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Imaging New Cultural Spaces

S. Christina Rebecca

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Edited by
Dr. S. Christina Rebecca



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Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*: Feminism as a Mode of Existence

C. Bharathi and Dr. S. Kalamani***

Feminism in literature refers to a mode that approaches a text with foremost concern for the nature of female experience in it. The fictional experience of characters, the relation, institutional or imaginative, capacity of an author, the experience implicit in language of structure that interrogates the cultural prescriptions that subordinate and trivialize woman and treat them as inferiors are the primary concerns of female fiction writers. Feminism demands an activity, not passivity, which analyses our sense of the female presence in the world. A feminist fiction is a work where language and imagery are employed to impart a new vision of reality- reality perceived from a woman's authentic mode of seeing, feeling and measuring her existence without subscribing to the male cultural codes.

Toril Moi in her essay "Feminist, Female, Feminine" (qtd. in Dhawan, 102), distinguishes between 'feminism' as a political position, 'female' or 'femaleness' as a matter of biology and 'femininity' as a set of culturally defined characteristics. The 'feminine' is a culturally produced position of marginality in relation to patriarchal society. It is not a fact of nature. Hence the term 'feminine' gives rise to a ground from which to conduct a feminist politics for change.



Feminism views femininity as a creation born out of patterns of sexuality and behaviour imposed by cultural and social norms. Hence Simone de Beauvoir's famous statement that one is not born a woman but becomes one and Julia Kristeva's contention that "woman as such does not exist" (16). A patriarchal dispensation imposes certain social standards of femininity on all biological women to foster the belief that the accommodating postures enjoined are natural. To be bold, assertive, independent and intellectual is to be non-conforming and therefore unfeminine and unnatural. In the traditional, patriarchal view, the terms 'feminine' and 'female' are interchangeable but to the feminist, women are female but they need not necessarily be feminine, in the traditional sense.

Feminism broadly aims at refuting masculinist approaches to women. It aims at bringing to fore the feminine subject matters in a distinctive feminine mode of experience.

The present day feminist thought seeks to destroy masculinist hierarchy, but not sexual dualism. It is necessarily as a rebalancing factor between men and women within a given society. It is viewed as a humanistic philosophy. It still remains a political change to male authority and hierarchy in the most profound sense. But today the theorists describing its ultimate vision, prefer the word 'transformational' to the term 'revolutionary'.

Feminism as a mode of existence in which woman is free of the dependence syndrome. When women are free from the dependency syndrome and lead a normal life, the idea of feminism materializes. As a philosophy of life, feminism seeks to discover and change the more subtle and deep seated causes of women's oppression. It is a concept of raising of the consciousness of an entire culture. Currently rational feminism is being widely accepted as it avoids all the negativisms associated with extremities of the individualist theories. The present-day feminist thought encompasses a moral vision and emerges as a holistic, anti-militaristic and life-affirming philosophy.

The feminine measures show that moral theorists have legitimized the oppression of women by insisting on their moral, rational and epistemological inferiority. Therefore, many women activists began to look for new theories like Liberal Feminism, Marxist Feminism, Radical Feminism, Psychoanalytic Feminism, Existentialist Feminism, Socialist Feminism and Post Modern Feminism.

It is no surprise that, more number of Indian English novelists concentrate on issues on feminist issues as the atrocities against women continue to increase. Nayantara Sahgal, Shoba De, Suniti Namjoshi, Ashapura Devi, Mahesweta Devi, Kundalika Kapadia and Arundhati Roy are some of the present day feminist writers. They have written of Indian women, their conflicts and predicaments against the male-chauvinist society. They have given the image and role towards the society of Indian women. The changing contexts have placed these women writers in an unenviable position. Their chief contribution consists of their exploring the moral and psychic dilemmas of the women protagonists and achieve a new harmony of relationship with themselves and their surroundings.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is basically a saga novel that depicts the life, destiny and fluctuating fortunes of three generations of women - Mammachi and Baby Kochamma, Ammu, and Rahel in Syrian Christian family in Ayemenem. The problems of patriarchal domination and female subalternity and the clash between the two are rooted in the specific geocultural reality of Ayemenem. Of the male characters, Pappachi and Chacko represent phallographic hegemony.

Pappachi is the father of Ammu, the one blessed directly by the patriarch of Antioch, is a typical member of an upper middle class Christian family. The novelist comments sarcastically on the carefully maintained imperialist postures of the family. Roy presents pappachi as an anglicized, tyrannizing and wife-beating man. He is suspicious of the emerging woman finding a voice, where anti-patriarchal impulses intersect. He cannot relish the idea of sending a girl for higher education. Nor can he appreciate

his wife's efficient management of the affairs of the family's paradise pickles factory.

