

PATRIARCHY AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: A FEMINIST READING OF *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*

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Abstract:

The present paper is an attempt to study Arundhati Roy's novel, The God of Small Things, as a feminist text in which women characters are forced to internalize the reigning patriarchal ideology. They are continuously subjected to intense humiliation and domestic violence by their male counterparts. The female characters are most often inferiorised by male chauvinism and frequently subordinated by the phallographic social discourse. They are resorted to live in their 'massive silence' with limited communication and exposure to the outside world. The problems experienced by the female characters are really political problems created by a patriarchal system which is essentially hard on women. The pernicious masculine discourse thrust upon women is symptomatic of a social system which corresponds to a phallographic order arguing for men's natural superiority. The female characters find different routes to subvert their conventional image in the society but in doing so they mostly become easy prey for the 'man masked predators'. They are prohibited to cross conventionally defined boundaries and are sometimes even locked in the confined apartments. The sterile narcissism of male scholarship coupled with monolithic male narratives pose a serious identity threat to these characters over the period of four generations. So the focus of the paper will be to highlight these cultural, economic and educational disabilities within a patriarchal Indian society, dominated by men that have hindered or prevented women from realizing their productive and creative possibilities.

Key Words: *chauvinism feminism, patriarchy women characters.*

Introduction:

The Indian society is pervasively patriarchal ruled mostly by the 'father'. This male centered discourse is organized in such a way as to subordinate women to men in all cultural domains: familial, religious, political, economic, social, legal and artistic. As M. H. Abrams observes that "From the Hebrew Bible and Greek philosophic writings to the present, the female tends to be defined by negative reference to the male as the human norm, hence as an 'other'. Women themselves are taught, in the process of being socialized, to internalize the reigning patriarchal ideology (a conscious or unconscious presuppositions about male superiority), and so are conditioned to derogate their own sex and to cooperate in their own subordination. The feminist criticism takes its roots from ancient Greece, in the works of Sappho and Aristophanes and slowly evolved to the present era mostly through European and English lands. The long deprivation of women and the resultant counter-resistance has laid down the strong foundation stone for feminist literary studies. Peter Barry notes, "As a distinctive and concerted approach to literature, feminist criticism was not inaugurated until late 1960s. It was not, of course the start of feminism. Rather it was renewal of an old tradition of thought and action already possessing its classic books which had diagnosed the problem of women's inequality in society. These books include Mary Wollstonecraft's A vindication of the Rights of Women (1792), Olive Schreiner's Women and Labour (1911); Virginia Woolf's A Room of one's Own (1929); Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex (1949) and so on".

While explaining feminist criticism M.A.R. Habib writes:

“In most of the long history women were not only deprived of education and financial independence, they also had to struggle against a male ideology condemning them to virtual silence and obedience, as well as a male literary establishment that poured scorn on their literary endeavors. Indeed, the depiction of women in male literature- as angels, goddesses, whores, obedient wives, and mother figures was an integral means of perpetuating these ideologies of gender. It was only with the women's struggles in the twentieth century for political rights that feminist criticism arose in any systematic way. Since the early twentieth century feminist criticism has grown to encompass a vast series of concerns: a rewriting of literary history so as to include the contribution of women; the tracing of a female literary tradition; theories of sexuality and sexual differences.”

Therefore, the feminist literary criticism of today is the direct product of the 'women's movement' of the 1960s. This movement was, in important ways, literary from the start, in the sense that it realized the significance of the images of the women promulgated by literature, and saw it vital to combat them and question their authority and their coherence. Contemporary feminist debates and disagreements are now centered on three particular areas, these being: the role of theory; the nature of language and the value or otherwise of psychoanalysis.

Discussion:

The choice for the women within the novel, within fiction, are either to survive by making the hysterics ambiguous choice into a femininity or to go for oneness and unity by suffering death.(Juliet Mitchell). The God of Small Things showcases the actual picture of the plight of Indian Women. Their profound anguish, cares and anxieties, their humble surrender harassment and undeserved humiliation in a patriarchal society. The novel shows women's continuous struggle to break the monolithic social borders in order to experience love and other human bonds through their own autonomous and conscious self. Whenever in the novel, a female character tries to challenge the man centric notions of authority like 'man is the son of god' and 'woman is the daughter of man', they no longer remain the darlings of the men or the society. When any female character somehow gathers the strength to challenge and averse, man- made power systems, they eventually become the soft victims in the hands of those they choose their lifelong partners. Arundhati Roy's women characters do not belong to the amoral world, but they live in a world where at every yard social classification and conventions are markedly visible. Anybody who tries to cross over these boundaries is found struggling within the social limitations. Roy, with her keen insight, pictures the real agony and longing of the Indian women trapped in the family and marriage boundaries. Her fictional world offers an intensive analysis of the historical, social, economic and religious background of the characters so as to enable an honest interpretation. She packs her characters with vivid pictures and intricate details that in a way compel the reader to participate in the process of creation.

