

## Feminist Voice in *The God of Small Things*

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**Abstract.** Arundhati Roy is an Indian author who won the Man Booker Prize for fiction in 1997 for her best-selling novel *The God of Small Things*. The novel is semi-autobiographical and she narrated her childhood experiences in Ayemenem. However, it comprises of many serious issues ranging from politics, racism, love, feminism to post colonialism. The vulnerable role of women in an orthodox patriarchal society is vividly described by portraying women across three generations to assert the continuity of female subordination. The first generations is about Mammachi and the second is about Ammu and finally Rahel. Roy represents herself in novel as women protagonists who struggle with the world of social protest and implicit engagement with India's socio-political history. She portrays women of contemporary Indian Society who struggle in the male dominant conservative society. Feminism is in fact a theory that is dialogic in nature and draws on women voices. All women voices, with their different value systems, need to be set against one another and the voices of patriarchy. In *The God of Small Things*, feminist ideologies are reflected from the various attitudes of the characters and the subversive elements used in the novel, rather than a monologic say by the author, whose own consciousness speaks and inspires many to take up this aspect of writing, focusing on the different discourses of marginality such as the position of women, caste segregation and untouchability. The novel depicts the feministic elements, caste and class gender, political and childhood exploitation. It is a tragic ordeal of a woman as a subaltern victim of existing injustice, caste discrimination and various heart rending problems, ultimately stripping them of their individual identity and marginalized them into nothingness. This novel shows how different men and women are treated according to the social norms that separate the views on men and women. The men oppress the women, who are not allowed to live their lives as they want since men rule over them. Women who stand against men and society are punished.

**Keywords :** Feminism; generations; post-colonialism; patriarchal society; women voices.

*The God of Small Things* is one of the chief issues of the family and social mechanism evolved over centuries in traditional Indian society to repress woman's independence as a human being. Traditional joint families are neatly structured where some women assume dominant role with greater authority over others who are downtrodden and, therefore, enjoy limited power. The complex structure is deeply embedded and has given rise to countless stories of personal tragedies of unequally placed women. The subjugation of women starts within the family and continues from one generation to another. Women are not allowed to assert their presence; they are cornered, pitied and looked down upon by their male

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counterparts.

Roy portrays the plights of women in three dimensions. They are Ammu's suffocating pre-marital stay in Ayemenem, her return with two children to an unwelcoming family and finally her brief affair with Velutha which cuts her life short. Mammachi's extremely disturbed conjugal tie with Pappachi, which results from Chako's attempt to stop Pappachi's regular beating of Mammachi. Baby Kochamma's unrequited love for Father Mulligan and her eventual spinsterhood. In this novel, Arundhati Roy depicts her feminist perspectives through the generations of women characters—Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, Ammu and Rahel. These characters are executives of their own postmodern culture and through them Roy gives the gradual change in the position of woman in the society. In *The God of Small Things* the character belong to three different generations :

- I. Mammachi and Baby Kochamma belong to the first generation.
- II. Ammu and Margaret Kochamma to the second; and
- III. Rahel to the third.

Roy deals with three generations of women and their struggle to lead a peaceful life. Mammachi is often beaten by her husband Pappachi. Ammu and Rahel are divorced in their life before they start their life, and both of them return to Ayemenem. They are the victims of the male dominant society. Through this Roy focuses the male dominance of patriarchal voice and treatment of untouchable in this novel. The central character of the novel Ammu is very poignantly subjected to all the cruelties by the society which are vividly portrayed in the novel. The story pivots around the relationship between Ammu and a lower caste 'untouchable', Velutha and the significant events like Sophie Mol's death by drowning, cross caste, affairs and Velutha's murder by the police. The caste system, marriage and the political affiliations are the big things in the society but Roy writes about the small things as well in her novel.

