

## Feminist activism of continuity and change in Arundhati Roy's 'The God of Small Things'

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### Abstract:

*Feminism comprises of a number of theories and philosophies dealing with social, cultural and political movements focusing on gender inequalities and equal rights of women. While movements of feminism raged on in the West in the latter half of the twentieth century, one could barely feel the wisp of this revolutionary air as a social or political campaign in India. But one could see the kernels of this crusade within the women of our society, where they rebelled against the shackles laid down by the patriarchal structure which subjugates every right of women, little realising that they were indirectly being a part of the campaign taking place in the West. Through the character of Ammu in Arundhati Roy's debut novel, 'The God of Small Things' I would like to bring to light how these women, living in the rural backdrop of our country are the forerunners of the change in the social and cultural paradigm of our society.*

**Key words:** feminism, patriarchy, education, submission, torture

Feminism is still an illusion in our country with lots of sound and fury. The female identity is, on one hand, worshipped in the form of Goddess' like Kali and Lakshmi, and on the other hand oppressed by dowry and 'sati' and female infanticide. Although the feminist movement has made great leaps and

bounds in the west, in India it is still in its infancy. Feminist activism which started out as a movement to equate men and women by giving them equal respect, remains a far-fetched concept as far as equal respect and position for women in our country is concerned. All citizens in our country are told to regard women and not to do anything derogatory to the dignity of women. Special provisions are made through Five Year Plans in order to strengthen and mobilize this long-submissive section of society. The reality, however, is scary. 'Women still remain objects to be appropriated, possessed and bargained in male domain (Vishnu, 161).' India has moved into the twenty first century but we are still bigoted with practices like female infanticide, dowry deaths and sexual discrimination.

Arundhati Roy's '**The God of Small Things**' is set in 1960s, in a small village Ayemenem, in South Kerala, where not even the embers of feminism, which was burning so furiously in the Western world, seemed to have reached at all. Life in Ayemenem, was deeply embedded in a patriarchal world, and any woman trying to resist it was met with catastrophic fate. The 60s and 70s were the time when the feminist movement gained momentum in the Western world, but in India this movement was very slow to gain ground. The Indian society was riddled not just with class division like the West but also divided by caste, religion, region, race, language and above all gender. Women in all section were accorded the inferior status and relegated to the background in all spheres of life. Arundhati Roy, in her debut novel, '**The God of Small Things**', goes on to prove that we did not need the Western feminist wave in order to bring awareness to the rural Indian women of their conditions and rouse their consciousness to rise against the norms laid down by patriarchy. The embers of such feelings lay within most women, but it was only a few who had the courage to give vent to it and take conscious action to change their situation. Ammu, the protagonist in the novel is one such character. She tries to break the shackles of bondage

laid by patriarchy and leads a futile battle against society. In spite of her defeat, we find her one of the most courageous heroines to lead a revolt.

In the saga of the Ayemenem women, the central character in the novel is Ammu, a tragic figure, for whom, from the very beginning we see that life been very unfair. Right from childhood one finds her engulfed in misery and torment. As a child she was subject to being the object of her father, Pappachi's, fury. Her father was a misogynist and a double faced Janus. 'In her growing years, Ammu had watched her father weave his hideous web. He was charming and urbane with visitors, and stopped just short of fawning on them if they happened to be white. He donated money to orphanages and leprosy clinics. He worked hard on his profile as a sophisticated, generous, moral man. But when alone with his wife and daughter, he turned into a monstrous, suspicious bully, with a streak of vicious cunning. They were beaten, humiliated and made to suffer 'the envy of friends and relations for having such a wonderful husband and father.'(TGOST,180).

Pappachi's exploitation, ill-treatment and his oppression of his wife and daughter is principally founded on the fact that he is well aware that his wife and daughter need his protection and can never question his power. In India, the traditional patriarchal structure prevailed, where women were controlled with a militant aggressiveness and assertiveness. 'Feminism in India struggles against patriarchal society in which women face oppressive gender restriction (Lowen, 2008). Both, Ammu and Mammachi had endured cold winter nights in Delhi hiding in the mehndi hedge around their house (in case people from Good Families saw them) because Pappachi had come back from work out of sorts, and beaten them both and driven them out of their home.'(TGOST,180-181). As they belonged to 'a Good Family' they could not let anybody else know about the beast that Pappachi would turn into when he was alone at home. All they could do is secretly and silently bear the brunt of his anger

and fury and patiently wait for the anger to subside so that they could go back into the house and carry on with their work.

