

GENDER INEQUALITY IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S NOVEL, THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS: A STUDY

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“There really is no such thing as a ‘women’s issue’ that isn’t also a ‘men’s issue’... Real equality would be as liberating for men as for women...Men are imprisoned by the very stereotypes that oppress women...What’s involved in this struggle is no less than the most profound of all questions... what does it mean to be a human being?” - Sargent Shriver

Abstract:

A well-known Indian writer and social activist Arundhati Roy is the author of award-winning novel *The God of Small Things*. She is not only a writer but a political figure who is fighting for injustice done to the human beings all over the world. Her famous book *God of Small Things* describes the dark face of the Indian society where women and marginalised victimised by the power of men. She also uncovers the ill-treatments done to the women by the patriarchy. Roy exposes issues of gender discrimination, caste and class conflicts, color and racial distinction. She raises the question on human rights. She describes minutely how the women and the down trodden are victimised in the hands of male dominated society and powerful. The research throws the light on the typical society where discrimination and injustice are in their regular mode of practice in their daily life.

KEYWORDS: Gender Discrimination, Patriarchy, Male-dominated Society, Marginalised

Introduction

Arundhati Roy is a well-known name in the field of literature and social work. She is not only a writer but a peace-loving human being. Her fame spreads with the publication of her well-known novel *The God of Small Things* which won the prestigious Booker Prize for Literature in 1997. And it is proud to say that Roy is the first Indian woman who has achieved this milestone. She has also got the Sydney Peace Prize for her social work and especially for the human rights movement. She is not only a novelist but a social worker, well known political leader and cultural critic. She has been fighting a non-violent war through words and protest against violence done to the human beings all over the world. In this paper, the gender discrimination is highlighted in an orthodox and narrow male dominated society where women are tortured in every sphere of their life and they live totally at the mercy of the men-folk.

The women today are not inferior to men in any field. They are assets to the men and the society. The society flourishes where the women are given the equal opportunity. Pawar writes:

Broadly speaking, women are held subordinate to men. However, in fact, women are powerful human resources in development of the nation and unfortunately, their contributions go unnoticed and neglected as they have to play different roles like a daughter, wife and mother. She is stuck in a unique social framework, that is, to cook and produce children. She has to do all the household and domestic chores. This is nothing but a gender role difference in the socio-cultural context (Pawar 35).

The God of Small Things is a telling account of the women's struggle for getting a respectable place in the society which is deliberately denied to them by the traditional norms of patriarchy. The critical situation of the women folk is highlighted in this novel. Arundhati Roy has minutely depicted the society of Kerala where she was born and brought up. The themes deal with Keralite customs, traditional patriarchal dealings, and the caste complexity mentality of the prevalent society. The characters like Ammu, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, Margarate Kochamma are the victims of prevalent male dominant society. Arundhati Roy advocates for the equal rights for each and every human being. As Gray writes:

Full many a gem of purest ray serene
The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen
And lost its fragrance in the desert air.(Gray,146)

When there is equality in the society nothing can stop to rise the society. Arundhati Roy's view can be seen through above lines of Thomas gray. Roy has shown the women character as hypersensitive, solitary and helpless. Even though they are virtuous but they are tormented by the patriarchal domination.

The God of Small Things criticises the terrific system of patriarchal society in India where the women are suppressed and oppressed at the hands of men. Surprisingly the novel deals with so many different issues that regard the personal family history of each member of the Kochamma family along with even more broad concerns about Kerala in India. She portrays the miserable condition of women and narrates how the women are struggling for their survival. Jason Cowley says,

The God of Small Things is undoubtedly a unique novel in the history of Indian English literature which fulfills the highest demand of the art of fiction" (Cowley 28).

The novel also narrates a socialist of Kerala during the sixties where politics of power played a major part. The novel is rich with Indian family connections, social convention and racialism, political beliefs, and mortal feelings. At the same time, it's a fascinating as well as woeful riddle, a love story, and a realistic picture of gender conflicts and shows how women are meant to suffer endlessly of no fault of their own.

