

Depiction of Post-Colonial Socio-Cultural Backdrops in *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract

Arundhati Roy debut novel *The God of Small Things* examines India's cultural transformation from colonial, post-colonial period to contemporary era of globalisation. The present study of the novel explores how caste and gender suppression is the sign of India's fundamental religiosity as this cultural phenomenon overpowers the whole novel. Caste carries lot of influence in our society. Gender biasness has the same influence. The paper presents the political and social upheavals, which are tightly related to colonialism, hegemony, class mobilization, and hybridity and identity problems in our society represented in *The God of Small Things*. In addition, the study also focuses on the stigma of untouchability and gender suppression is so deeply ingrained in the minds of Indian people. The issue of marginalization which is an important aspect in the novel has been deeply investigated in the novel.

Keywords- Gender Suppression, Political and Social Upheavals, Class Mobilization, Marginalization, Post-Colonial India, Cultural Phenomenon of Indian Society.

Arundhati Roy was born in Shillong;lived in Kerala and is based in Delhi. Arundhati wrote her first novel *The God of Small Things* in 1997 and won Booker prize.The Booker brought her fame and change her life but she used this newly created space and recognition to raise dissent. These are the social and feminine concerns that created a beautiful and powerful writer out of her. Her writings were from the marginalised, weak and exploited sections of the society of post-colonial era. Due to the author's Indian nationality, some critics hailed her as a female Rushdie, "establishing . . . the cultural striking back of the once-peripheral" (Boehmer 165)

For Arundhati friends and readers seemed like transition from writing in the world of fiction and imagination to writing about concert things like dam, people being displaced in the Narmada valley, globalisation and Enron. But she had already written three essays called, the great Indian rape trick and not the lady of schedule and about the way The Bandit Queen exploited Phoolan Devi and whether or not somebody should have the right to restate the rape of a living women without her consent and it because that she was swamped by media when Arundhati visited her the band it was converted into India's most famous serial rape victim in that firm and people strong to watch it on big screen for stop for Arundhati. The film was about how the mail mind reiterates Andre Infosys email victimhood for stop those who lauded the hateful in the women's. The Bandit the outlaw and the locus person under the decided that she will avoid the glare and keep her sanity.

However, she may not be a feminist herself. Arundhati is a very rational woman. She is educated aware alert and Fearless. A part of it is a borrowing from her mother. In a conversation with David Bassamian,Arundhati Speaks of herself and mother as,"both women who are unconventional". She further says, "There must be very few girls in India whose mother say,"whatever you do don't get married and don't sleep with the man until you are financially independent".(Roy 34). Arundhati philosophically patronise Simone De Beauvoir's - "Liberated and economically independent: free women just being born" (Beauvoir 715).

Her mother is very well known in Kerala because in 1986 she won a public interest litigation case. She challenged the Syrian Christian inheritance law that said that a woman law in her it one fourth of her father's property of Race 5,000 whichever is less. The Supreme Court ruling in her case gives women equal inheritance with retrospective effect from 1956. Women usually don't go court to claim their right those days. The churches used to conduct classes and taught fathers how to disinherit their daughters.

It's a very strange kind of operation that happens in Kerala. Women from Kerala work all over the India and all over the world for stop many of the words runs and nurses are from Kerala. Descent all the money they are and back home to support their families for staff and yet the nurses who an comparatively cute salaries will get married pair. Dowry and end up having the most bizarre really Sab servant relationship with their husbands for stop growing up in Kerala was a nightmare to me accepts Arundhati. (33)

These were the undercurrents of separation in Kerala that grew with Arundhati and she created the character of Ammu a radical feminist. Arundhati makes her readers understand that within the socio-cultural backdrops of those times, the achievement of mama Chi is no less the God of Small Things. It is a well-defined feministic text of pure Indian sensibility. The selection and Organisation of the fictional material is finally done here. She has

chosen to reconstruct the Kerala countryside and its life that she knows so well in order to produce a counter discourse.

The main events in the novel *The God of Small Things* take place during some December weeks in 1969 and the setting in Ayemenem, a town in South Indian state of Kerala. The novel is seen through the eyes of Rahel Ammu's daughter for the most part. The narrative moves between two points in time 1969 and 1993 and the perspective subsequently switches between Rahel seeing things as a seven-year-old girl and as adult woman (Olsson Angelika, 2011). January 2011, this factor in the novel creates grounds for its feminist reading. Very beautifully, Arundhati reveals the changes that happens in a city of Kerala, she narrates the destructive changes like environment. 1993 is the year when Rahel returns to Ayemenem to meet her brother Estha after being separated for 31 years.

