

Gender Polarity and Domestic Affairs: A Study of *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract

The issues of gender inequity and sexual discrimination are as old as the mankind itself on this planet earth. These subjects have remained the great challenges for all social thinkers and activists right from the very beginning, but have never been resolved completely by any society so far. So, they appear natural and necessary evils which go on ceaselessly with human existence. Every society and culture is practicing and continuing the gender difference despite big claims that it believes in equality, liberty and social justice for all. Due to this social bigotry, some segments of population suffer at the cost of others' enjoyment and exploitation. Literature being very close to socio-cultural institutions and practices, undertakes to reflect the same and urge people to ponder upon it whether such practice is fruitful or damaging. If positive, it is to be embraced and preserved, and otherwise, it is to be eradicated. The social injustice in the form of gender polarity and sexual difference is such a menace which yields a number of colossal problems, and thereby hinders the overall progress in the social and cultural enrichment and empowerment. The hazardous effects of this man-woman unbalanced treatment are first seen in domestic circles. Generally a home with adequate understanding between male and female whether it is wife-husband case or any other affair among the family members is supposed to flourish. Such a pacific and conciliatory environment also provides good psychological nourishment to all. If it is otherwise, it tells upon the solidarity and tolerance level of all adversely. The sweet home in that case becomes a hell instead of heaven as it is called commonly. Therefore, the mutual understanding and respect for each other in domestic affairs is mandatory, if the individual happiness, familial contentment, social welfare, and balanced cultural growth are the goals to be attained.

As now it is clear that gender bias and sexual inferior-superior concept are grave social problems faced by one and all everywhere and always, literature has a crucial role to play to get control over it and its burgeoning negative repercussions. Gender consciousness and struggle for the attainment of equal rights and privileges between male and female is not a modern phenomenon and any new social development, but it has been highlighted and expressed in social and literary documents even in antique

Greek and Roman civilizations. In a very appealing manner the same has been sharply pointed out by Arundhati Roy in her debut novel *The God of Small Things*.

Arundhati Roy is highly praised Indian novelist to have bagged the Booker prize for her influential work *The God of Small Things* which got published in 1997. In this novel she wonderfully studies the predicament of Indian women against the setting of Ayemenem, a southern Indian state of Kerala where the complex muddle of relationships ensnare the female characters subjecting them to recurring repression and sweltering their individual freedom. Arundhati Roy as one of the outstanding present-day women writers in India takes us inside the insight of her modern educated middle class women characters to present their predicament, worries, dilemmas, disagreements and aspirations. Ensnared between patriarchy and convention on the one hand, and expressiveness, uniqueness and liberty on the other, her central character feels lost and confused and explores way to fulfill herself as a human being. She delineates her women characters in the light of their expectations, uncertainties, aspirations and dissatisfactions.

The author analyzes the gender subjugation from beginning to end by examining the marital and inter-gender relations while creating the characters like: Ammu, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma and Rahel. All these female characters are capable, elegant and are in the right place of prosperous class but they are disadvantaged in fully realizing their abilities. They are deficient in fortitude to frankly confront the social order and are torn between conventional norms and up to date outlooks. Their attempt to defy the traditions, laws, values of social and cultural boundaries, they do moral misconduct which in due course lead them toward their downfall and extermination. "Thanks to our wonderful male chauvinistic society" rightly Ammu had observed (Roy 57). In the course of their flights of individual participation in diverse issues, they cross-examine the configurations of social group, relations and gender in both hidden and open manner. Ammu, middle class bourgeois woman, a divorcee with two children, she has the main role in the novel that is why she is considered to be the female protagonist in the novel. However, she is educated and eloquent; she is the sufferer of marriage that did not work out. "Her husband turned out to be not just a heavy drinker but a full blown alcoholic with all of an alcoholic's deviousness and tragic charm. "There were things about him that Ammu never understood. Long after she left him, she never stopped wondering why he lied so outrageously when he didn't need to particularly when he didn't need to" (Roy 40). Her drunkard husband used to impose horrible treatment on her to the severe end of fulfilling the carnal pleasures of his boss, so that his position remains safe and sound. State of affairs becomes so hurting and intolerable that Ammu is strained to break up with him: "Drunken violence followed by post-drunken badgering" and 'Ammu left her husband and returned, unwelcome to her parents in Ayemenem.' (Roy 42)

So, Helplessly along with her twins-Estha and Rahel, Ammu try to find protection in her own home but her father's house turns out to be an unpleasant place for her and she is subject to dishonour and abuse by her own family members. Ammu as a lady has great self-confidence in herself and she frequently outmanoeuvres her own well versed brother, Chacko so far she was deprived of the chance to study and have an experience like her brother. Through the estimation of Chacko who is constantly bent on marginalizing his own sister – "Ammu had no Locusts stand I" (Roy 57) and that "Ammu and Estha and Rahel were millstones around his neck" (Roy 85)