In a house where love and happiness had been denied to the young child, we find Ammu transferring her love and possessiveness to the few things she owned. One of them was a new pair of black gumboots that she possessed. Ammu was about nine years old when one night, hiding as usual behind the hedge with her mother, she '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, he tore down curtains, kicked furniture and smashed a table lamp. An hour after the lights went out, disdaining Mammachi's pleading, little Ammu went back into the house through a ventilator to rescue her new gumboots that she loved more than anything else. She put them in a paper bag and crept back into the drawing room when the lights were suddenly switched on.' (TGOST,181) It is ironical that a little girl would take such risks in order to save a pair of gumboots from the wrath of a monster father. Most girls of that age usually have a doll or a teddy bear to which they get emotionally attached. Here we find that Ammu did not have any of these little pleasures. Even as a child, apart from the basic essentials, there was nothing more given to her. So, all she could hold on to, was those basic possessions that she could call her own. The risk she takes in order to protect her favourite gumboots gives us an insight into her protective nature, where she would face any trials and travails in order to protect those whom she loved. Later in life we see those very characteristics, when she tries to shield her children from the harshness of the world around. And again, when Velutha is falsely accused, she defies both family and society in order to protect him.

But Fate always seems to have her icy claws around Ammu perennially. Every time she tries to protect something she loves, she fails miserably. When she is caught by her father sneaking out with her gumboots, he caught her and flogged her

with his ivory-handled riding crop. Ammu endured it without tears. 'When he finished beating her he made her he made her bring him Mammachi's pinking shears from her sewing cupboard.'(TGOST, 181) Then he took her mother's pink shears and shred the gumboots into strips. 'When the last strip of rubber had rippled to the floor, her father looked at her with cold, flat eyes, and rocked and rocked and rocked. Surrounded by a sea of twisting, rubber snakes.'(TGOST, 181) It was this kind of cold, calculating cruelty that she learned to live with as she grew up. Says Meena Usmani in her article "**Violence against Women**": The women have frequently been ruthlessly exploited in our society and the problem is growing day by day. The case of eve teasing, sexual harassment, abduction, sati, rape and wife battering in public and at the workplace etc. have been more regularly reported since the 1960s and early 1970s. The issue of violence against women had become public problem as women are discriminated at work, home and denied their due in every field. The constitution of India promises freedom, equality, opportunity and protection to women and give them several rights. In spite of that they enjoy an unequal status (13).

Education was not considered a priority for women in the eighteenth and nineteenth century in the West. It remains a sad fact that, even today as we move into the twenty first century, education for girls is not considered a top priority in most Indian families. Roy brings out this shameful fact in her novel '**The God of Small Things**'. Though Ammu wanted to continue her studies, she was denied further education as she was a female. By the time she finished schooling her father retired and came to live in Ayemenem. She wanted to go to college, but Pappachi insisted that college education was unnecessary expense for a girl. On the other hand, her brother, Chacko, was sent to Oxford for higher studies. Ironically, Mammachi even pawned her jewellery in secret to support

Chacko in England, but she did not give an inch of support to her daughter's wish to study further.

In the traditional Indian society, if the daughter was not given education, it was the duty of the parents to get her married. Here too, Ammu was deprived, as her father did not have enough money to raise a suitable dowry (TGOST, 38) and so she did not get any suitable proposal. It was almost as if they did not want to spend any money on her. She was expected to stay at home and help her mother with the household work till suitable proposal came within those constraints. Ammu yearned to escape from Ayemenem and living with her tyrannical and ill-tempered father.

The chance to finally escape from the tormented and tortuous life came when Ammu's father agreed to send her to Calcutta to spend a few days with a distant aunt. It was in Calcutta that Ammu met her future husband. He proposed to Ammu five days after they first met. Ammu didn't 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. She wrote to her parents informing them of her decision. They didn't reply.'(TGOST,39 )

But not long into marriage Ammu realizes that she has jumped straight from the frying pan into the fire. She found history repeating itself. The husband turned out to be an alcoholic who would often abuse his wife. Her father had tortured her mother and now her husband tortured her. Marriage seemed to include husbands' beating wives. Even as she lay on the table giving birth to her kids, her husband was lying in a drunken stupor in the hospital's sofa. She continued to bear this stoically as she believed that there was no choice for her. But the last straw came when her husband asked her to 'entertain' his English boss, Hollick, in order to save his job. He 'began to badger her about helping with his transfer. This fell into a pattern. Drunken violence followed by post-drunken badgering.'(TGOST,42) For Ammu's husband, she was just

another commodity to be used, to serve his purpose. When she refuses, her husband only intensifies his physical and mental torture towards her. It was only when the violence began to include the children that she took the extreme step of leaving him to return to Ayemenem, the very place that she had tried to run away in the beginning. "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 she had two young children. And no more dreams.'(TGOST,42)

