

Different Spaces: the Male and the Female Dichotomy Discernible in Arundhati Roy's the God of Small Things

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Abstract

Gender discrimination is discrimination against a person or group on the grounds of sex or gender identity. Unfair discrimination usually follows the gender stereotyping held by a society. Discrimination begins by placing men and women in different social positions-one is placed in the core and the other in the periphery. It is the patriarchal civilization that defines the woman as a marginalized creature. She is never an autonomous self. She is just incidental, the inessential and an appendage to man. My paper tries to examine how far the woman suffered discrimination in Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things*.

Key Words: Gender, Patriarchy, Discrimination, Male dominance

Introduction

Soft, heavy, continuous...a genuine account of womanhood, one of the chorus of secret Voices speaking out of our bones, dreadful and irritating but instantly recognizable

-Showalter

Elaine Showalter said these words on reading Olive Shreiner. This is largely applicable to the voice we hear in *The God of Small Things* too. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) is preeminently a novel by a woman about a woman seen through the eyes of a woman. Viewed from the angles of the gynocritics the narrative of *The God of Small Things*

is authentically feminine. This is not a feminist novel and yet, quite naturally, it contains the vision of a female writer as it evokes pity and terror for the conditions of women in a particular cultural milieu. In the novel tension arise from the female characters struggle against convention. The structure of society presented by Arundhati Roy in this novel is apparently patriarchal and man is the controller of the sexual, economic, political and physical power. The position of man and woman in society is influenced very much by the culture. My paper here, attempts to examine the different spaces occupied by male and female characters in the novel from a feminist perspective.

Different Spaces

The woman's body, sex and gender are the foundation on which gender inequality is built, established and legitimized all over the world. According to Gardá Lerner, Patriarchy means the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over woman and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over a woman in society in general. It implies that men held power in all the important institutions of society and that women are deprived of access to such power. Patriarchy is a historic creation formed by men and women in a process which took nearly 2,500 years to its completion. The basic unit of its organization is the patriarchal family, which both expressed and constantly generated its rules and values. Roy expresses her contempt to such a society in her novel *The God of Small Things*.

An Indian woman's identity in the familial, societal and cultural levels is determined by patriarchal norms. She is defined in relation to others and is never accorded autonomy over her being. In *The God of Small Things*, the story mainly concerns Ammu. Ammu is the mother of Rahel and daughter of Mammachi. In the novel, these three characters have been portrayed very distinctly.

The trajectory of Ammu's life moves from an unhappy childhood to a loveless marriage and from it to an extramarital relationship with an untouchable that ostracized her both from the family and society. Ultimately it ends in her tragic death in a strange hotel room in an atmosphere of unbearable solitude. Ammu's childhood is robbed off all the sweetness that is

generally associated with childhood. Ammu remembers her unhappy days in Delhi, where her entomologist father used to act like a bully, “He donated money to orphanage and leprosy clinics. He worked hard on his public profile as a sophisticated generous moral man but alone with his wife and children he turned into a monstrous bully, with a streak of vicious cunning. They were beaten, humiliated and then made to suffer the envy of friends and relations for having such a wonderful husband and father”. (180)

Male dominance is quite obvious in Pappachi-Mammachi relationship. Ammu as a young girl got accustomed to her Mammachi’s mute resignation to Pappachi’s ill treatment towards them. Ammu becomes a victim of male dominated patriarchal society when she is not allowed to pursue her studies. She finished her school education the same year when retired from his job at Delhi and settled in Ayemanam. Pappachi considers the education of women as “unnecessary expense” and she has no alternative but to wait for marriage and meanwhile help her mother with her housework. Ammu begins to grow desperate. At Ayemanam she feels like a captive fettered to household chores and dull mechanical routine. Her frustration over the disruption of education, uncongenial atmosphere at home and lack of viable alternative through marriage made her desperate, “All day she dreamed of escaping from Ayemanam and the clutches of her ill-tempered father and bitter, long suffering mother. She hatched several little plans. Eventually, one worked. Pappachi agreed to let her spend the summer with a distant aunt who lived in Calcutta” (38-39)