Ammu uses scathing and even blasphemous language to deflate the vanity and eurocentric pretensions of an authoritarian father whose extreme interventions had traumatized her childhood. Ammu's conflict with patriarchy often assumes an anti-imperialist dimensions. She never loses a chance to condemn the hypocritical and Oxford educated Chacko. She can only sympathize with her mother, who considers him a prime-ministerial stuff. Roy puts him in a ridiculously absurd situation by making him love and marry a English waitress, who walks out of that marriage soon after.

Ammu, the heroine of the novel challenges the defiled social order by marrying a man of her choice and then breaking that marriage and getting entangled in a forbidden love. Ammu seeks to unsettle the formidable structures of an socio-cultural order by interrogating the traditional grammar of love.

Roy has evinced a well-defined feminist sensibility in the selection and organization of her fictional materials. *The God of Small Things* is nearly an autobiographical novel by Arundhati Roy. The Ammu in the novel represents Mrs. Mary Roy, Arundhati Roy's mother. She marries a Bengali man with Roy as surname. Since they belong to two different states, there is very much a cultural difference between husband and wife. It results into several problems. Roy portrays the patriarchal society of sexual, economic, political and physical power. The novel protests against a male-chauvinistic society.

The God of Small Things is a remarkable indictment of patriarchy and the injustice and the oppression faced by a woman in the androcentric society. Woman is victimized everywhere: as a daughter in her parent's house, as a wife in her husband's house, as a worker in a factory or as an employee in an office, whether in India or in America. *The God of Small Things* is the truthful portrayal of the plight of the women in society and their marathan struggle for seeking the sense of 'identity' in a male dominated conservative framework. The

social structure of an Indian woman is full of many ups and downs. Life offers little choice for a forsaken woman like Ammu, who is the daughter of Mammachi and mother of Rahel. Ammu became a victim of male-dominated society, when she was not allowed to pursue her studies. She finished her school education the year her father had retired from his job at Delhi and settled at Ayemenem. Ammu's father called Pappachi in the novel, considered the education of women, an unnecessary expense. So Ammu's education had suddenly come to a stop and she had no other alternative than to come with her father to Ayemenem and wait for marriage:

Ammu finished her schooling the same year that her father retired from his job in Delhi and moved to Ayemenem. Pappachi insisted that a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl, so Ammu had no choice but to leave Delhi and move with them. (38)

After that Ammu helped her mother with the household duties. Ammu began to grow desperate, when no suitable marriage proposal came in a reasonable time. Marriage for Pappachi is the male's domination over woman and women are nothing but the flowers in the hands of men. At home, Ammu felt like a captive lady, fettered to household chores and dull, mechanical routine. Sudden disruption of education, uncongenial atmosphere at home and lack of a viable alternative through marriage made her desperate:

All day 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, one worked. Pappachi agreed to let her spend the summer with a distant aunt who lived in Calcutta. (38-39)

Ammu met her future husband in a wedding reception when she paid a visit to one of her relatives in Calcutta. He was an assistant manager of a tea estate in Assam, who happened to be there on the vocation from his job. He proposed to her within five days they had met. Ammu accepted the proposal of a man whom she had known so little in a short time. Ammu was in a

hurry to marry him, because she knew that in Ayemenem, people were quite dead against her wishes and so something was better than nothing.

But soon after the marriage, Ammu discovered that she had actually fallen from the frying pan into the fire. Her husband whom she loved so much, proved to be an alcoholic. Disappointment became unbearable when her husband, was suspended from his job for alcoholism, and sought to bargain by procuring his beautiful wife for his boss, Mr. Hollick, the English manager of the tea estate. Mr. Hollick suggested that he could go on a leave and "Ammu be sent to his bungalow to be looked after"(42). Ammu's refusal only aggravated her physical and mental torture. Her husband "grew uncomfortable and then infuriated by her silence. Suddenly he lunged at her, grabbed her hair, punched her and then passed out from the effort"(42). Ammu also hit back as hard as she could, but "when his bouts of violence began to include the children" (42) she could not tolerate the situation any more.

Ammu had no alternative but to break off and come back with her twins (two-egg twins, born from separate but simultaneously fertilized eggs) – Estha and Rahel to the very same place from where she tried to run away.

Ammu left her husband and returned, unwelcomed, to her parents in Ayemenem. To everything that she had fled from only a few years ago. Except that now she had two young children. And no more dreams. (42)

In brief, at the age of twenty-four Ammu's life came to a standstill, nothing to hope for, nothing to happen, only to spend the long uneventful days languidly one after another. Her rebellious spirit only made her more and more miserable as the days went by.

