

AMMU'S QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

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ABSTRACT

The present paper examines various social factors that make women a victim in Arundhati Roy's debut novel *The God of Small Things* (1996). It primarily tries to focus on the subject of violence against women vis-à-vis gender issues in the society. It raises some of the burning problems related to gender issues and the existing laws and rights of women. It is a narration of the suffering of women seen through the eyes of a woman. Here we observe the account of unhappiness, humiliation and brutal treatment of Ammu, Mammachi Baby Kochamma and Rahel..

In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy deals with feminism and gender discrimination in a male dominated patriarchal society where women have a very little share in the total happiness of the family. From cradle to grave, she has to face all kinds of hardships, and gender discrimination to establish her individuality. The social structure of an average Indian woman is full of many ups and downs, ifs and buts. It can be very clearly seen in some of the women characters like Ammu, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, Rahel and Margaret Kochamma, how a self-effacing, subaltern, subjugated, dominated and dwarfed woman changes to independent, autonomous woman of selfhood who can also contribute equally in the holistic development of the society as a person in her own right. In the novel *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy portrays three generations of a Kerala Syrian Christian family. Rahel and Estha, the protagonists, belong to the youngest generation. Their mother Ammu and uncle Chacko belong to the preceding generation and their grandfather and grandmother (Pappachi and Mammachi) belong to the oldest generation. Apart from them, there is Baby Kochamma their grand aunt who has lived with all the three generations. While reading the novel, one can see and notice the changing attitudes from generation to generation.

Ammu exemplifies the type of woman who is a victim of the conventional society which does not allow a woman to hold her own and considers the issue of identity as completely contrary to nature, reason and common sense. She experiences a fragmented identity, one that creates much confusion in the depth of subjectivity. Yet "For all women, as for men, the need for self-fulfillment, autonomy, self-realisation, independence, self-actualization is as important as the sexual need with as serious consequences when it is thwarted" (Friedan 9). She struggles from the beginning to the end to establish her own identity and faces all hardships in the male dominated patriarchal society. The tragic tale of Ammu begins her very childhood. A child is supposed to lead a life free from the encroachments of experience. The child's world is the world of innocence, ignorance and simplicity. But Ammu's childhood is not free from torments and her childhood is suffused with discontent and disappointments. As a little girl, Ammu had to endure some unbearable nightmarish experiences. She saw with her open eyes the cruelty of her father Pappachi, who used to beat her and her mother Mammachi with a brass-vase. She received a step motherly treatment like the thousands of other women in the country who due to gender bias are devoid of the very basics of life.

Ammu too is devoid of higher education because of her father thought that college education corrupts a woman. Ammu was not entitled to pursue higher studies and she should be content with school education. As such, she was deprived of higher education. This shows the portrayal of the women of the society who find nothing but a step motherly treatment in a male dominated society. Ammu started facing hardships at a very young age, Ammu's life came to a screeching halt. As days passed by, Ammu became a virtual social outcaste alienated from her home, family and society. She was left with no one to support her. She faced all hardships individually and tried to establish her identity. Ammu was slowly moving in a forbidden direction. She never got love from any other members of the family and naturally she had been a little unkind to her own children. Chacko, her brother and Baby Kochamma, her aunt made use of every opportunity to sideline her, creating an impression that she was an outsider in Ayemenem house. We find a determined woman in Ammu who sheds her 'motherhood' and 'divorce hood' only to establish a connection with Velutha, the untouchable.

The brilliant narration of Ammu's struggle against the male dominated society makes the main story. Since childhood, she had been a victim to the patriarchal value system. It was a very unpleasant childhood. Her father Shri Benaan John Director, Entomology at PUSA Institute, Delhi. He was very charming and generous to others. He donated money to orphanages and leprosy and clinics, but he was very brutal to his own people in his house. Ammu and her mother Mammachi were the easy target of this male chauvinist. In her childhood, Ammu often saw his father beating her mother mercilessly. She had spent many cold nights outside their Delhi house after this kind of heavy beating along with her mother.

As a child, she had learned very quickly to disregard the father bear mother bear stories she was given to read. In her version, father bear beat mother bear with brass vases. Mother bear suffered those beating with mute resignation. 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 public profile as a sophisticated, generous, moral man. But alone with his wife and children he turned into a monstrous, suspicious bully, with a streak of vicious cunning. They were beaten, humiliated and then made to suffer the envy of friends and relations for having such a wonderful husband and father.