'The God of Small Things,' portrays life in 'God's own country'- Kerala as ungodly. The characters are victimized and their life is overshadowed with despair and gloom. (Liddle Vandita, 2013). In *The God of Small Things* the story develops around agonizing Ammu, Rahel's mother and Mammachi mother of Ammu. Arundhati records her renders woman into a dependent and deprived being. Indian society is patriarchal one, dominates by male in every sphere of life. Feminist describes this as severe injustice to woman through man-made institutions, to legitimize their inferior and secondary states in society. She is assigned relative position through the process of continuous social and cultural conditioning. This process begins from the day of her birth. This affect her whole beings (Saminathan G. 2010)

"One is not born but rather becomes a woman". Simon de Beauvoir declared boldly in "The Second Sex". (Beauvoir vii)

Though the gender inequality is neither culture specific nor country specific. It has travelled down from the age of old times to our times. Even in the novel, *The God of Small Things* Ammu's father, Pappachi after retiring from his job from Delhi, settles in Ayemenem, he thinks the education of women an "Unnecessary expense" and stops Ammu from pursuing higher education and wait for marriage. The Chacko, Ammu's brother could be sent to Oxford for further studies. "Since her father did not have enough money to raise a suitable dowry, no proposal came Ammu grew desperate (38). Ammu felt suffocated and frustrated. Being the victim of gender discrimination in her family right from her childhood, she realizes that the social institutions hold an inevitable sway over the social maturation of women (Margaret Anne 2017). She would dream of being little away from the clutches of her ill-tempered father and bitter, long-suffering mother. Suddenly she decided to go to Calcutta to spend some time with the distant aunt.

In a wedding there Ammu met her, 'future husband'; a Bengali Hindu man. He proposed to the five days after they had met. Ammu accepted the proposal of this man whom she had known so little. She marries him without informing her parents. "She thought that anything, anyone at all, would be better than returning to Ayemenem (39). But to her shock she finds that the man finds whom she married was not an executive (as he claimed before marriage) but an uneducated and ordinary employee in the tea plantation. He was an alcoholic also. Ammu feels disillusioned now. Their relationship starts getting strained. His insensitivity due to excessive drinking is evident from the fact he was dead drunk and was sleeping in the hospital corridor while his wife was in labour pain. The situation aggravates by his 'bouts of violence' which include the children also (40 41). Ammu is deeply hurt when her husband was suspended from job for alcoholism sought to bargain by procuring his "extremely attractive wife" for his boss, Mr. Hollick, the English Manager of the estate. Mr. Hollick suggested that while a mood husband go for a holiday. "To a clinic perhaps for treatment and for this period of time Ammu be send to his bungalow to be looked after" (42).

Ammu's silent refuser at this proposal aggravated her husband, he got furious and suddenly "lunged at her, grabbed her hair, punched her and then passed out from the effort" (42). Ammu also hit him hard by a book but this ended their relationship. She returned to her parents Ayemenem. 'Unwelcomed' and to anything that she had fled away from only a few years ago. Except that now she had her twin (two-egg twins) Rahel and Estha and no more dreams. 'Arundhati wrote, "it was as though the windows through which their father disappeared had been kept open for anyone to walk in and be welcomed". (43) These lines explain the agony of Ammu and her twins.

Sarah Grimke observes:

Man has subjected to his will, used her as a means to promote his selfish gratification, the minister to his sensual pleasure, to be instrumental in promoting his comfort, but never has he desired to elate her to that rank she was created to fill. He has done all he could do to debase and enslave her mind. (Grimke 44)

Because Ammu has defied the male made conventions show so she has no "Locus standi" in the society. Society does not allow equal space to women. It is necessary to quote Virginia Woolf important precursor in feminist criticism who wrote, 'A Room of one's own' (1929). She stated, "Patriarchal system strongly advocates the society that have hindered or prevented women from realising their productive and creative possibilities" (Abrams 88). Even Ammu is a representative character who suffers the pain and plight of a woman in a Patriarchal Society. She, an estranged wife, lives a very pathetic and miserable life in her parents' house. She has no legitimate claim over the house she shares with Chacko "Thanks to our wonderful male Chauvinist Society" (57). She says, Chacko can boast that "What's your is mine and what is mine is also mine."

Accordingly, to Baby Kochamma, she (Ammu) has disqualified herself for a dignified life by marrying without her parents' consent and then separated. Divorce is metaphorically a form of that only. "Baby Kochamma resented Ammu because she saw her quarrelling with a fate that she, Baby Kochamma herself, felt she had graciously accepted. "The fate of the wretched Man-less woman" (22). Baby Kochamma strongly believed that a divorced daughter from an *intercommunity* love marriage had no place in her parents' house. If anything went wrong in the house the immediate cause according to the family members would always be Ammu and her children. The pain and happiness makes them uncomfortable in the family. Unloved and uncared children feel happy in the company of Valutha. He loves them, care for them and plays with them.