Life back in Ayemenem was no better than Ammu could hope for - except for the fact that she did not have to endure her husband's physical torture anymore. She found her parents indifferent to her and her children. It was the miserable condition of two children that she found most difficult to bear. Ammu loved her children, but their wide-eyed vulnerability, and willingness to love people who didn't love them, exasperated her and sometimes made her want to hurt them – just as an education, a protection.'(TGOST,43). She watched over her children fiercely and protectively. She did reprimand her children when needed but was quicker to take offence on their behalf. Her watchfulness and fear for her children made her taunt and tense. She was aware that she had nowhere else to go. She was stuck in Ayemenem.

Within few months of her coming back, Ammu realized that though she lived in her parents' house with her parents and brother, she had no 'Locus Standi' thanks to the wonderful male chauvinistic society she lived in. She was made aware of her position by almost everyone, more severely by Baby Kochamma who '...subscribed wholeheartedly to the community 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.'(TGOST,45-46)

Her brother, Chacko, treated Ammu and her kids cordially, but did not let her forget her position, especially when it came to money and property. 'What's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine.' (TGOST,57) he told her. Although Ammu worked equally hard in the pickle factory, he referred to it as 'my factory, my pickle and jams' when dealing with government inspectors. He told the kids that their mother did not have any 'Locust Stand I' in the family property or factory. He even goes on to tell Ammu that she and the kids '...were millstones around his neck'(TGOST,85), without a thought of how it might affect the mind of the young children sitting at the back seat of the Plymouth.

It is not the male folk alone that help to perpetrate her tragedy. It is worth considering how women act as agents of this society to undo another woman. Even women who have been deprived in their life cannot disturb the society in the least, but choose to come down with all the unspent force of their frustration on another helpless woman.(Roy,54)

One would expect her mother to be compassionate and sympathetic towards her. After all they had experienced the torment and torture at the hands of Pappachi together. They had spent many evenings and nights behind the Mehendi bush after being beaten and thrown out of the house. 'An important expansion of nurturing and care-giving is the woman-woman dyad, also called female bonding. It challenges the male-centred interpretation of female psychological development and offers new paradigms to contextualize female friendship'. (Singh,2007). But Mammachi turns out to be a typical Indian mother who cares only for her son. All her womanly and motherly emotions are deposited in her son, Chacko. There is barely any space for Ammu within her feelings. The son is the one, who will carry on the family lineage and so, only he is to be given any importance. A girl is only a burden to be relieved of, by getting her married. One can see this discrimination in the treatment accorded to Chacko and Ammu by their own parents.



Although the brother and sister had just a few years of difference between them, the treatment meted out were poles apart. While Ammu was also subjected to the torture by her father along with her mother, her brother seemed to have escaped his wrath. While Chacko was sent to Oxford for further studies, she was denied even college education as it would be a wasteful expenditure on a woman. Both of them had failed marriages and were divorced, but she was condemned for returning home as a divorcee. A daughter estranged from her husband is made to feel unwanted in her parents' home whereas an estranged son not only receives a warm welcome, he remains the rightful inheritor of the family fortune. Even when it comes to fulfilling the base physical needs, Chacko is allowed to have all the illicit relationships he wants with the pretty women from his factory. Profligacy in him is encouraged in the name of 'Man's needs'. Chacko's 'manly needs' are not only overlooked but also made convenient by his mother. Mammachi has a back entrance built in his room to ensure the privacy of his 'manly needs'. But when Ammu has an illicit relationship with Velutha, a worker from the factory, havoc is let loose and she and the children are made to pay heavily for it. A son can have 'Manly needs' but such a behavior in daughter decrees torture. What is desired and facilitated in case of a man is branded blasphemous and sinful in case of a girl. The scales are never even, rather heavily tipped in favour of men in this society. It is indeed sad that her mother, who too had to face intolerable abuse at the hands of her husband, is not able to understand or empathize with her daughter. We do not find any traces of compassion that she feels for her daughter's unfortunate position. This discrimination spills over even to their children. The welcome, love and affection showered by Mammachi on Sophie, Chacko's daughter by marriage to Margaret, a white woman, far exceeds any affection exhibited towards her daughter's children.