“Ammu learned to live with this cold, calculating cruelty... she did exactly nothing to avoid quarrels and confrontations. In fact, it could be argued that she sought them out, perhaps even enjoyed them.” (Roy 182.). The frequent rejections of Ammu by her own family members forces her to seek tear-jerking refuge in Velultha - a low caste or untouchable carpenter. In this way a secret love-affair develops between the two consequential in cautious sexual encounters which is in infringement of the customary norms of the Syrian Christian society. For the reason, due to her moral lapse the church also rejected to bury Ammu. “Rahel thought she looked like a roman senator. Et tu, Ammu! She thought and smiled, remembering Estha! (Roy 162) .Accordingly “Ammu died in a grimy room in the Bharat lodge in Alleppey... She died alone. She was thirty-one. Not old, not young, but a viable, die-able age.” (Roy 161). For ever, Ammu is disowned by her people, isolated mercilessly from her children and faces a horrible death.

Now, as per the assessment, second influential woman character in the novel is Mammachi, who mutually has the mother’s relation with Ammu and Chacko. She is very skilful in running a pickle factory all by herself, but so for her husband Pappachi is concerned that he “would not help her with the pickle-making because he did not consider pickle-making a suitable job for a high ranking ex-govt. official” He knows very well how to thrash her always for no obvious reason “the beatings weren’t new. What was new was only the frequency with which they took place” (Roy 47-48). After Pappachi’s death her own son Chacko, takes over the control of factory from Mammachi’s hands that become the main cause of her to face a marginalized position in terms of family and gender. She has to face the situation like this because Chacko considers as per his viewpoint “what’s yours is mine and what’s mine is also mine.” (Roy 57). Mammachi on the other hand does not refuse to accept her authoritarian son, she grants to his “Men’s Needs” because Chacko has carnal feelings towards “pretty women who worked in the factory.” compelling them to “sit at table with him and drink tea” (Roy 65) to a great extent to the disappointment of his own mother. Mammachi is creative and knows how to play a violin. When her music teacher admires her outstanding performance and ability before her husband, her music lessons are stopped immediately for the reason that his wife may outdo Pappachi. Though, contrasting to Ammu, Mammachi certainly not questions the situations and admits the truth submissively and with a weird flexibility in her character. Her submission is a self-protective gesticulation of her narrative sense of stamina to experience the torment and distress exclusive of outburst.

Also, Baby Kochamma is the paternal aunt of Chako and the sister of Pappachi. She is another ill-treated sufferer in the novel, who receives the shock of her life when her fantasy of marrying father Mulligan, an Irish priest gets plagued. In order to win him, she converts herself to Roman Catholic faith but at last she does not succeed and begins living in seclusion in the Ayemenem house. She schemes with the inspector and becomes successful enough to imprison Velultha who is severely put to death due to beatings. Such a disappointing attitude from the part of Baby Kochamma is perhaps due to the unfair and spiteful treatment meted out to her throughout her life: “the fear of being dispossessed”. She felt that she had the “fate of the wretched Man-less woman.” Aswathy Cheriyan has written:

Baby Kochamma soon realizes the hopelessness of her venture, and her powerlessness to give voice to her oppressed desires due to her fear of

conservative society force her to lead a disturbed life and she becomes stubborn. Her stubbornness obtains her a bad reputation because of that her father thought she was unlikely to find a husband, so he sent her America to do a course in Ornamental Gardening. (118)

Therefore, like Mammachi, Baby Kochamma as well accepts to the patriarchal social norms without any uncertainty however, if closely observed she puts up a line of unspoken confrontation in opposition to the discriminatory socio-political and money-making order in the post-colonial India.

Moreover, Rahel is the daughter of Ammu, who has underprivileged status and is devoid of traditional parental love. She lives with the dishonour because of a mixed parentage, equally in terms of religion and separate states of living. It all happens because her father is a Hindu and her mother a Syrian Christian. She experiences a very terrible time during her school days. Even sometimes she was barred many times from the Nazareth convent and refused to be allowed again by the school. She is detested by her relatives like- Baby Kochamma, Kochu Maria and even Chacko. She regards Velultha to be a father figure with whom she even does not hesitate to entertain games “She knew his back. She’d been carried on it. More times than she could count”. (Roy 73). However, when Rahel finds out about the sexual relationship of Ammu with Velultha, she locks herself in the bedroom. No sooner the police comes to arrests Velultha she goes to the same police station in the company of her brother Estha to identify Velultha as an immoral criminal. Together when it is seen that she is the butt of ridicule of an aberrant family, where she fails to unite with the people more or less around her and lacks self-assurance in the very case. She commits the most deviant act of social contravention because she loves her own brother which is considered incest and forbidden in any religion. It is a kind of understood reaction or resistance toward the social order in which she figures herself. According to author “Rahel watched Estha with the curiosity of a mother watching her wet child. A sister a brother. A woman a man. A twin a twin”.(Roy 93) While this evaluation it is found that there is only her brother Rahel with whom she can feel an accord, compassionate relationship. From their relationship it is evident that they find a kind of refuge in each other company.