The caste system distinguishes India from other Nations. Like racism in America and apartheid in South Africa, caste and gender suppression is the sign of India's fundamental religiosity. This as a cultural phenomenon overpowers the whole novel. Caste carries lot of influence in our society. Gender biasness has the same influence. Velutha and Ammu represent the political and social upheavals, which are tightly related to colonialism, hegemony, class mobilization, and hybridity and identity problems in our society. In addition, the stigma of untouchability and gender suppression is so deeply ingrained in the minds of Indian people that it may become a dangerous juggernaut. Arundhati's portrait on the caste system and gender poses a challenge to the centuries-old shibboleth and she expresses her disillusionment towards the social conditions of postcolonial India where the untouchables and females (females and doubly marginalized in our society) still face a hostile society.

Outside the caste system are the Untouchables. They are considered polluted not to be touched. Since upward mobility is hardly seen in the caste system, most people remain in the same caste for their whole life and marry within the caste. Velutha is that's why an exception of the caste norms in the novel. Ammu's character also portrays the same notion as of Velutha. He interacts with people higher than his rank. The division between the Touchable and the Untouchables is deeply rooted in Kerala. So Velutha, which means white in Malayalam, was given this name because he was black. His father Velly Pappan was a Paravan. As a young boy, Velutha would come with Velly Paapen to the back entrance of the Ayemenem House to deliver the coconuts they had plucked from the trees in the compound. Pappachi would not allow Paravans into the house (73). Arundhati dealt with this aspect with clarity. She writes:

They were not allowed to touch anything that touchables touched. Caste Hindus and Caste Christians. Mammachi told Estha and Rahel that she could remember a time, in her girlhood, when Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrians Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan's footprints. In Mammachi's time, Paravans, like other Untouchables, were not allowed to walk on public roads, not allowed to carry umbrellas. They had to put their hands over their mouths when they spoke, to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed. (74)

Arundhati writes about the age-old caste discrimination, gender bias and police politicians nexus that is a reality even after six decades of independence. The History of Kerala tells us that when "Britishers came to Malabar, a member of Paravans, Pelayas and Pulayas (among them Velutha's grandfather, Kelan) converted to Christianity and joined the Anglican Church to escape the scourge of Untouchability. As added incentive, they were given a little food and money. They were known as the Rice-Christians" (36). They were made to have separate churches with separate priests and services. It did not take them long to realise that they had jumped from the frying pan into the fire. As a special favour they were even given their own separate Parian Bishop. After independence they found that they were not entitled to any government benefits like a job reservation or bank loans at low interest rates because officially, on paper, they were Christian and therefore casteless (36). "It was little like having a sweep away your footprints without a broom or worse, not being allowed to leave footprints at all" (74). This suffering of hundreds of us probably turns in making Velutha join the Travancore-Cochin Marxist Labour Union and become an activist.

Rahel saw the rugged dalit character, in between the marchers, "who were party workers, students and labourers holding a flag and carried a key of ancient anger lit with a recent fuse" (69). They were shouting 'Zindabad'. Velutha holding the red flag, in a white shirt and mundu with angry veins in his neck. Arundhati shows how anger reflects through body language. Velutha a culturally rich man is suppressed by society and its beliefs. "Velutha was not supposed to be a carpenter (73) though Rahel knew his back. She had been carried on it several times. When Johann Kelein, a carpenter from carpenter's guild in Bavaria, came to Kottayam and spent three years with the Christian Missionary society, conducting a workshop with local carpenters. Velutha joined that workshop when he was fourteen years in age. Every afternoon, after school Velutha caught a bus to Kottayam where he worked with Klein till dusk. By the time Velutha was sixteen, he had finished high school and was an accomplished carpenter. He had his own set of carpentry tools and a distinctly German designer sensibility (36). Other than his skills in carpentry, Velutha had a way with machines. "Mammachi (with impenetrable Touchable logic) after said that it only he had not been a Paravan, he might have become an engineer. He mended radios, clocks, water pumps. He looked after the plumbing and all the electrical gadgets in the house (75). This comment reflects in dignity towards Velutha the Dalit character.

Arundhati commented that deep at the heart of the horror of what is going on lies the caste system: this layered, horizontally divided society with no vertical bolts, no glue, no intermarriage, no social mingling: no human – humane- interaction that holds the layers together. Therefore, when the bottom half of society simply shears off and falls away, it happens silently. It does not create the torsion, the upheaval, the blowout, the sheer structural damage that it might, had there been the equivalent of vertical bolts.