The novel records the story of four generations. The novelist does not say about the women in the first generation. Aleyootty Ammachi is Pappachi's mother. She continued to live in an oil portrait and also in her husband Rev. Ipe's painting. While Ipe smiled Aleyootty Ammachi looked more timid.

The phallocratic ideology becomes more apparent when we move towards second generation women characters-Mammachi and Babykochamma

Mammachi is the wife of Pappachi, an Anglophile self centered entomologist. She is one of the principal characters who face a series of un-deserved humiliation and cruelty from time to time. She silently endures the harsh treatment of her husband without complaining about her place in a patriarchal family. She is condemned to live an unhappy life sacrificing her personal desires in order to be accommodated in a household which legally does not belong to her. Her character resembles to the traditional Indian women who have to go extra miles than men to prove themselves equivalent to men. Her husband, Pappachi is a symbol of male dominating society. He is never happy with his wife even though she works very hard to support the family. He has a very poor opinion about her. He is even jealous of her youthful charm on her face. He treated her as his personal property and in the evenings used to beat her with

a base flower vase (47). In the very beginning of the novel, Roy presents a pathetic picture of Mammachi's life. Roy observes, "Mammachi was almost blind and wore dark glasses when she went out of the house. Her tears tickled down from behind them, trembled down from behind them and tremble along her jaw like raindrops on the edge of a roof" (5). Mammachi had started making pickles commercially soon after Pappachi retired from government service from Delhi. Although she was half blind yet Pappachi would not help her with pickle making. He greatly resented the attention her wife was suddenly getting. It was Pappachi who did not allow her to continue the lessons on the violin in Vienna. These are the restriction men usually impose on the women. In turn, at Pappachi's funeral, Mammachi cried and her contact lenses slid around in her eyes. Ammu told the twins that Mammachi was crying more because she was used to him than she loved him (50). She was first under the control of her husband and later her son Chacko supervised her. Initially Mammachi's factory had no name. Everybody just referred to her pickles and jams as Sosh's tender mango, or Sosh's banana jam because Mammachi's name was Soshama. But when Chacko returned from America, things changed. Mammachi just run the factory like a large kitchen. Chacko always referred to it as my factory, my pineapples and my pickles (57). This is true of the Indian society where women are legally denied the inheritance rights of the property. In her conservative outlook, acquired through male narratives, she loved Chacko and almost neglected Ammu. She even suggested Ammu that she should visit Rahel as seldom as possible, while as for her son, she had built a separate entrance for his room, so that the objects of his needs wouldn't have to go to traipsing through the house (169). She joyfully welcomed him and placed fresh flowers in his room every day (248). Mammachi showed unsympathetic attitude towards Margaret Kochamma. She shows female envy for woman whom her son had loved and married. She never met Margaret but looked down upon her. She is unkind towards the workers of the factory paradise pickles and preservers. But she is meek with Chacko. Mammachi is not crafty as baby kochamma but her mind is hardly less pervert than that of baby kochamma. She promises to the logic and ethics of the male bigotry in toto. Her conservative thinking turns her brutal, nasty and brutish.

Baby Kochamma is drawn as a spiteful, destructive and materialistic character. Rahel once described her as living her life backwards. In her younger days she rejected materialism to win the heart of Father Malligan and in later years she embraced it. She is quick to insult Ammu and her children, mostly for the reason of being a divorced mother with fatherless children. She strongly believed in the social customs that a divorced mother with an inter-caste love marriage has no place in the world. She misrepresented the relationship between Ammu and Velutha not for Ammu's sake but to contain the scandal and salvage (259). She acts as the agent of patriarchy, who even being a woman, assists Pappachi and Chacko to further the degree of domination. However, her efforts to seduce Father Malligan failed miserably. Her conversion to Roman Catholics also did not work. She has been left with only two choices either to revert and marry or to embrace her new unique life. She resented Ammu, because she saw her quarrelling with a fate she, Baby Kochamma has graciously accepted. The fate of the wretched man-less woman (45). She decided to live a life upon her own impulses without knowing that her identity is determined by somewhere else. In fact, her character is so versatile and complicated that even in her apparent snobby nature readers find multilayered realities. Roy, as an excellent observer of the human behavior leaves some of the portions for the reader to explore the meaning. Baby Kochamma's character reveals some of the realistic but unbearable agony of the Indian woman. She had initially searched a male partner who could decide her ultimate social position and exclusively determine her happiness and fulfillments of life or lack of these. When she was not successful in these attempts, she lived a life of social exclusion. She neither reverted to her earlier religion nor bothered cleaning her filthy room. She instead watched her favourite television shows and mostly lived a life like a hallow woman.