Ammu had the painful realization that since she had spoilt her only one chance of livelihood by making the irrevocable mistake of choosing the wrong man. At her home and in her family and the society, she became virtually "untouchable". The mood of the patriarchal society is reflected in the view of Baby

Kochamma:

Subscribed wholeheartedly to the commonly held view that a married daughter had no position in her parents' home. As for a divorced daughter- according to Baby Kochamma, she had no position anywhere at all. And as for a divorced daughter from a love marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochamma's outrage. As for a divorced daughter from a inter community love marriage – Baby Kochamma chose to remain quiveringly silent on the subject. (45-46)

But, secretly, the love between Ammu and Velutha, an untouchable went on. During this time Velutha was arrested to be tortured to death on a false charge. As soon as Ammu came to know about it, she rushed to the police station to tell the truth. The treatment that she received at the hands of the Station House Officer shows how pitiable is the condition of women in the society, particularly when a woman is a divorcee. The author drops a large hint that the police officer knows that he can freely insult woman without any fear or compunction.

The officer represents the society's attitude to a woman who has loved outside the rules of "Love Laws". Ammu's brother, Chacko had already threatened her with all the authority of a patriarchy in his own house. "Get out of my house before I break every bone in your body" (255). So, having no "Locusts Stand I" anywhere, she had to leave and die helpless, sick, and alone in a hotel in the strange place for a job interview. Ammu's last frantic effort is to make a living in her struggle for survival, mainly for the sake of her children. She died at the age of thirty one – "Not old, not young, but a viable die-able age" (161).

Ammu had been humiliated and cornered by her father, ill-treated and betrayed by her husband. She had been insulted by the police and rendered destitute by her brother. Each of them voiced the patriarchy ideology which commanded that she should have no right anywhere – as daughter, wife, sister and citizen. She was no individual to her society but just an object, a role necessarily submissive. However it is not malefolk alone who perpetrated her tragedy. It is worth considering how a

woman acts as an agent, of this society, to undo another woman. Even women who have been deprived in their life cannot disturb the society in the least, but rather choose to come down with all the unspent force of their frustration on another helpless woman.

Baby Kochamma's frustration in love and the unspent force of repressed desire are instrumental in making Ammu's life miserable. She also poisoned the minds of Mammachi and Chacko against her. She was also responsible to a large extent for the children's unending suffering. Baby Kochamma is a study in meanness and perversion that may result from unnatural self-repression and the consequent frustration. When the novel opens, Father Mulligan died four years ago. Father Mulligan's death did not affect the attitude of Baby Kochamma. On the contrary, she felt that she could possess him more now. She felt that "her memory of him was hers, wholly hers. Savagely, fiercely, hers. Not to be shared with Faith, far less with competing co-nuns, and co-sadhus or whatever it was they called themselves" (298).

Mammachi's case is different – a different tale of woe. Although her husband was a high up in the society, a noted entomologist is seventeen years older than Mammachi. He had always been a jealous man. In Vienna, when Mammachi took her first lessons in violin. The lessons were abruptly discontinued by Pappachi when he heard the appreciative comments from the teacher that she was exceptionally talented. A sadist, every night he used to beat her with a brass flower vase.

Mammachi regularly suffered this ignominy with increasing frequency, till one day Chacko, on vacation strode into the room, caught Pappachi's vase-hand and twisted it around his back. The result of it was always a thin bond between Mammachi and her husband. He never touched her again. He never spoke to her. If he needed something, he called either Kochu Maria or Baby Kochamma as intermediaries. He had other ways of insulting his wife. He never allowed Mammachi to sit in his car. And when some visitors were expected, he would sit on the

verandah and publicly sew buttons which were not really missing, only to give an impression to the visitor that his wife neglected him.

In brief, Pappachi rejected Mammachi and insulted her in every possible way. Mammachi accepted the rejection passively and submissively. In other words, she accepted the female role model imposed on her by the society—docile, submissive, ungrudging, unprotesting. It is possible because of the trained sensibility.

In the Indian society mother feels more for the daughters agony, but here Mammachi due to her failures' did not feel much for her daughter's agony and it may be perhaps she was secretly jealous of Ammu's courage, happiness and her fulfilment, however brief, it was.

The story commences with the return of Rahel to her home in Southern India, Ayemenem, and the reunion with her brother Estha after twenty-three years. Thus the story begins near the end of the story and it is presented by a third person narrator: "It was raining when Rahel came back to Ayemenem" (1). Rahel has come back leaving her job in America, hearing that Estha is in Ayemenem again. The narrative moves backwards and forwards to the arrival and the aftermath of the death by drowning of Sophie Mol (English cousin) and an ill-fated love between Ammu and the untouchable Velutha. Rahel recollects with pain this bitter memory of her mother's suffering life.