### **Voice of Mammachi**

Mammachi, a talented violinist and an efficient entrepreneur had been a victim to the patriarchal blows of her husband. She is the victim of domestic violence, "every night he beat her with the brass flower vase" (Roy, 47). Yet Mammachi never resists rather she passively tolerates the beatings. The arrival of her son, Chacko put an end to this violence and he rescued her. This shows the inability of women to resist violence and their dependence on men. However, it is to be noted that after Pappachi, Mammachi was not free rather she was controlled by Chacko. Mammachi is portrayed as a skilful woman she is good at playing violin. She is running her own pickle factory. Thus she is financially in a stable position. Yet she passively tolerates the beatings of her husband without thinking about divorce. This could be because divorce is not sanctioned in the male conservative society in India. This shows that not only does economic dependence tie women to men

but also there is an undefined dominant force that makes women inferior to men. It may be due to the way in which women were socialized throughout history under a patriarchal system. Simone de Beauvoir, a seminal feminist created intellectual awareness about this undefined dominant force that makes women inferior. She traced the roots of female subordination in the history. She says that throughout the history women were being oppressed by man and they set standards that a woman should meet because “humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself, she is not considered autonomous being” (Beauvoir, 26). As a result of this definition of women the “society codified by men decrees that woman is inferior” (849). Then men began to contrast her with them in every way, thus she became the “other”. So a woman is everything that a man is not. So “female humans” occupy a subordinate position in the society through biology, psychoanalysis and historical mechanism. Men and women are anatomically different and due to this anatomical difference women are essentially different from men. Beauvoir denies this “women’s essence” saying that her body is not enough to define her” (848). In addition, history from ancient time celebrated the male figure through myths and the myth, “Eternal feminine” worshipped femaleness and maternity. Because of this myth a female child is conditioned to become a wife and mother since her birth. Beauvoir takes every stage in a woman’s life from childhood to motherhood and portrays “how a woman is shaped by thousands of external forces in the upbringing” (848). Through this portrayal she argues, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (14). In addition, men always want women to be in subaltern position, this is why Pappachi “greatly resented the attention that his wife was suddenly getting” (*The God of Small Things* 47). Pappachi starts beating his wife more violently only after seeing her rapid growth in business, because men fear that the progress of women will be a threat to male superiority and for men to be in a superior position, women should always be in an inferior position. Thus it is evident that the response of first generation women to domestic violence and exploitation is noted by absolute passivity. In other words they did not show any kind of resistance towards male domination. Thus it can be concluded that the first generation women did not rebel against patriarchy.

### **Voice of Baby Kochamma**

Baby Kochamma in her youth is quite rebellious in the sense that she opposes both the tradition of arranged marriages by independently choosing a man, and then even converting to Catholicism against her father’s will. Later in life she apparently becomes more conservative, and accepts her bad fate as a ‘Man-less woman’ while condemning others who break the rules like she once did. Obviously she pities herself and is jealous of other people, for instance Ammu, who as a “divorced daughter from an intercommunity love marriage” in Baby’s opinion did not have the right to live in her parent’s house. Baby Kochamma does not spare any chance to make Ammu and her twins understand this, but in her own, insinuating

manner. She begrudges the twins every small moment of happiness and especially the “comfort they drew from each other” when they really ought to be generally unhappy and sad (45). This jealousy is probably a major motive behind Baby Kochamma’s idea to return one of them (Estha) to their father after Ammu is kicked out of the house by Chacko. She is perhaps also jealous of their relationship with Velutha, who has become something of a father figure to them and reproaches Rahel for being “over-familiar” with Velutha (175). Another feature that is particularly marked in Baby Kochamma’s character, as mentioned before, is that she carries this “fear of being dispossessed”, a political fear (shared with the elites and landowners worldwide) that grows stronger every year. This fear, in her relation to Velutha, becomes mixed up with the age-old, more regional contempt towards untouchables, creating strong feelings of antagonism that make her do almost anything to get rid of him. On one occasion in the narrative, when the family’s car is stuck in the middle of a Marxist demonstration, Baby Kochamma is humiliated by a mob of men who make a joke out of her by forcing her to wave a red flag while shouting Marxist slogans. After this, she “focused all her fury at her public humiliation on Velutha” (78). In her mind “he grew to represent the march and all that had been done to her, “all the men who had laughed at her” (78). It should be mentioned that Baby Kochamma’s fear of the communists was not without cause. We are told by the narrator (and these are also historical facts) that a new militant communist movement called the Naxalites spread rapidly across India and “struck terror in every bourgeois heart “ (66) by organizing peasants into fighting cadres, expelling landowners and seizing their land. They even set up “People’s Courts to bring Class Enemies” to trial (66). In Kerala, a landlord had not long ago been brutally lynched and killed. Even if the Ipe family is on its downfall financially and status-wise, they bear the characteristics that easily would make them ‘class-enemies’ in the eyes of the Naxalites. This political fear grows so strong in Baby Kochamma that she, in her declining years, locks all the doors and windows of the house, and even the fridge so that no one can steal her cream-buns. Why does Velutha represent this fear within Baby Kochamma? Evidently he is an ‘unsafe’ Paravan, very much unlike his father, Vellya Paapen, who is an “Old-World Paravan” who has “seen the Crawling Backwards Days” (73). Vellya Paapen is content with his present situation and humbly accepts all the benevolence showed in many ways towards him and his family by the Ipe family. But Vellya Paapen feared for his son. :