Arundhati Roy describes the pitiful condition of the protagonist how she has been deprived of her fundamental rights as human being by keeping her away from the school on the base of her gender. It's important to mention that education is the fundamental right of every human being living in India and it must be given to both men and women without any gender discrimination. Only education enlightens the outlook of a person. But the households of Ammu never believed in education. Their thinking was that education misguides a person. As a result of this fallacy, Ammu, the only daughter of Pappachi and Mammachi is unfairly barred from continuing advanced studies by her parents on the belief that advanced education degrades a woman. This traditional misconception governed the mind of Ammu's parents who designedly deprived her of basic education. But on the other hand, they prefer Chacko the son to keep on studying at Oxford despite his poor performance in the studies. Chacko gets all the possible facilities for his studies as being a man. Arundhati Roy castigates this kind of gender demarcation as gross injustice and despotism. She resists this stereotype nature of the society. Roy describes:

On one such night, Ammu, aged nine hiding with her mother in the hedge, watched pappachi's natty, silhouette in the lit windows as he flitted from room to room. Not content with having beaten his wife and daughter (Chacko was away at school), he tore down curtains, kicked furniture and smashed a table lamp. An hour after the lights went out, disdaining Mammachi's frightened 'pleading, little Ammu crept back into the house through a ventilator to rescue her new gumboots that she loved more than any thing else.... While Ammu watched, the Imperial Entomologist shred her new gumboots with her mother's pinking shears. (Roy, 222)

In fact *The God of Small Things* is a unique novel in which the novelist boldly intermingles all the styles of narrative techniques—leading to the creation of a new style—a new innovation. Roy's portrayal of the political scenario is very realistic and authentic. She presents condition as they are. Even the names of Kerala politicians are real enough to raise a storm of Controversy in her home state. She ought to have not made direct remarks because instead of direct remarks work of literature can be presented by other means both allegorically and symbolically. However, if a writer decides to call a spade a spade, we may grant him or her that liberty.

Roy exposes the social evils such as gender discrimination, colour and ethnical distinctions through her characters in the novel. She gives hints how these evil affects the society. Seeking the critical situation of the society in kerala Roy has raised a voice through her characters. The traditional life was very pathetic for women but after the independence as the new waves of change came as equal rights to women in the constitution, Ammu felt delighted. She was living a life of a captive in the big Ayemenem House. She intended to live a free life as a free bird but it was not possible for her. But once she got chance to go to Kolkata for the marriage ceremony. There she met a man with whom she fell in love. He was on the post of Assistant Manager in a tea estate in Assam. Ammu got married at the earliest. But soon after her

marriage she came to know that her husband was a drunkard but by that time, the twins Rahel and Estha were born. In a male- centred social set up, the male thinks that they are free to do anything according to their own choice against the opposite sex and that is why the husband of Ammu wanted that she should have physical relations with his senior i.e. the Manager of the tea estate so that he may get promotion in the company. This type of torture she could not bear and she thought of going back to their parents' house. She carried her two children and walked for Kerala. She had never thought that she will have to face lots of challenges in her own house. Thus, Ammu suffers like Shakespeare's Cordelia in King Lear. She was tortured by her family members considering her a divorced woman. She was always mocked and teased by the family members. Roy has given a peculiar picture of house hold injustice how son Chacko is kindly treated with love and respect by his parents but the treatment of the same parents is biased against their daughter on account of her helplessness and homelessness. Baby Kochamma often criticised her saying "a married daughter had no position in her parents' home. As for a divorce daughter...she had no position anywhere at all. As for a divorced daughter from a love marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochamma's outrage" (45).

One more example of gender discrimination and social injustice can be noticed in the novel where the women are deprived of parental property. Chacko, the brother of Ammu proudly exercises and asserts his full right as the inheritor of the property of his parents, but his sister Ammu cannot claim any property of her parents, as a woman as a daughter has no claims to her father's property. Chacko arrogantly asserts his power before his sister every now and then by saying: "What's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine" (57). This haughty claim of his property hurts the sentiment of his sister but Chacko does not mind hurting her emotionally. Another example of patriarchal thinking is shown when Chacko claims the pickle factory his own even though his sister Ammu is working day and night with partnership. The frequent tease of Chacko regarding the property shows the cruel patriarchal society. All the family members are responsible for the miserable condition of Ammu who is oppressed in her own house. Roy criticises this treatment given to the woman in her family. This is the true picture of the gender biased society in Kerala. Ammu suffered a lot in her own house. She felt that those who came to see her they shed crocodile tears and tried to give sympathy. Alex Tickell gives remarks,

The God of Small Things is a book where you can connect the very smallest things to the very biggest. Therefore the chain of connections delineates the multi-layered pattern of big and small in the novel, originating from the very title which challenges the tyranny of big things and enunciates creative potential of dissent" (Tickell 10).