In Calcutta, she meets a young man who proposed to her five days after they met. She accepts his proposal not out of love, but in a fit of desperation.”Ammu didn’t pretend to be in love with him. She just weighed the odds and accepted. She thought that anything, anyone at all, would be better than returning to Ayemanam. She wrote to her parents informing them her decision. They didn’t reply” (39).It soon transpires that Ammu has fallen from the frying pan to fire. Simon de Beauvoir asserts that, “Marriage is not an honourable career and one less tiring than many others: it alone permits a woman to keep her social dignity intact and at the same time to sexual fulfillment as loved one and mother... (Beauvoir, 99)

Simone de Beauvoir's assertion has gone entirely wrong in the case of Ammu. Marriage fails to offer her any sense of security and love. She considered marriage as a route of escape but realizes that it is a double trap. Disappointment becomes unbearable when her husband, suspended from job for alcoholism, tries to turn her in to an object to be bartered for job security. Mr. Hollick, his boss, the English manager of the tea estate, suggests that he go on leave and send Ammu to his bungalow to be 'looked after'. Ammu's refusal only aggravates his violent temper. Endless torture is inflicted on her mind and body."Suddenly he lunged at her, grabbed her hair, punched her and then passed out from the effort" (42)

But Ammu, unlike Mammachi, is not one who accepts everything with mute resignation. She hits him back with a heavy book. Now she has no alternative but to break off and come back with her twins-Estha and Rahel to the very same place from where she tried to run away." Ammu left her husband and returned, unwelcomed to her parents in Ayemanam. To everything that she had fled from only a few years ago. Except that now she had two young children and no more dreams" (42)

At the personal level she is burdened with the liability of two children who are not really loved by anyone, and all her dreams are shattered. But as a mother she loves her children. She is concerned about their innocence which makes them willing to love people who do not love them. Furthermore, at the familial level she does not receive any sympathy at all. Her father refuses to believe that any English man would covet another man's wife and to her mother her children are a nuisance. And to the society around her situation is a juicy topic. "Ammu quickly learned to recognize and despise the ugly face of sympathy" (43)

Thus at the age of twenty four her life comes to a standstill, nothing to hope for, nothing to happen, only to spend the long uneventful days languidly one after another and her rebellious spirit only makes her more and more miserable as the days go by. At her home, in her family and in society she becomes virtually untouchable. It is at this time that Velutha, son of Vellya Paapen returns to Ayemanam after his years away from home. To the forlorn woman and innocent children it is a rekindling of hope. She and her children are actually seeking love and security in the company of Velutha. She watches her daughter Rahel's attachment to Velutha,

“She was surprised at the extend of her daughters physical ease with him. Surprised that her children seemed to have a subworld that excluded her entirely” (176)

All these prompt her to take a fatal decision to “love by night the man her children loved by day”. Velutha like a father figure to her children and his real love for the children builds a bridge for the love she needs. It is clear that what seems an illicit relationship between a divorcee touchable woman and an untouchable Paravan is actually a union of two rebels protesting against hypocritical laws of society not in word but in deed. The secret love affair goes on for thirteen days until it is reported to Mammachi by Velutha’s father and compounded by the accidental death of Sophiemol.

In the eyes of her own family, Ammu is now a fallen woman as her forbidden love to Velutha contradicts the cultural laws of her time. She is locked in her bed room and Velutha is implicated in false case of attempted rape, kidnapping of children and murder of Sophie mol. Velutha is grabbed by the police and killed, while Ammu is allowed to attend Sophie mol’s funeral standing separately with her children. Soon after the funeral she goes to the police station and tries to set the record straight. The author drops a large hint that police officer knows that he can freely insult this woman without any fear of compunction, he has the sanction of society, “He stared at Ammu’s breasts as he spoke. He said the police knew all they needed to know and that a Kottayam police didn’t take statements from Veshyas or their illegitimate children” (8)