He couldn’t say what it was that frightened him. It was nothing that he had said. Or done. It was not what he said, but the way he said it. Not what he did, but the way he did it (73).

Through this we learn that Velutha carries a sense of self-respect that makes him appear a little dangerous, since as a Paravan he should be lowly, humble and grateful in his attitude :

Perhaps it was just a lack of hesitation. An unwarranted assurance. In the way he walked, the way he held his head, the quiet way he offered suggestions without being asked or the quiet way in which he disregarded suggestions without appearing to rebel. Velutha's self-assurance is strange and unfamiliar to his father, whose gratitude towards the Ipe family's charitable deeds has "widened his smile and bent his back" (73).

Baby Kochamma also notices these traits and tries to explain this to the others in the family by vague insinuations that she has "noticed some signs, some rudeness, some ingratitude" (78). In short, Baby Kochamma embodies the Syrian Christians incorporation of the caste system within their religious practices, with all its prejudices and double standards. To her Velutha represents a person with the potential to transgress the boundaries of class and caste; an untouchable with the looks and talents and brains to have 'a future' and without the common fears that regularly keep people in place in the hierarchy of society. She also regards Velutha as a personal threat to her and to the whole family.

#### **Voice of Ammu**

Ammu is a victim of the patriarchal society. She is portrayed as a sad character who has been deprived of love and affection since her childhood. As a child, she is much exposed to family violence in the form of Pappachi who exploded every now and then due to his extreme frustration in his professional career. Ammu has been a silent witness to the brutal behaviour of Pappachi with Mammachi. Pappachi is portrayed as a sadist who is delighted in inflicting mental agonies on his wife. Ammu has seen the brutality of masculine power from the early years of her life. She couldn't even save herself from the heinous cruelty of her own father. Ammu is the victim of Pappachi's male chauvinistic indifference towards the education of women. It is ironical to note that Ammu is deprived of higher education by someone who is a "reputed scientist". There is inequality between men and women in terms of education. Chacko is sent to Oxford for his higher studies whereas Ammu is made to stay at home after she finished schooling, because "Pappachi insisted that a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl" (38). These words of Pappachi vividly depict the patriarchal attitude of the society. Having been deprived of education the next step in Ammu's life was marriage because "there was very little for a young girl to do in Ayemenem other than to wait for marriage proposal" (38). According to a prominent feminist, Simone De Beauvoir "marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society" (20). Thus the institution of marriage is deemed as a threat to women by feminist because it reasserts and legitimizes the ideologies of patriarchy. However, marriage was the only option left for Ammu as the door for education was closed and also her house was not a comfortable place for her, "All day dreamed of escaping from Ayemenem and the

clutches of her ill-tempered father and bitter, long suffering mother” (*The God of Small Things*, 39). Ammu is a woman who craves for an independent life. Being a victim of domestic violence at her own home, she wants to leave home with the hope of a better life at her husband’s place. Pathetically her marriage life turned out to be a failure and all her expectations were shattered. Thus Ammu’s situation became even worse. Though Ammu and Mammachi are victims of the institution of marriage, Ammu, unlike Mammachi resists male domination and eventually dares to divorce her husband despite the consequences of her decision. Divorce according to the male conservative society is not sanctioned and a divorced woman will be cornered from the society forever, “As for a divorced daughter, according to Baby Kochamma, had no position anywhere at all” (45). Though Ammu was passive to the flogging of her father, she reacted to the beatings of her husband by beating him back. Her courage to resist male dominance shows the gradual progress women make from absolute passivity to resistance to physical violence.

