

Marginality of Women in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* : A Comparative Stance

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Abstract. Most of the family members, especially in rural areas, develop negative opinion when a girl child is born in their family. They reckon with the fact that a day will come when the girl will leave her parents and will go to her in-laws forever. They consider her as a burden on them, that's why, from the very beginning, they teach their girls to understand their social status in comparison with that of boys. She is persuaded to conform, relentlessly to the preferred male code of behaviour. Theoretically the female chastity is honoured greatly but the reality is totally different. In real life women are humiliated, depersonalised and dominated. Usually at the time of the girl's marriage, the guardians don't comply with her and settle her marriage with a total stranger. After marriage a woman's fate is confined within the house. In lower classes of the society, the guardians arrange their daughter's marriage in early age. They train their daughters, from the very beginning, to become a 'pliant', 'placid' and 'well-mannered' housewife who will fulfil her dreams by following the decrees of her husband. The woman has to devote herself to homelife and her spirit gets lost in the endless chores of the domestic duties. They list up all her activities in one single breath but doesn't quite evade the emptiness in her life. The marginality of the women is the handiwork of the indigenous power structure thriving on patriarchy, caste system and class-based privileges. Women in India have sometimes been exalted as a doll or kept down and oppressed. Mulk Raj Anand has successfully depicted the marginality of women in his first novel *Untouchable*, which was published in 1935 and was described as a minor classic. He not only introduces us to the world of outcasts but also underlines the subalternity of women as they suffer under the class structure which is prevalent in the society. In Indian society, a person's caste is a decisive factor of his position in power structure. Similar issue has been raised by Arundhati Roy in her debut novel *The God of Small Things*, which bagged her the prestigious Booker Prize for literature. In this paper an attempt has been made to analyse Mulk Raj Anand's and Arundhati Roy's exploration of the marginality of women characters in their novels.

Keywords : Marginality; patriarchy; power struggle; subalternity; outcast.

Literature is the best medium of expression of human feelings, emotions, sufferings and joys. In fact literature is the representation of life and life is nothing but the real picture of society. In every society, there are various sections to which people belong. There are some sections of society that are regarded as Marginalized. Marginalization is a complex as well as shifting phenomenon linked to social status. It is also called social exclusion. It is the social process by which a person or a

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group of people are made marginal or become relegated to the edge of the society. There are different social structures that impact exclusion i.e. race, geographic location, class structure, globalization, social issues, education, religion, politics, economic status etc. Marginalized group is viewed with hostility and fear. Marginality is an experience affecting millions of people throughout the world. The forms of marginalizations are many which keep on changing from country to country. It's true that more marginalized groups exist in third world especially in developing nations. Women, people with disabilities, dalits, the downtrodden, minorities, poor etc are most vulnerable marginalized groups in almost every society. These people are deprived of socio- economic opportunities for their sustenance and they are victims of social, cultural and political exclusion. Those who are marginalized generally suffer from a crisis of identity and this perhaps leads to rise in social inequality. It is true that marginalization is the unfair or unjust treatment of individual or minority groups by the majority or stronger groups.

The Indian society is classified into various classes such as upper class, the non-upper class and depressed classes. Among these classes exist many castes, sub-castes which follows numerous practices and surprisingly each of them is unique. The caste system is a strict hierarchial social system based on underlying notions of purity and pollution. The influence of upper caste is felt in the socio-religious and cultural lives of the marginalized sections of the society. Brahmins are on the top of the hierarchy and dalits or depressed classes constitute the bottom of the hierarchy. A major proportion of these lower classes are still dependent on others for their livelihood.

Marginality is generally used to describe and analyse socio-cultural, political and economic sphere, where disadvantaged people struggle to gain access to resources and full participation in social life. The main objective of this paper is to show how the female characters of the novels *Untouchable* and *The God of Small Things*, by Mulk Raj Anand and Arundhati Roy respectively, are influenced negatively by society. It also deals with the analysis of how they are dehumanised at the hands of the upper caste people at various levels. Both the novelists have depicted very sensitive issues of untouchables, marginalised sections, the truthful conditions of women and their sufferings of pre and post-independent India.

