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JOURNEY FOR FEMALE EMANCIPATION: STRUGGLE OF THREE GENERATIONS IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S *A GOD OF SMALL THINGS*

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Abstract:

The present paper critically analyses the meandering journey of three generations of women characters in Arundhati Roy's Booker Prize winner novel, *The God of Small Things*. It studies the effects of gender bias prevalent in Indian society on the psyche of women. The analysis focuses on the portrayal of various types of marginalisation and subjugation of women by their powerful and dominating counterparts. Further, it also throws light on the general condition of women throughout the country. The paper highlights the struggle of female characters for their liberation from discriminatory and exploitative patriarchal norms. It also underlines women's miserable condition in Indian society and their reaction to their social position. From the passive acceptance of their plight with a fatalistic attitude initially, the journey of women characters in the novel toward their amelioration and self-assertion has really been an arduous one. The present paper reflects this progression and evolution of the femme eternelle.

Keywords: Human Rights, Subjugation, Discrimination, Patriarchy, Liberation

Female life and experience have been seen mostly through the masculine lens. As a result, the female experience has been either ignored or completely wiped off the pages of history. It is a sad commentary on the existing affairs in the life of women that they have been denied their fundamental right to make decisions about



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their life. Article 1 of the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that all human beings are born free and are equal in dignity and rights ("Universal"). However, for ages, women's rights, freedom, equality, and dignity have been compromised in the male-dominated world. Though women represent one-half of the world population, they have been struggling to voice their opinions and assert themselves. As Simone de Beauvoir rightly comments: "They have gained only what men have been willing to grant; they have taken nothing, they have only received" (19). Women have been rendered voiceless, powerless, and even purposeless by the patriarchy. The struggle to bridge the gap between the powerful and powerless, voiced and voiceless, exploiter and exploited is one of the biggest challenges of modern times. Though there are no quick answers or easy solutions to such a practical problem, social activists and litterateurs from all corners of the world have tried to empower women by empathizing with them and by presenting their stories to the world. In India, women writers like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Nair, Nayantara Sehgal, Manju Kapur, Amrita Pritam, Githa Hariharan, Arundhati Roy, etc. have beautifully showcased in their works the various nuances of female life, including their aspirations, sufferings, struggles, suppression, marginalisation, and also, their relentless efforts to lead a life of dignity. Arundhati Roy's name shines out in this list for presenting a realistic picture of the plight of women in her debut novel, *The God of Small Things* (1996). The book offers the readers a critique of male chauvinism through the portrayal of the suffering of females due to patriarchal ideologies and hegemony. Fittingly, the novel won the prestigious Booker Prize in 1997 for exploring how 'small' things which are seemingly insignificant and generally ignored can make a deep impact on the lives of 'big' people.

The God of Small Things deals with the lives of three generations of women who must pay the price of being women in a male-dominated world. The novel is set in Ayemenem in Kerala, a place that symbolizes a microcosm of the whole country in terms of the unfair treatment of women. The novelist gives a realistic portrayal of her women characters to highlight the fact that despite the tall claims of equality made in the constitution of India, women are still subordinated and marginalised on various fronts. Such suppression and gender inequality alienate them from the 'centre' and push them to the 'margins' of the social fabric.

The book successfully portrays various types of marginalisation and subjugation of women by their powerful and dominating counterparts. The very title of the novel is an indication of the novelist's aim of underscoring "the intrinsic dignity, worth and beauty of all that is considered to be 'the small' (trivial or insignificant) by 'the big' (those who wield power over others...)" (Ghotra 227). Besides other things in her book, Arundhati



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Roy has represented the inferior status of female characters in the Keralite society in Postcolonial India. B.S. Jamuna remarks that the novel, *The God of Small Things* is a “neo-colonial text highlighting the struggle for liberation not from the colonial hegemony but from one’s own oppressive neo-cultural set-up” (189).