Further, Ammu’s rebellion on the one hand is successful because after she beats her husband “he apologized abjectly for the violence” (42). It reveals the idea that male can dominate women only as long as they are passive and submissive to the violence of men; the moment women resist, the validity of male dominance is challenged. Also according to feminists, resistance on the part of women is inevitable to challenge patriarchy. On the other hand Ammu’s rebellion is a failure because her situation becomes even worse after the divorce. She encountered insurmountable suffering partly because of the decision she takes to divorce her husband. After her divorce she is left penniless with her two children to be looked after, so she has no option other than going back to her unpleasant and restrictive home. When she returned home she was received with contempt. Mammachi and Baby Kochamma were rude to Ammu and treated her like slave. Moreover, other people at her home and outside also accused her of divorcing her husband and looked down upon her as if she had committed a crime. Chacko, her own brother, also became more violent in treating her and considered her as a burden. It is ironic to say that a woman who divorces her husband solely to liberate herself from male domination once again becomes a victim of male domination by another man, Chacko. Thus Ammu’s rebellion against patriarchy is entirely futile because her resistance deteriorates her situation more. Another tool of patriarchy that ensures the subordination of women is the law of inheritance. According to this law the entire property owned by the father is inherited by male children. Since Pappachi has only one son, Chacko, all the properties are given to Chacko after Pappachi. Ammu has to endure much suffering because she does not have money to live in this “male chauvinist society” (57). Thus “Ammu as a daughter had no claim to the property” (57). Chacko says “what is yours is mine and what is mine is also mine” (57). Not only does Chacko inherit wealth but also he claims ownership to the pickle factory though he has no part in the establishment and development of this factory. Chacko kicked Ammu out of the house saying “Ammu had no locus standi”

( 57). She underwent much torture in her life by all the male figures: Pappachi, Chacko, and her husband. In addition she died a miserable death, “died in a grimy room in Bharat Lodge alone” (161).

### **Voice of Margaret Kochamma**

Margaret Kochamma is a British who married Chacko when he was studying at Oxford University. Some days after the marriage, she fell in love with another man, Joe, but at this time she was pregnant with Sophie Mol. After being dissatisfied with Chacko, she divorced him. Some days later Joe was killed in an accident. Then Margaret Kochamma decided to go to Ayemenem and spent her holidays with Chacko and his family. She is also a rebellious woman because not only does she divorce her husband but also she falls in love with another man while being the wife of Chacko. Indeed this a serious crime according to the Hindus. However, it is very sarcastic to note that the family of Mammachi who ill-treated Ammu for being a divorcee, treated Margaret Kochamma with much respect when she was staying at Ayemenem. In this case both are divorced women, the only difference is that Margaret Kochamma is a white. In addition, the rebellion of Margaret Kochamma is successful because the society does not condemn her for divorcing her husband. In fact she is respected in her society. Thus Roy gives a hint that not all the rebellious women are unsuccessful but what makes the rebellion difficult is the context. Women in Asia, particularly Indian women suffer under the clutches of men because women are extremely vulnerable. As a result their rebellion is futile. However, this is not the case with Western women.

### **Voice of Rahel**

Rahel is to a certain extent progressive. Rahel unlike Mammachi and Ammu had access to education. Thus it gave her some power. Rahel becomes a free woman, who unlike her mother, is not restricted by mental restrictions of the Hindu tradition. That is why, on her return, she replies to an old man who asked her about her marital status “We are divorced” without worrying about what the old man would think (Roy,12). However, it cannot be denied that Rahel is the victim of the patriarchy because she being the female child of a divorced mother has grown up as an unwanted child. She has been ill treated by her mother’s family and controlled by Chacko. However, Rahel who represents the third generation women, breaks away from many stereotypes associated with women by patriarchy. For example she has been kicked out of school for smoking, she hides behind the door and intentionally collides with senior girls. These behaviours completely go against the stereotypes about women. Moreover, Rahel has had sex with her own brother, Estha- this sexual relationship is a serious crime as it is an incest. Thus Rahel is not only rebellious but also radical to a certain extent because she not only challenged patriarchy but also challenged religion and culture.