The third generations of women characters are Ammu and Chacko's alien wife Margaret Kochamma. Ammu is the mother of twins Rahel and Estha. She is an independent woman who is both a loving mother

and has an “unsafe edge”. She is the most intimately drawn character who all through her life in a patriarchal Indian family searches for her own space. She finished her schooling the same year that her father retired from his job. Her father, Pappachi insisted that a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl (38). Therefore, 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 house work. Ammu's character reveals the hardships Indian women encounter in the course of their life. They always dwindle between family and traditional customs without getting the chance to realize their dreams. At the marriageable age, no proposals came to Ammu. Pappachi did not have the enough money to raise a suitable dowry as a result her birthdays came and went unnoticed. (38). As a grown up girl, she was very desperate. She dreamed of escaping from Ayemenem and the clutches of her ill-tempered father and bitter long suffering mother. She hatched several wretched little plans. Eventually, her one plan worked, Pappachi agreed to let her spend the summer with a distant aunt living in Delhi. There she met her future husband who proposed to her five days after they meet. Ammu did not 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 Ayemenem. Ammu's world is so shrunk by male history that she oscillates between strict family norms and biased social customs. In order to find her future and do away with patriarchal lineage, she marries a handsome stranger. Her married life also did not provide her an opportunity to escape from the social bondages. Her marital ties carry no significance than to permit herself “to be so painstakingly decorated before being led to the gallows” (44). This realistically shows the agony of the contemporary Indian women who are first held in the strict family customs and then trapped in marital restrictions. In both cases they have been on receiving end and become passive receivers of heinous crimes on daily basis. The Indian women have to act against triangular forces- family, new home and society. These socio-cultural borders always suppress their voice and their fate lingers between hope and despair. They cannot think independently because their destiny is no longer believed to be theirs. Ammu passed through all these forces. She was first ill-treated by her parents. When Pappachi once caught her, he didn't say a word. He flogged her with his ivory-handled riding crop. Ammu didn't cry. When he finished beating her, he made her bring him Mammachi's pinking shears from her sewing cupboard. (181). When she trusted a strange man and made him a model to realize her own shattered dreams. He turned out to be not only an alcoholic person but also bargainer of her honour to satisfy his boss. When Ammu rejected her husband's invitation to a wicked and deceitful plan that Mr. Hollick suggested that Ammu be sent to his bungalow to be 'looked after', he grew uncomfortable and then infuriated by her silence, he grabbed her hair, punched her and then passed out from the effort. (42) When his bouts of violence began to include the children, she left her husband and returned, unwelcomed, to her parents in Ayemenem. Again when Ammu died even the church has no place for her proper burial. She was a heathen, a sinner whose only fault in a patriarchal set up was that, she tried to see the world through her own eyes. The church refused to bury Ammu. On several counts. So Chacko hired a van to transport the body to the electric crematorium. (162).

So, from the day one, Ammu is cornered by many social-marital and religious forces. She was supposed to accept her fate within the set boundaries. Her transgression of these limits is directly or indirectly responsible for her rejection by the society. She wandered place to place like an exile with Rahel and Estha as milestones around her neck (85). She used the same boat to love by night the man her children loved by day, the boat that Estha sat and Rahel found (202). She became delicate bait even to Velutha. Similarly, her brother first locked her into her bedroom and then kicked out her from the very house they were brought up as brother and sister. She learned to live with this cold, calculating cruelty. With the passage of time, she developed a lofty sense of injustice and the mulish, reckless streak that develops in someone small who has been bullied all their lives by someone big. She did exactly nothing to avoid quarrels and confrontations. (182). finally, when she grew tired of their propriety and handling of her. She wanted her body back. She shrugged her children off the way a bitch shrugs off her pups. Then she swung

her legs off the bed, walked to the window and drew back the curtains (222). She gathered up her heavy hair, wrapped it around her face and peered down the road to age and death through its parted strands. She was not the kind of woman who wanted her future told. She dreaded it too much. So if she were granted one small wish perhaps it would only have been not to know. Not to know where she might be, next month, next year. Ten years on. (224)