The three generations of women characters in this novel become victims of double marginalisation at the hands of their male counterparts as well as their own native culture. In general, they are treated as mere objects of possession and are meant to be controlled by the ‘man’ of the house. Mammachi represents the first generation of women. She complacently accepts her subordinate existence and never thinks of questioning male sovereignty. She is truly a subdued Indian woman who has no control over her life and is not allowed to take decisions on her own. She cannot even think of questioning the authority of her father who gets her married to a man who is seventeen years older than her. After marriage, she silently bears all the tortures and beatings of her husband and never complains. Regarding the silent subordination of women, R.K. Mishra’s comment seems apt in the Indian context. He says that in India, “there is a willing resignation of the women to the subordination of the male. They have accepted this subjugation as a traditional prescription of the Hindu society” (48). Mammachi’s husband, Pappachi is a male chauvinist, jealous, possessive, and cruel man who beats his wife at the slightest pretext. He disallows her violin lessons just because her teacher tells him that his wife is “exceptionally talented and, in his opinion, potentially concert class.” (Roy 50). The thought of subverting the arbitrary and atrocious male authority never crosses Mammachi’s mind for she had been taught since her childhood that the husband is the God of a woman.

Thus, she mutely resigns to her fate and, like Kamla Das’ female persona, “Cowering / Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and / Became a dwarf”. Frequent and severe beatings also affect the psyche of Mammachi’s children, especially, her daughter, Ammu who observes, “Father Bear beat mother Bear” (180). It is only towards the fag-end of Mammachi’s painful married life that her husband stops beating her because of the intervention of their son, Chacko. Symbolically, the novelist makes the reader hear the “long-smothered wail” of all the suffering females in the country (Sharma 178). Pappachi’s male chauvinism becomes evident from the fact that he considers it below his dignity to help Mammachi in pickle-making though he has nothing else to do after his retirement. Even the fact that his wife has become nearly blind due to her conical corneas does not alter his decision. Though after Pappachi’s death, she gains the legal right to be the mistress of the house, yet the de-facto master of the house in all matters is her son, Chacko.



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The women workers' predicament at the pickle factory is even worse than that of Mammachi. Nobody sympathizes with them, nor hears their silent cries. They are doubly oppressed and marginalized.

The whole narrative shows how the elite women become the centre and the factory women the margins. Vicious roots of patriarchy deeply ingrained in the female psyche affect these women's subconscious selves so adversely that even when, like Mammachi, they are free from male oppression, they turn into the female version of patriarchy. Mammachi, now the woman in power, accommodates and overlooks the sexual affairs of her son, Chacko with the factory women who have to become mere sexual objects for satisfying the "man's needs". Chacko's clandestine relationships receive silent approval from the mother as she constructs a separate entrance for his room, "so that the objects of his 'Needs' wouldn't have to go trespassing through the house" (169). Such commodified women suffer at the hands of both the men and women of the elite class. It is not only the patriarchal ideology, but also the hegemony which becomes instrumental in the oppression of such hapless women indiscriminately by both genders. Benita Parry is right to point out that such females are "positioned on the boundary between human and animal" (39).

The second-generation women are represented mainly by Ammu in the novel. Since her childhood, she suffers in a patriarchal household where there is a discriminatory attitude towards her. She is not allowed to get a college education while her brother Chacko is sent to Oxford to study as a Rhodes scholar. Ammu does not get equal treatment at home since she is a woman and such discrimination makes it unbearable for Ammu to spend her life at Ayemenem. Though Ammu contributes to factory work, she is never paid anything, and her legal and natural right on the family property is also denied and usurped by her brother, Chacko who always refers to the property as "my Factory, my pineapples, my pickles" (57). He brazenly tells Ammu, "What's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine" (57). To such a statement, Ammu retorts: "Thanks to our wonderful male chauvinistic society" (57). Her ironic reaction indicates the root cause of gender bias prevalent in Indian society.