Mulk Raj Anand was an Indian writer in English noted for his depiction of the lives of the downtrodden in traditional Indian society. He had seen the poverty, hunger and starvation of the poor and the downtrodden. He had intimate knowledge of hypocrisies and exploitative attitudes of the rich, the money lenders, the high caste people, the priests and so on. These experiences made a lasting impact on his creative output. In his first novel *Untouchable*, he drew a realistic and sympathetic portrait of the marginalized class of the country. In the novel, Anand has described the day-to-day life of a member of India's untouchable caste and has also portrayed the sexual exploitation of low caste women by upper caste people.

The theme of exploitation is best expressed through the character of beautiful Sohini, the sister of Bakha, the protagonist of the novel. She exemplifies not only caste exploitation but also sex exploitation. As a caste exploited, she is shown waiting patiently for a long time when she goes to fetch water from the caste well. This water incident of the novel is very heart rendering. The untouchables weren't allowed to touch the well and draw water from it. They have to depend on the bounty of some of their superiors to pour water into their pitchers. Such humiliation is common for them as they are untouchables. Bakha, after finishing his job of toilet cleaning, returns home. He is thirsty but there's no water at home. Sohini goes to bring water from the well. Anand writes:

When Sohini reached the well there were already about ten other outcastes waiting. But there was no one to give them water. She had come as fast as she could to the well, full of fear and anxiety that she would have to wait for her turn since she could see from a distance that there was already a crowd. She didn't feel disappointed so much as depressed to realise that she would be the tenth to receive water... Now as she sat in a row with her fellow-sufferers, her heart sank. There was no sign of anyone passing that way who could be a possible benefactor. But she was patient. She had in her an instinctive fortitude, obvious in her curious reserve, in her composed and peaceful bearing.

(*Untouchable*, 15)

Gulabo, a washerwoman, a caste superior to all other outcastes exploits Sohini :

Now Sohini being of the lowest caste among the outcastes would naturally be looked down upon by Gulabo. The delicate features of her rising beauty had added fuel to Gulabo's fire. The girl was a potential rival. Gulabo hated the very sight of her innocent, honest face, though she would not confess, even to herself, that she was jealous of the sweeper girl. But she unconsciously betrayed her feeling in the mockery and light hearted abuse which she showered on Sohini. (16)

She not only abuses the sweeper girl but also rushes to hit her. Sohini behaves unlike any other outcast woman. When other women make servile appeal and show their abject humility to the passersby high caste Hindus to draw the water from the well, she sits patiently away from them.

She becomes the victim of sexual exploitation due to her caste and poverty. She is very much beautiful and her figure could have vied with the sculptured

images of Konark and Khajuraho. But she has been condemned by birth to walk the path of the outcasts and to suffer their mortification. She hasn't enough clothes to protect her beauty from the hungry eyes of male. Prof. K.R.S. Iyengar, in his book *Indian Writing in English*, has depicted very nicely the situation:

...till at last the priest, Kali Nath, more as a cure for constipation than in access of generosity, agrees to draw water from the well for the assembled outcasts...., he sees Sohini, feels attracted to her youthfulness, and driving away the others, pours the water into her pot and suggests that she should come to his house later in the day to clean the courtyard. When she does go, he makes improper suggestions to her, and as she starts screaming, he shouts 'polluted' and gathers a crowd of indignant high-caste people. (Iyengar, 337)