Arundhati has been very rational in designing the female character, Rahel. Though Ammu and Mammachi are traditional women with lesser spark of revolt against prejudices. The difference that separates Ammu and Mammachi from Rahel is that whereas, they both make compromises for their life the ‘self’ of Rahel is much more aggressive. She protects her space, against the conservatively shaped socio-cultural determinants. In Indian Culture, it is expected of a woman to remain very faithfully to a man-alive or dead. But Arundhati has forcefully raised the question of ‘woman’s needs’. Though Ammu pays a severe price to satisfy the demands of her body. “Two lines, Two children’s childhood. And a history lesson for the future offenders” (336). Yet she seems to be quite helpless. They knew there was “nowhere for them to go, they had nothing no future. So they stick small things (338). Their forbidding physical involvement in *The God of Small Things* – powerful and compulsive within man and woman. With Ammu and Mammachi clearly “biology is destiny” (Fetterley 492). However, Rahel powerfully rejects the authority of father, husband and brother; Arundhati surrenders some power to man and claims some for her woman. Implications of gender-based power structure is short-circuited by her. When her marriage is broken, she returns to Ayemenem. She is a divorcee like her mother. Though she also suffers emotionally, but very courageously faces the with Comrade Pillai. She informs him, rather shocks him into silence by saying, we are divorced, after being interrogated on marriage. She is unquestionably, the ‘Liberated Woman’ of Simone De Beauvoir. Who is being born as stated earlier?

Though Arundhati has structural Mammachi and Ammu both as traditional women trying & flight their ways out but they are also rebellions characters within their own flight. Ammu is a feminist fighting against male chauvinism for her individuality. She emerges as rebel challenging the age-old value system and oppression. First by marrying a man of her choice and then breaking that marriage and falling again committing herself into a relationship with an ‘untouchable’. Arundhati has challenged the politics of caste and gender in the Syrian Christian community through Ammu. It is believed that in many ways Arundhati drew the character of Ammu in the image of her own mother Mary Roy, a well-known social activist. She broke the tradition by marrying and divorcing a Bengali and then made history by fighting the Provisions of the Christian Succession Act all the way upto the Supreme Court on the issues of the status of women in Kerala.

Marginalization is an important aspect in the novel. Ammu and Velutha are marginalized in their own way. The construct of our society is such that females, especially dalit and lower cast are doubly marginalized. Velutha is obviously marginalized and subordinated as he is a Paravan and Untouchable. Ammu is marginalized because she has defied rules being a female. Arundhati gives us a somewhat euphemistic picture of his status when the narrator shows us how Velutha appears in Ammu’s dreams: “He left no footprints in sand no ripples in water, no image in mirrors” (206). This was the position of the untouchables in the old days. Mammachi tells her grandchildren about, the days when “Paravens were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paraven’s footprints” (71).

Arundhati’s novel is particularly interesting because it focuses on how women relate to other women but also to different kinds of men. There is a stand and male-female dichotomy in the novel but rather a popularity of relationships. This now makes it clear to the reader how farfetched it is to assume that all women share the same cultural or political interests only because of their similar bodies. Women as a group are more likely to be deeply divided by boundaries like class, ethnicity and nationality. (Olsson Angelika, 2011). These were the undercurrents of suppression in Kerala that grew with Arundhati and she created of Ammu, a radical feminist. Mammachi too after returning to Ayemenem helps the family economically by making her famous banana jam and tender mango pickles. They were referred as ‘Soshas’ Tender Mango pickles and jam. Though Mammachi lives in conventional patriarchal family system but is able to retaliate with her son’s help against, ‘wife beauty operation’ and create a small space for herself. She fulfils her small dreams of recognition in the society. Mammachi has corner in her eyes but that does not push her back. She redeems her womanhood but also achieves small but significant victories. She becomes woman expressions. Arundhati makes her readers understand that within the socio-cultural backdrop of those times, the achievement of Mammachi is no less. *The God of Small Things* is a well-defined feminist text on pure Indian sensibility. The selection and organisation of the fictional material is finely done here. She has chosen to reconstruct the Kerala countryside and its life that she knows so well in order to produce a counter discourse.

Arundhati becomes her own matter for when she takes the ‘onerous’ responsibility of a writer, of feminine talent of Simone De Beauvoir’s discourse, that women don’t go beyond the given world, have not challenged the unjust society like Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy and Karamazov. Simon writes, “Today it is already less difficult for woman

to assert themselves; but they have not as yet completely overcome the age long sex-limitation that has isolated them in their femininity.

The God of Small Things received mixed reactions after being published. “In some places there were public protests due to its castetransgressive content, and the left wings critics chastised Arundhati’s (negative) portrayal of the communist party in the novel.” (Mallaney 71). Her linguistic originality and inventiveness is remarkable. Apart from very little controversies and very high acclaims her novel has been analysed by scholars from various theoretical angles, feminism, post colonisation, post-structuralism Marxism, new historicism. Arundhati Roy represents the subaltern literature through somewhat disputed, term of marginalised groups and the lower classes, in formerly colonized Third World countries. The purpose was to explore how Arundhati fictionally constructed the marginalised female characters in *The God of Small Things* – Mammachi, Baby Kochamma and Ammu.

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