Margaret Kochamma is Chacko's British ex-wife and Sophie Mol's mother. She also becomes a victim of feminine jealousy. Mammachi did not even spare her from her in-built bias and anger. Margaret, after a married life was initially very happy. Being with Chacko made her feel as though her soul had escaped from the narrow confines of her island country into the vast, extravagant spaces of her husband's promising world. Chacko made her feel as though the world belonged to them. What Chacko loved most about her was her self-sufficiency (245). He loved the fact that Margaret Kochamma didn't cling to him. He was grateful to her for not wanting to look after him. He grew to depend on Margaret Kochamma for not depending on him. He adored her for not adoring him (246). A year into the marriage, and the charm of Chacko's suddenly sloth wore off for Margaret Kochamma. It no longer amused her that while she went to work, the flat remained in the same filthy mess that she had left it in. Chacko didn't apologize for the cigarette burns in the new sofa. She had just discovered that she was pregnant when she met Joe. Despite her marital troubles she had that air of secret elation and affection for her own body that pregnant women often have (247). She had passionate desire to be good and gentle lady with enough money. So she had to face with the real world. One day when Chacko came to cafe, she all of a sudden drew towards him like how Ammu drew towards Baba. Margaret and Chacko had an affair and they both married without their family consent. But this untraditional rebellious marriage as a bad luck did not prosper in a fertile way. To crowd the effect, Margaret's parents refused to see her. Her father disliked Indians as he thought Indians as sly, dishonest people. He could not believe that his daughter marrying such a man. Moreover Margaret was also fed up with the living of Chacko and she separated from Chacko and married Joe.

The fourth generation women characters are- Rahel and Sophie. Sophie Mol is a minor but very important character in the novel. Sophie's character is mostly revealed through the lenses of Estha and Rahel. She is the half-English, half-Indian daughter of Chacko and Margaret Kochamma. She is the one who feels left out from the jovial company of twins. She wants the company of both Estha and Rahel and to allure them, she gathers up presents and gives them. She unlike the adults is unbiased and insults Chacko and baby Kochamma for their hypocrisy towards the twins. She chases twins when they decide to run away. This was her first and last decision. Her fate had something else stored for her. She drowned from the boat and died at the tender age of nine.

Ammu's daughter Rahel deserves much of our attention. The story deals with her life only up to the age of thirty-one and most of the events present details of her childhood. She was isolated by father, separated from mother, victimized by her maternal uncle, grandmother and grand aunt. The neglect has accidentally resulted in a 'release of the spirit'. From her childhood pains, she has grown up as a resilient and independent, daring and capable of keen observation. Rahel is the protagonist and partial narrator and eye witness of most of the story. As a child, she exists in a kind of harmony with Estha, her twin brother who is eighteen minutes her senior. She has an incredibly active imagination. She continues to wander until she was divorced and returned to Ayemenem at the age of thirty-one. She studied architecture not because she had particular interest in it, but more because she just falls into it (17). She married Larry MacCaslin and lived years in the United States. After they were divorced, she worked various jobs all over United States few months as a waitress and several years as a night clerk in a bullet-proof cabin at a gas station outside Washington before returning to Ayemenem (20). As a child, when her memory had just begun, Rahel thought of themselves together as me, and separately, individually, as we or us (2). She was imaginative, wide awake, fiercely vigilant and brittle with exhaustion from her battle against real life (5). Rahel grew up without a brief. Without anybody to arrange a marriage for her. Without anybody who would pay her a

dowry and therefore without an obligatory husband looming on her horizon. (17). So, as long as she wasn't noisy about her aspirations, she remained free to make her own enquires into life and how it ought to be lived. (17). In a way, Rahel is what the circumstances have made her. The patriarchal family set up, dislocation, parental neglect and above all her brother's separation and mother's untimely death has forced her to live her life in several guises. Although torn apart by the society yet she bravely embraced her individual identity defying every norm that brought tragedy to their household.

Conclusion:

The novel as a feminist text deeply explores the complex issues, primarily opposing the notions of “masculine” subject as active, adventurous and creative while as “feminine” as passive, timid and conventional. It explores what might be called the mechanisms of patriarchy, an orderly cultivated cultural 'mind-set' in men and women that perpetuates sexual inequality. The novelist raises various intricate questions on the cultural arrangements which regard men as the emblem of social power and the advantages which go with it. The female characters constantly oppose these notions of power and authority. They in the course of the novel either fall prey or become transgressors in a limited traditional sense. Within the novel, female characters try to overcome their assumed negative self by vehemently challenging their male counterparts. The characters, both male and female cross over the conventionally prohibited territories but in doing so women pay much higher price for this crossing over. Roy very aptly brings home the adverse effects of social classification in her society as:

“Looking back now, to Rahel it seemed as though this difficulty that their family had with classification ran much deeper than the jam-jelly question. Perhaps Ammu, Estha and she were the worst transgressors. But it wasn't just them. It was the others too. They all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tempered with the laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much. The laws that make grandmothers grandmothers, uncles uncles, mothers mothers, cousins cousins, jam jam, and jelly jelly” (31)

The *God of Small Things* realistically portrays the unjust patriarchal system in which women, on the whole, are subjected to intense physical and psychological tortures from time to time. Roy penetrates to the depths of our contemporary social milieu and exposes the issues of domestic violence, male chauvinism and gender bias with an extraordinary vision, wisdom and scholarship.

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