Ammu's life at her parental home has been bad, but her married life with a Bengali Hindu is worse than that. Her husband, besides being a habitual liar and a drunkard, is so mean that he stoops to the extent of forcing her to act as his boss' concubine for allowing him to remain absent from duty. When Ammu refuses to oblige him,



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he “lunged at her, grabbed her hair, punched her, and then passed out from the effort” (42). Under this exigency, Ammu decides to retaliate to reclaim her self-respect and distinct identity. She refuses to submit to the highly invidious patriarchal norms. She picks up “the heaviest book she could find in the book-shelf... hit[s] him with it as hard as she could. On his head. His legs. His back and shoulders” (42). Finally, she walks out on her husband for good and returns to Ayemenem. She expresses her fervent feministic stance by getting her wedding ring melted down and made into a bangle for Rahel, her daughter. Her family does not let any opportunity slip to make her realize that she and her children are unwelcome guests in the house. But by that time, Ammu has learned to assert herself and hit back at the chauvinistic world.

She starts defying the social norms which use the silence of women as “a tool of oppression” because she has realized that women’s retaliating voice is “a tool of resistance” (Faheem 63). Ammu is not ashamed of her divorce since she knows that it is better to live alone with dignity rather than keep dragging on a life of woes and innumerable insults at the cost of one’s self-respect. She even establishes a sexual relationship with an untouchable Paravan, Velutha. Such a relationship is unacceptable in an orthodox caste-ridden society. When Ammu’s aunt, Baby Kochamma comes to know about their affair, she cannot tolerate it and decides to punish them. She is, in a way, the doppelganger of elderly Mammachi who is unreasonably vicious and oppressive towards Ammu. Kochamma’s unrequited love for Father Mulligan has turned her so bitter, self-centered, and vindictive that she makes a scheme of filing a false case of molestation, kidnapping of children, and murder of Chacko’s wife, Sophie Mol against Velutha. She even forces Estha to testify against the poor Velutha, leading to his impending doom. Ammu fails to get her lover released from that charge since the attitude of the Police Inspector is also biased against him. She finds social and administrative forces to be against her.

She is separated from her children and asked to leave the house at Ayemenem. She yearns to be united with her kids, but ultimately, she dies all alone in a cheap hotel room. Though she pays the price for her free-thinking attitude and assertive behaviour, she paves the way for the next generation of women who would put up a good fight against the stringent phallocentric norms.

Ammu’s daughter, Rahel represents the third generation of women. She is also important in the story as she grows through her traumatic childhood experiences. Owing to the divorce of her parents, she does not enjoy a normal childhood. Deserted by her father and separated from her twin brother Estha, she becomes a victim of



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biased treatment in Ayemenem, by her maternal grandparents and maternal uncle who do not welcome Ammu and her daughter, Rahel after the former one's divorce. While Ammu raises her voice against the prejudicial social norms meekly, her daughter flouts the same openly since her childhood. Her expulsion from school and a virtual social boycott by her college mates do not make her a conformist. The neglect of her family gradually makes her an independent, bold, and free-spirited girl, ready to take the decisions of her life. She gets admitted to a college of Architecture in Delhi, not out of interest, but to stay away from Ayemenem. When she comes to understand that nobody at Ayemenem is taking an interest in finding a suitable match for her, she decides on her own and marries an American scholar, Larry McCaslin.

Unfortunately, the marriage does not work and she gets divorced after some time, but she does not bother about this and asserts her right to follow her convictions. She becomes finally independent and starts earning by doing various jobs in New York without feeling any shame or moral scruples for getting a divorce. She leaves her job and returns to Ayemenem when she comes to know that her twin brother, Estha has 're-returned' to Kerala. The separation from Estha has taken a toll on the psychological health of both the brother and sister. While Estha turns speechless in the process of dealing with the painful memories of separation, Rahel becomes so mentally and emotionally wrecked that she fails to form a long-lasting healthy relationship with her husband or any other man and even ends up a pervert, committing incest with her brother towards the end of the novel.

Hence, Arundhati Roy has successfully depicted the plight of her female characters and how they subvert as well as assert their doubly marginalized identity. While older women become subdued under the phallogocentric social set-up and conform to it, the younger generation's educated women claim their right over their lives by rebelling against the rigid patriarchal norms. Thus, the novelist seems to convey that women can reclaim their lost dignity and self-esteem with education and proper grooming. She skilfully portrays the revolutionary progress made by modern women in exploring new avenues, availing themselves of opportunities, making bold unorthodox decisions, taking life's challenges unwaveringly, and moving forward "...strong in will/ To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield" (Tennyson).



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