The story revolves around the protagonist Ammu who is the victim of the patriarchal society. From the childhood till her middle age she had to suffer and go through torture. The irony is that she is oppressed by her own family members. The real tragedy starts when Velutha comes in her life. Despite their different cast and culture both fall in love and indulged in physical relationship. Both had thirst for sex activity. They did not consider their place in the

society. During those days this type of affair was considered as crime for which there were severe punishment. Even Mammachi said,

Ammu had defiled the generations of breeding and brought the family to its knees. For generations to come, forever now, people would point at them at weddings and funerals. At baptism and birthday parties. (258).

Gender discrimination is possible where there are men in the society because men think themselves superior to the women. But in *The God of Small Things* it is an irony that a woman is tortured by the other woman. And this is the fact that women are also against the other women. In fact it is surprising. The love story of Velutha and Ammu does not remain longer and Velutha is forced to leave the place where as Ammu is locked in her room. Ammu is tormented and forced to live in isolation. Later she dies in agony. Here too is the example of discrimination. Ammu and Chacko have committed the same crime of breaking the law of love affair. But when the time comes for punishment Chacko gets no punishment whereas Ammu gets severe punishment which leads her to death. Seeing this partiality Susan Stanford remarks "how Chacko receives no punishment for his transgressions, whereas Ammu and Velutha do, proves why panoptic operations are resisted" (Friedman 255). This way Roy gives a true picture of the evil of gender discrimination in *The God of Small Things*.

Next example of gender discrimination is seen in the next generation of family tree where Ammu's daughter Rahel who grows as the bird in the cage developing a sense of isolation and aloofness in a male centred social set-up and she is always treated by her own family members as an outsider. She never gets any affection from her family members in Ayemenem House. She feels lonely and isolated. After the death of her mother her situation becomes more panic. She faces the most troublesome period of life whether she is in school or at home. She was illtreated not only in family but in school too. She had to face regular tease by her seniors in the school. Many times she was kicked out from the school without any mistakes. Later when she grows up Rahel goes to Delhi for the study of the architecture. There she got married to a research scholar Larry Mc Caslin but her married life is totally eclipsed by her divorce.

Mammachi is another sufferer of gender discrimination whose married life is also not very peaceful and happy as she is always a puppet in the hands of her husband, Pappachi. He often beats his wife with a flower vase and from the first date of her marriage, she is a silent sufferer to the atrocities of her husband. Though he is a well educated man yet he is a very jealous husband who wants to abuse and insult her wife without any sufficient cause. Margaret Kochamma is another character of the novel who is the wife of Chacko and the mother of Sophie Mol. Her life also becomes horrible like the other victims in the novel by the hand of her husband. Like Hardy's Tess, she is also a poor victim in the hands of fate as she faces a series of misfortunes i.e. she gets the divorce, her daughter Sophie Mol dies and thus becomes a pathetic character who earns our sympathy.

Thus, in the conclusion we could say that Arundhati Roy has described the gender discrimination in a very striking and comprehensible manner in the novel *The God of Small Things*. The novel depicts the miseries of women who have to undergo the cruel tortures

which they have swallowed silently. Through this novel Roy has tried to make the society aware of the discrimination done to the women through various reason by the society. She wants equality for women so that women can be a good asset for the society and the nation. Plato holds: "We shall have to train the women also, then in both kinds of skill, and train them for war as well and treat them in the same way as the men." (Plato, 299) Thus we see that men and women are the two wheels of the same chariot or the two phases of the same coin. Plato further observes: "The only difference between men and women is one of physical function—one begets, the other bears children. Apart from that, both can and both should follow the same range of occupation and perform the same functions (though men will on the whole, perform them better); they should receive the same education to enable them to do so. In this way society will get the best value from both." (Plato, 299) Arundhati Roy is not only a story-teller but she is a perfect human being too as expressed through her nonfictional writings. Her vision for human life and sympathy for the poor, underprivileged, illiterate, mute tribals have made her a champion of the cause of the deprived and the lonely.

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