Very often we find that tension rises from the female characters' struggle against conventions. Thus we find that, in spite of her suppressed, truncated upbringing and marriage, Ammu did not turn into a completely docile, intimidated, subservient woman. Somewhere between her childhood, marriage and life as a single mother, she had developed a mulish, reckless streak 'that develops in Someone Small who had been bullied all their lives by Someone Big. Bitter childhood experiences have created rough edges of a rebel in her. She did exactly nothing to avoid quarrels and confrontations. In fact, it could be argued that she sought them out, perhaps even enjoyed them.'(TGOST,181-2)

There were occasional days when this wild streak overtook her. She would listen to the songs that she loved on the radio and feel something stirring within her. 'A liquid ache spread under her skin, and she walked out of the world like a witch, to a better, happier place. On days like this, there was something restless and untamed about her. As though she had temporarily set aside the morality of motherhood and divorcehood. Even her walk changed from a safe mother-walk to another wilder sort of walk. She wore flowers in her hair and carried magic secrets in her eyes. She spoke to no one. She spent hours on the riverbank with her little plastic transistor shaped like a tangerine. She smoked cigarettes and had midnight swims.'(TGOST,44). On such days everyone was a little wary of her. For them she was a woman who was already damned and therefore very little to lose, and hence could be very dangerous. So on days that the radio played Ammu's songs, everyone avoided her and let her be. That would be the best. 'Her women learn to think and act independently and take on the role of the protector but in the process do not sacrifice their feminine qualities (Adhikari,43).'

Probably, it was this wild streak that made her go boldly ahead and meet her lover in secret at night. In Velutha, she not only saw her childhood friend, but also the fiery spirits of

protests which she herself wanted to articulate but could not. Velutha was probably the only man in Ayemenam who loved her children. Her children too were at ease with him and loved him more than anyone else, except for their mother. When Ammu suddenly realises her love for Velutha, she does not hesitate to enter into an illicit relationship with him 'It is perhaps natural that Ammu with her trodden youth, oppressed existence and frustrated dreams should drift towards Velutha, a paravan, who dared to be so un-paravan like and transgress the 'Love-Laws', a representative of the oppressed and marginalized, and the two tried to seek solace in each other's warmth (Roy,58).'

When the affair is revealed to Ammu's mother, Mammachi, who until now was seen as an open minded woman with regards to her son's affairs, she does a complete renegation of her principles on sexual needs. She cannot bear the thought of her daughter having an affair with a Paravan. She had tolerance of 'Men's Needs' as far as her son was concerned. But when it came to her daughter, it became the 'fuel for her unmanageable fury ...Her daughter had defiled generations of breeding and brought the family to its knees. 'For generations to come, *for ever* now, people would point at them at weddings and funerals. At baptisms and birthday parties. They'd nudge and whisper. It was all finished now.'(TGOST, 258)

Baby Kochamma, was the Machivellian aunt, who had always jealously envied Ammu for daring to live life on her terms, which she herself, had never the courage to do, takes advantage of the situation. She uses all within her power to wreak havoc on both Ammu and Velutha, both whom she hated with the bottom of her heart. She conjures and provides the plan which goes on to take the lives of both, Ammu and Velutha and scar the lives of the twins, Estha and Rahel, forever. Baby Kochamma goes to the police station to level false charges against Velutha. Velutha is beaten to pulp by the police and Ammu is locked up by the family.

But, Ammu was not a person to give in without a fight, she was not a person who could be beaten into submission. She could not bear the thought that the only person who loved her in the world is suffering due to false accusation by her family. So she went to the police station to straighten the records. When Baby Kochama heard about Ammu's visit to the police station, she was terrified. She had gambled on the assumption that Ammu would never publically admit to her relationship with Velutha, because, according to her that would tantamount to destroying herself and her children. But she had not taken the 'Unsafe Edge' in Ammu into account.(TGOST, 321).

Ammu symbolizes a woman of amazing transgressive power who violates numerous rules of proper behavior and domain. As her predecessors are few she can exist only in a binary world and as an emblem of instability. She was everything what a traditional women in Kerala should not be; she leaves her father's home to marry a man of her own choice, leaves him when he turns abusive, has an affair with a low caste worker and later turns against her family to exonerate him of the false charges levelled against him by her family. Her performance is 'discordant' and 'denaturalized', and thereby serves to 'trouble' the status of the natural itself'. The 'self-less' or humorously 'self-important' woman is the contained woman, one who challenges neither hierarchy nor domain, like Mammachi who is constant, self-denying, earnest and devoted, all attributes that would contribute to social status and stability.

Through Ammu, Roy points out that the struggle for women is not just concerned with the quest for equality but rather encountered with difference and specificity- differences in power, language and meaning; and specificity of the female and of the individual woman and thereby in the process calling into question the position of women itself.

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