The people who gather around know the truth well, but the indecent aggression of the priest towards the untouchable girl is tolerated by them because of the superiority of Brahmins in the caste hierarchy. Even the teenaged Sohini who suffers humiliation realises that the attempt made by Pundit Kali Nath can not be retaliated. Even her brother's anger has no value. So, she stops him from taking any aggressive action against the priest and returns home. She accepts her humiliation with docile humility of the woman of her caste. Through the character of Pundit Kali Nath, Anand brings out the underlying hypocrisy of the high caste advocates of the so-called morality and culture. The molestation of the untouchables by the high caste landlords, money lenders and the so-called custodians of religion is very common throughout the countryside of India. They look at the low caste women as objects of sexual satisfaction. Pundit Kali Nath is a priest and he must be a spiritual person but he lacks the real strength of spirituality. His moral weakness is exposed when he tries to seduce a sweeper girl. It has been a custom in most of the villages of India to convert the low caste girls into 'Devdasi'. The girls are married to the God but are used by the priests to satisfy their sex hunger. Those who firmly believe that the touch of the outcaste defile them, don't get defiled when they sleep with the untouchable women.

The world has seen both matriarchal and patriarchal societies but matriarchal societies have become almost extinct now. Centuries of experiences have made it clear that patriarchal society promotes the male at the expense of the female, consequently women have been denied economic, social and cultural equality the world over. Arundhati Roy, who won the prestigious Booker Prize for her debut novel *The God of Small Things*, highlights the pitiful conditions of the marginalized in her novel. She tries to show how the women and the untouchables are treated as impersonal and subjugative objects in this social structure. How things are decided for both by the patriarchal ideology of an ancient culture. The

novel deals with the tribulations of women as daughter and as wife in patriarchal society. Women have become victims of gender oppression.

Mammachi, a female character of the novel represents the old generation of women. She is the mother of Ammu and Chacko. She is a victim of her husband's brutality throughout her life. B.Krishnaiah in his book *Image of Woman in the Recent Indian English Fiction by Women*, has delineated the relationship between Mammachi and Pappachi in the following lines:

Mammachi-Pappachi relationship lacks mutual love, adjustment and understanding. It is predominated by hatred, jealousy and violence... Their marriage bond survives but it's basic concept is spoiled as he beats her every night with a brass flower vase...The life of Mammachi -Pappachi symbolises the structure of patriarchal society in which man is the regulator of the physical, sexual, political and economic power. Hence Mammachi never questions her husband's brutal attitude.

(Krishnaiah, 190)

Ammu, the central character of the novel who represents the second generation of women, emerges as a much marginalised character in the novel. She faces double marginalisation at the hands of men as well as women. Rahel, the representative of the contemporary generation, inherits the rebellious attitude of her mother Ammu, and lives the life of a rebel and a non-conformist free from inhibitions and repressions. Far from being traditional, she is a transgressor.

Ammu, the protagonist, despite her quest for freedom and identity, is a victim of male chauvinism. She was born in a Syrian Catholic Christian family in a conservative town Ayemenem, now part of Kottayam in Kerala, beside the Meenanchal river. The problems of patriarchal domination and female subalternity and the clash between the two are rooted in the geo-cultural reality of Ayemenem. Being born in rich family of Pappachi and Mammachi, we expect Ammu's upbringing with full of care and love, but the reality shocks the readers. Ammu received no love and affection from her parents. Her parents always denied her right of love and care as a daughter. Her childhood was full of misery and hardship. As a child her father mercilessly beat her with 'iron-topped riding crop'. Her father was the combination of patriarchal authoritarianism and misogynistic misdemeanours in his violence towards his wife Mammachi and daughter Ammu. After beating his wife and daughter, he would turn the two out of the house in the wintry nights of Delhi. This inhuman action of her father is clear indication of marginalisation of women in the family with the help of violence. The marginalisation of Ammu is made possible by traditional patriarchal family structure, where a female child is always unwelcomed and treated as a burden on family. Her father would not hesitate

to flog her at the slightest provocation and Ammu still remembers the violence with which Pappachi had shredded her favorite gumboots. When Ammu finished her schooling, she isn't allowed to take further education. Her father can't relish the idea of sending a girl for higher education. On the contrary, her brother Chacko has been sent to Oxford University for higher studies in Biology as a Rhodes Scholar. Ammu is the worst sufferer as she can't go for college education. This dual nature of her parent is the prime factor for her marginalisation. The author remarks :