The police officer represents the society’s attitude to a woman who has loved outside the rules of the “Love Laws”. Similarly Chacko, Ammu’s brother has already threatened her with all the authority of a patriarch in his own house, “Get out of my house before I break every bone in your body” (255). So having no “Locusts stand I” anywhere, she has to leave and die helpless, sick alone in a hotel in the strange bed in the strange room in the strange town where she had gone for a job interview, her last frantic effort to make a living in her struggle for survival mainly for the sake of her children, “She was thirty one. Not old, not young, but a viable die-able age” (161)

Thus Ammu is humiliated and cornered by her father, ill-treated and betrayed by her husband, insulted by the police and rendered destitute by her brother. Each of them voices the patriarchal ideology that she should have no right anywhere as daughter, wife, sister and as a citizen. She is no individual to her society but just an object, a role necessarily submissive. Ammu dares to assert her individuality and sexuality and thus becomes an outcaste. In a patriarchal society, represented by Chacko and the police man, the woman has no autonomy over her mind or body. If anyone dares to be different, she is to be silenced or obliterated. Hence Ammu disappears into the world of eternal silence.

Ironically, it is not the male folk alone that help to perpetuate her tragedy. It is worth considering how women act as agents or weapons of patriarchy to undo another woman. Even women who have been deprived in their life, like Mammachi and Baby Kochamma who belong to older generations choose to come down with all the unspent force of their frustration on another helpless woman. The mood of the patriarchal society is reflected in the views of Baby Kochamma who subscribed wholeheartedly to the commonly held view that a married daughter had no position in her parents' home, "As for a divorced daughter according to Baby Kochamma she had no position anywhere at all. And as for a divorced daughter from a love marriage, well words could not describe Baby Kochamma's outrage. As for a divorced daughter from an inter community love marriage-Baby Kochamma chose to remain quiveringly silent on the subject" (46)

It may be noted that Baby Kochamma resented Ammu's courage and blamed her for her own failures- her failure in expressing love, in having a fulfilling relationship with a man. Baby Kochamma's femininity is just a show which brings no result, "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 manless woman. The sad Father Mulligan-less Baby kochamma" (45).In other words, it is her frustration in love and the unspent force of repressed desire that makes her instrumental in making the life of Ammu and her children miserable. It is her unfulfilled yearning for love that accounts for her unsympathetic nature.

Mammachi's experience in a world dominated by males and money and her sufferings in the enclosure called marriage with a brutish husband dehumanize her and closes her mind. Her reasoning is based on a strikingly dualistic ethics. She along with Baby Kochamma has double standards in matters regarding sex. What is permitted to man is strictly denied to woman in their ethics. Chacko is allowed to carry on his libertine relationships with women and a separate entrance for his room is built to facilitate it. She clarified Baby Kochamma in just one sentence, "He can't help having a Man's needs, she said primly" (168)

Mammachi slips money secretly to keep the women who satisfy Chacko's needs because 'a fee clarified things'. Margaret too is a whore for her. She even hates her for being Chacko's wife. She is a weapon used by patriarchy. On the contrary Ammu's daughter Rahel very bold and rebellious belongs to new generation unlike her mother and grandmother. To a large extent Rahel is an emancipated woman.

If we examine the female characters in the novel, Mammachi is the symbol of devalued womanhood. Ammu tries to gain voice and space, but fails. She is the transitional woman. While Margaret and Rahel, claiming equal power with their husbands can be grouped as the egalitarian new women. Estha and Rahel live a life free from inhibitions and repressions of Syrian Christians in Kerala. They have the courage to go it alone, violating even the taboo of incest. As a modern girl, Rahel has the courage to surmount all discrimination more successfully than her mother, Ammu.

Conclusion

Arundhati Roy in her novel *The God of Small Things* raises her voice against the discrimination and injustice faced by women in Patriarchal society. This paper examines the manifold discrimination a woman has to face in a patriarchal society and how one woman can act as a tool to increase the suffering of another woman. Her compelling women characters reject their mirror-role and enter into a deadly combat with the establishment and patriarchy.

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