Furthermore, Roy vividly portrays that women are viewed in terms of

their sexuality and society considers them as objects as opposed to thinking about them as human beings. For instance, Mr. Hollick tries to favour Ammu's husband targeting Ammu's body. He suggests that Ammu be sent to his bungalow to be looked after. Also in the police station the police man "stared at Ammu's breasts as he spoke and tapped her breasts with baton, gently tap tap" (5). Similarly Chacko under the guise of educating women on labour rights "flirt with them" (65). Mammachi himself supported his conduct with women by building "a separate entrance to Chacko's room so that the objects of his "Need" (69) can use it. Here "objects" refers to women and "needs" stands for his sexual desire. These incidents disclose that women are regarded as mere sexual objects in the patriarchal society. In addition, the society favours men in all situations because society justifies anything that a man does. For instance, Mammachi not only turned a blind eye towards Chacko's illicit sexual relationship but also helps him do it by building a "separate entrance" so that he can do it more conveniently. The worst part of it is that Mammachi, being a woman justifies her son's illicit sexual conduct. This clearly demonstrates the power of men and the fact that women also help patriarchy or in other words there is no sisterhood among women. On the other hand any trivial mistake committed by a woman is considered as a serious offence. Patriarchy considers women as sexual objects and they are expected to be asexual. For example, when Chacko had illicit sexual relationship with several women Mammachi and others defend it saying "he can't help men's need" (168). But when Ammu had sexual relationship with Velutha it was condemned by everyone and she was labelled as "vesheyas" (5). But Roy through the portrayal of Ammu's frequent dream (which shows her sexual desire) and her attempt to initiate sexual relationship with Velutha proves that even women have sexual feelings and desires like men. Thus there is double standard in the society because society is male-dominated. If Ammu is to be condemned for her relationship with Velutha then Chacko should be condemned more as he has many illicit sexual conducts. But Chacko is defended. Thus it is evident that the society is entirely patriarchal. In a male dominated society women's rebellion cannot be successful.

To sum up Roy exploits common everyday issues in her novel. Family and political customs play a key role in disadvantaged women. Social compels are so built up as to sanctify the persecution of women. This is because, in most of the civilizations, social structures are basically patriarchal. Arundhati Roy's novel challenges this position, and feminism is one of the many strands in the novel. Mammachi and Baby Kochamma were absolutely voiceless; they did not rebel in the least degree. So their position in the society is marked by absolute passivity. Ammu tried to rebel against patriarchy; her beating of her husband back and the very decision she takes to divorce her husband bear testimony to the rebellion of Ammu. In other words, Ammu rebels against patriarchy by resisting domestic violence and transgressing the set boundaries of the society, divorce and illicit sexual relationship with Velutha. But Ammu's rebellion has been futile because the



rebellious Ammu, at the end is literally reduced to ashes and even she was denied of her burial rights by the church. Thus it shows the more rebellious a woman is, the more she is subjected to suffering because fighting the system is difficult. Rahel was more progressive as she was given the privilege of education unlike other generation women. Through education she broke away from all the stereotypical roles assigned to women.

Roy presents several different female characters in her novel *The God of Small Things*, all in different ways trapped in a system of oppression but also with a substantial degree of agency. She shows that subjugation of women is ensured by the institution of marriage, male domination, law of inheritance, unequal opportunities in education and by viewing the woman as sexual objects. Some women characters are absolutely submissive whereas some are rebels. The major question that the novel seems to ask is whether their rebellion is successful, in other words whether women can fight against the patriarchal system. The woman who most clearly rejects the intricate system of oppression in the story, Ammu, is punished severely by her mother and her aunt. But as one of the main characters in Roy's novel, She represents people who actually dare to do 'the unthinkable', to transgress the very line that upholds the system of difference that casteism inherently maintains.

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