Further, Rahel is the only character in the novel who possesses lofty thoughts. She takes up architecture program in Delhi without any consideration or concentration, there she meets Larry MCcaslin the associate, marries him and goes to the U.S.A. She goes with the flow into marriage, “Like a passenger drifts into an unoccupied chair in an airport lounge” (Roy 18) However, in a little while gets divorce from him and returns to Ayemenem, her birth place. No more than Eastha with whom, she has compatibility, a balancing agreement. Also, she like her mother learns at a young age to dream and envisage and like her she is eventually renounced and cast off by the society. Her bond with her brother Rahel breaks the rules the conventional boundaries of a definite and social association. Whereas, Ammu has an illegitimate relationship with Velultha, Rahel indulge in a sexual liaison with her own brother. So, both of these women characters disobeys the social norms of the customary Ayemenem society – Their sin is perhaps a intentional act to challenge and to confront the society where in, they have to continue to exist as the subjugated sufferers. Once again Aswathy Cheriyan even on Rahel has aptly written:

Even Rahel has suffered a lot due to the patriarchal society; starting from her birth, she is deprived of love and affection first by her father later by her

family in Ayemenem House. She has undergone through traumatic experiences in her childhood and has witnessed her mother's unendurable sufferings and miseries in the Ayemenem House, and also seen her mother's body reduced to ashes. (119)

Now, Arundhati Roy as an influential novelist brings out into limelight the gender polarity and domestic affairs through her debut novel through the sensitive female characters. But at the same time gives proper weight to her viewpoint by depicting these highlighted points as an obstacle in the happiness and prosperity of those who are shown as disadvantaged. For this very purpose they are not emancipated, though they are wealthy and belong to upper middle class. However, at the same time they cannot be called submissive. There is an incessant great effort within their selves to search for their restricted regions and to understand their lives with individual independence. They undergo subjugation in the patriarchal world order, but they do not shed tears or suffer in loneliness. Rather they try to bring about a transformation in the course of opposition which takes shape of a transgressional behaviour. Besides, they make efforts to question the structures of gender in an understood as well as an open way.

Likewise, if we make a comparative Study of Roy's *The God of Small Things* with Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* it can be comprehended that though the female characters belong to two different worlds, countries still they share the common relationship of domination. Atwood endeavours to make ambiguous the negative features of the Canadian Society including taboos and infanticide. The Canadian culture is certainly a patriarchal in a number of ways that is exemplified by relationship between Anna and David who are always found on the cross roads. In their case it is found that Anna the protagonist of the novel is humiliated by the David. The same ill-treatment in case of Roy's characters is found here in case of Ann in *Surfacing* that is taken into the consideration by her as she says "Don't think I don't know what you're trying to do," Anna said, as though she'd guessed a riddle. 'You're trying to humiliate me.'" (Atwood 136)

Moreover, in the same manner, portrayal of gender polarity and domestic affairs has also been mirrored by Tony Morrison, Jane Austen, James Coetzee and Zadie Smith. In case of Coetzee even the glimpses of gender polarity can be found in his landmark novel *Disgrace*. Here we come to know that it is only the duty of a woman to share her beauty when she comes into this world. It becomes obvious when the author says "a woman's beauty does not belong to her alone. It is part of the bounty she brings into the world. She has a duty to share it" (Coetzee 16). In the meanwhile Zadie Smith a contemporary English Diasporic woman writer discussed in length and breadth the domestic affairs in her novel *White Teeth* in which we found that sometimes it is parents who remain responsible for any downfall in terms of morality. It is because the parental misdeeds can influence a child in a very bad way. In the same context we have author's words "Mrs. Iqbal, with all due respect, the problems in your family began long before either my husband or I had any involvement" (Smith 366).

Consequently Arundhati Roy in the line of Tony Morrison readily sets down the women characters in opposition to the patriarchal structures that are one of inconsiderateness and control. Like the seekers, in pursuit of independence and free will, the different women characters in *The God of Small Things*, are placed at different levels in their protest march towards liberation. In one way is Mammachi who is

submissive and at the other extreme is Ammu and Rahel who administer from their conscious levels. They take the daring step to disobey the definite boundaries of the customary societies. As per the Roy's women characterization is concerned they try to seek freedom and deal out spaces for themselves.

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