Pappachi insisted that a college education is an unnecessary expense for a girl, so Ammu had no choice but to leave Delhi and move with them. (*The God of Small Things*, 38)

Her father's remarks on her education clearly shows that she has secondary place in the family. She was intentionally deprived of higher education which was a ray of hope in her future life. Her father remains a hurdle between her freedom and future progress. When her family shifted from Delhi to Ayemenem, Ammu's life was engulfed in boredom, isolation and waiting for marriage proposals. The house at Ayemenem is like prison to her :

There was very little for a young girl to do in Ayemenem other than to wait for marriage proposals while she helped her mother with the housework. Ammu grew desperate. All day she dreamed of escaping from Ayemenem and the clutches of her ill-tampered father and bitter, long-suffering mother.(38-39)

Ammu meets her future husband in a wedding ceremony of her relatives in Calcutta. He proposes to her five days after they have met. She accepts the proposal of a man whom she has known so little in a short time, with the hope that this marriage will bring up all the love and affection which she was deprived of her parental house. But her bad luck continues and very soon she realises that she has fallen from the frying pan into the fire. Her husband lies outrageously even when he doesn't need to. He is an alcoholic and he makes her smoke and beats her frequently. She becomes mother of twins and by the time they are two year old kids, drinking has driven him into an alcoholic stupor. Due to his drunken habits his English manager, Mr. Hollicks, wants to dismiss him from service but offers and suggests him a way out to keep his job that Ammu be sent to his bungalow to be 'looked after'. Ammu's husband agrees to this indecent deal and goads her to gratify the boss. Her refusal draws his fury and she is thrashed black and blue. He grabs her hair and punches her as a tyrant. When he begins to beat the twins, Ammu hits him back :

Ammu took down the heaviest book she

could find in the bookshelf— *The Reader's Digest World Atlas* and hit him with it as hard as she could. On his head. His legs. His back and shoulders. (42)

She decides to leave him. What she wants to escape from her maternal home, violence follows her into her marriage. Victimised by her father initially and later by her husband, Ammu appears to be a 'scapegoat' who leaves behind one master, her father, and chooses the other one in her husband.

The divorce with drunkard husband leaves her with no option but to return to her parents with two children, the very same place from where she had tried to run away a few years ago. A divorcee has no place and respect in the traditional family. The family were hostile, neglectful and unfriendly to her and her children. She receives mental torture from the members of her family. Frustration seems to have made her reckless. She starts behaving strangely. She ventures out of her house at night, begins to wear sleeveless blouses, smokes and swims in the Meenanchal river even at midnight. At such times she appears slightly mad or neurotic. In spite of all these sufferings she loves and cares her innocent children, plans for their future, their education and perfection of manners. She becomes mother and father both for them.

Ammu and Chako are sister and brother of the same house. Both did marry out of their community. Ammu, with a Hindu and Chako, with a Britisher. Both the marriages end in divorce, but Ammu alone pays a heavy price as a divorcee whereas Chako enjoys a lot of privileges since he is a man. Chako is brutal and unkind to his sister. He, who saves his mother from the violence of his father, mercilessly chases Ammu out of his house. She has to be at Chako's mercy and assist him in the pickles' factory. In Indian society, a daughter has no claim to property. Chako unambiguously tells her :

What's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine. (57)

This mentality of Chako is because of the male chauvinist society. In this way the individual space which Ammu deserves in her own right is denied.

