say you are good but strive for better and hope for the best."

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