Rahel was one of the twins. She was a child of broken home and a daughter of divorcee mother and presently staying in her ancestral house. She was not fortunate to receive the love and affection from her elders that a child so badly needs. Her emotional needs remained unfulfilled. Of course her mother had all the concern for her, but in a hostile atmosphere she was utterly helpless. When Ammu died at the age of thirty one, Rahel was nearly eleven. As a child she had seen the sufferings of her mother, the insults and ignominies that were inflicted on her all the year round and the tortures she had been subjected to when her affair with Velutha was detected.

Estha and Rahel were also very fond of Velutha. They were deceived into giving a false evidence when Velutha was arrested and brutally tortured to death. Rahel after all these years, on her return to Ayemenem, still remembers how they were made instrumental by Baby Kochamma in doing wrong to their mother. It is a memory that Rahel could never put out of her mind and in a way, it is this memory that practically ruined her conjugal life. After the death of Ammu, Rahel was more neglected than ever. With the death of her mother, Rahel had lost the last moorings that she had and she began to drift, from school to school, spent eight years in a college of Architecture in Delhi. She spent eight years in Delhi unable to finish the five year undergraduate course. But it was here that she met Larry Mc Caslin, who happened to be in Delhi, collecting material for his doctoral thesis. He met Rahel and found in her 'a jazz tune'.

He followed her into a bookshop where neither of them looked at books and Rahel drifted into marriage "like a passenger drifts towards an unoccupied chair in an airport lounge. With a Sitting Down sense. She returned with him to Boston" (18). Initially things went well. Larry held Rahel in his arms, her cheeks against his heart, and saw the dark tumble down of her hair. He held her as though she was a precious gift. But things went wrong, when they made love. While making love he was offended by her eyes that seemed to have belonged to someone else and watching someone, "Looking out of the window at the sea. At a boat in the river" (19). He could not decode what that look meant. He could not expect to understand what was in Rahel's eyes. He was unable to understand "that the emptiness in one twin was only a version of the quietness in the other. That the two things fitted together. Like stacked spoons. Like familiar lovers' bodies" (20).

Rahel realized within the short time of their marriage that something was lacking in their love relationship. They could not understand each other and decided to divorce. When Rahel returned Ayemenem, she was a divorcee like her mother. But luckily, she was not encumbered with a child, with any

'Millstone' round her neck. She developed a casual attitude to life and did not suffer from the various restrictions generally imposed by the society.

To a large extent Rahel is an emancipated woman. In terms of mother-daughter relationship, we notice that Rahel understands her mother much better than Ammu understanding Mammachi. There is enough evidence in the novel that she shares the agony of her mother, realizes the great injustice and cruelty done to her mother. Ammu has always remained a living presence in her memory.

The novel presents three generations of women-Baby Kochamma and Mammachi, Ammu, and Rahel, and all are suffering in their own way. The novel shows the quest of their own individual identities which finally fuse into one. The novel ends on an optimistic note. Unlovedness and loneliness stalk the twins in both the novels. The binary combination ends in a single entity with the death of Nadege in *AL' Autre Bout de Moi*, and in the imbricate reunion of Estha and Rahel in *The God of Small Things*. Arundhati Roy's portrayal of exploitation and sufferings of women is parallel to Tony Morrison's treatment of black women's suffering. The female characters in the works of both the novelists, suffer from humiliation and exploitation by the elders, parents and society.

Thus Arundhati Roy has dealt about the three generations of women in her novel, *The God of Small Things*. The first generation Mammachi and Baby Kochamma are submissive and accept the male domination. The second generation, Ammu, the protagonist, who raises her voice against a male – chauvinist society utterly fails in her effort. The third generation, Rahel is proves herself a modern rebel and a non-conformist, throughout her life. Thus the three generations of women have been realistic portrayal by Arundhati Roy with great skill.

The major issue of feminism discussed in this novel, is the struggle engaged by women for the establishment of their identity, their economical and sexual freedom. Ammu is a valiant fighter for these causes, though the options open to her in the

male-dominated order are not viable at all. The first generation of women Mammachi and Baby Kochamma represent the generation that submits to the norms of patriarchy. The second generation Ammu pays a heavy price for non-conformity and defiance. The contemporary generation of women is represented by Rahel, who lives throughout the life of a rebel and a non-conformist.

It is fundamentally a novel by a woman, about a woman, observed by the analytical perspective mind of a woman. The novel has elaborated upon the theme of freedom and bondage quite impartially and it meets the expectations of the reading public. The novel has very deeply scrutinized the problems faced by women in the dominancy society. The novel centers on some of the less debated issues like women's deprivation of property rights, of equal educational opportunities, wife beating and scarcity of opportunities.

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