Ammu's first taste of male chauvinist brutality and hypocrisy is through her father only. His extremely desensitised ways and interventions have traumatised her childhood. His belief that college education is an unnecessary expense for a girl has ruined Ammu's life. Ammu becomes the target of his violence and is thrashed by him. His regular and merciless beating of Ammu alongwith his wife has made Ammu's life miserable. In order to escape from the cold calculating cruelty of her father and the suffocating environment of house, Ammu has made the irrevocable mistake of choosing the wrong person as husband. She does it in sheer desperation. Her marriage to a person, whom she accidentally stumbles upon, is a result of such

desperation than a well taken decision. The alienation between Ammu and her father is complete as he is shown to have :

looked at her with cold, flat eyes, and
rocked and rocked and rocked.(181)

It's a matter of surprise that Ammu's parents, brother and aunt, who should take care of her when she is in distress aren't sympathetic towards her. What surprises one more is her own long suffering mother, who has no sympathy for her. On the top of it she discriminates Ammu by making her feel unwanted in the same house after her estrangement from her husband whereas her estranged son is given warm welcome. Mammachi's resentment for Ammu, perhaps results from years of conditioning and the way she has been trained by her husband to be a feminine role model. She behaves like a high caste feudal woman. If ill-tempered Pappachi is responsible for Ammu's misery, the bitter Mammachi is equally responsible too. It can be said that if Ammu's tragedy is originated by Pappachi, it's Mammachi who precipitates it. She loves Chako's daughter but neglects the twins of Ammu. She is so heartless and cruel that she considers them a nuisance. Mammachi subscribes to the double standards of the society by recognising Chako's - Man's Needs (168) and has a side door especially built to her son's room to facilitate the working women to enter and leave and she even secretly gives them money. On the other hand she can't accept Ammu having an affair with Velutha, an untouchable. She thinks that Ammu has defiled generations of breeding and ruined the reputation of the family and therefore it is an unpardonable sin. So, alongwith Baby Kochamma she plans for the removal of Velutha which devastated Ammu. The police grabbed Velutha and brutally killed him in false case of rape. When Ammu went to police station to set the record straight against Velutha, the police officer insulted her with remark:

Kottayam police didn't take statement from
veshyas or their illegitimate children.(8)

In the end of the novel Ammu is exiled from house by her family members. She is separated from her children and is not allowed to visit Ayemenem. She desperately tries to seek good job in anonymous places. This is the representation of her intense desire to stand on her own. Her pathetic plans to be independent from her brother don't materialise. Instead she has to suffer physically as well as mentally. She has to fend for herself taking odd jobs. On being thrown out of the house, she becomes vulnerable without love, shelter and protection. Tired, exhausted, sick and finally defeated, she dies all alone in a grimy room in Bharat Lodge in Alleppey at the age of thirty one. Her death is very pathetic. She often had nightmares...

recurrent dream in which policemen approached
her with snicking scissors wanting to hack off her
hair. (161)

After death her humiliation doesn't end. The church authorities refused to bury a fallen woman and this speaks volumes about the wrath that Ammu's violation of moral code has evoked in Ayemenem. Since the church refuses to bury her, Chako wraps her in a dirty bedsheet and takes her to electric crematorium by a hired van. Nobody except beggars, derelicts and the police custody dead are cremated there. This appears to be a fit punishment for breaking the laws laid down by a caste - bound, repressive patriarchal society. Her cremation is attended by no one from the family except by her brother Chako and daughter Rahel. Finally they are handed over her ashes,

The whole of her crammed into a little clay
pot.(163)

Throughout the course of Ammu's life, we observe that she was severely marginalised by social institutions like family, marriage, religion and police. We also observe that for her marginalisation not only men are responsible but women like Mammachi and Baby Kochamma have equal share.

The novels *Untouchable* and *The God of Small Things* focus on the important issues of untouchables and marginalised. Through women characters of the novels, both the novelists seem to raise their genuine concern about the male hegemony prevalent in the society explaining the irrationalities and injustice of the domestic and social life. Both the authors have challenged the defiled social order and caste system which is deeply rooted in the society.

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