After her school education, her father did not want her to continue further. He considered the education of women an “unnecessary expense”. Where as he decided to send his son Chacko to Oxford for higher education. It clearly indicates how our society gives importance to the education of a boy as compared to a girl. It can be termed a kind of human rights violation. So, Ammu had to return to Ayemenem with her father after his retirement. Here in this typical Kerala town, she felt restless. She always wanted to escape. She quite understood that marriage was not possible in her case.

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 her summer with a distant aunt who lived in Calcutta. And here in Calcutta, she met a young Bengali man. He was working in a tea estate. In the words of Mohit K.ROY, Ammu accepted the proposal of a man who she had known so little and for a short time, not because she had really fallen in love with him but simply because, in a fit of desperation. This was better for her than going back to Ayemenem. But she soon realized that she married a wrong man. She became a victim to an alcoholic husband.

Ammu had to tolerate the attack of a drunkard husband. Her husband was even ready to prostitute her to his English boss Mr. Hollick in order to protect his job. But when his husband started beating her twin children then she decided to break off and she came back to Ayemenem as a divorced woman, she was unwelcome to Ayemenem house. She had no right in this house. Her brother Chacko used to say, “ what’s mine is also mine”. She was also humiliated at the hands of her relatives, who came to sympathize on her case. She realized that she had no “Locusts stand I” in her ancestral house. The dismissal view of the patriarchal society is very clear from Baby Kochamma’s regarding Ammu’s status in the house.

As for a divorced daughter, according to Baby Kochamma she had no position at all. And for a divorced daughter from a love marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochamma’s outrage. As for a divorced daughter from an intercommunity love marriage. Baby Kochamma chose to remain quivering silent on the subject.

She found herself in a miserable situation. And here, she met Velutha the male protagonist of the novel and what we learn is: they turned deep lovers of each other. Ammu realized that Velutha was the only person, who really loved her children. She dared to meet Velutha at the haunted house on the river bank. But this was soon found. Their love was considered sinful as Velutha was a paravan and so he was an untouchable. He was targeted and arrested in a false case of Sophie Mol’s death. When Ammu knew this, she rushed to the police station to tell the truth. But inspector Thomas Mathew behaved in a very insulting manner with her. The police inspector’s language and behavior was very offensive.

He started at Ammu’s breasts as he spoke. He said the police knew all they needed to know and that the kottayam Police didn’t take statements from veshyas or their illegitimate children. Ammu said she’d see about that inspector Thomas Mathew came around his desk and approached Ammu with his baton. “If I were you,” he said, “I’d go home quietly”. Then he tapped her breasts with his baton. As though he was choosing mangoes from a basket. Pointing out the ones that he wanted packed and delivered. Inspector Thomas Mathew seemed to know whom he could pick on and whom he couldn’t. Policemen have that instinct.

Ammu is a symbol for all the women, who are subject to many inhuman treatments such as sexual and physical assault, psychological depression etc. they have no place to go. One thing is noteworthy that she always wanted to protect her children until her last breath. Even after Velutha’s death, she wanted to rise above that. Atlast, she became a victim to a caste conscious and male dominated society. Even in her home, she did not get any affection. For instance, Mammachi fulfilled “Man’s need’s of Chacko by secretly arranging women for him through the back door of Ayemenem house. But she considered Ammu’s relation with Velutha a disgrace to their family. This shows that woman often acts as the enemy of another woman. It is very clear from the two characters like Baby Kochamma and Mammachi. Being women, they themselves were victim to male prejudice but they became instrumental to kill Velutha and compel Ammu to die a miserable death. For Ammu, the story of frustration and suffering had no end.

Ammu’s plight brings to the surface many social issues for sensitization like domestic violence against women, right to property of women, right to property of women, abolition of dowry, right to education of girl child, gender discrimination etc. Ammu reminds us the condition of many Indian women, both educated and uneducated, who suffer silently inside their home atrocities by their husbands, in-laws. Many women don’t have any choice but to suffer psychological and physical atrocities. And those who like Ammu tries to raise voice are either silenced by various ways or they are brutally killed by patriarchy system. In this regard, we can take the help of Domestic violence act, 2005 to rescue many women like Ammu, from domestic atrocities, get compensation from husband after divorce and even get their right to parental property after marriage. Ratna kapur describes the restriction imposed on women in the name their safety is questionable.

As the narration of Ammu's story evokes great concern for the safety and welfare of millions of women in India, it will be prudent here to mention various existing laws to protect them. Acts like protection of women from Domestic violence act 2005, The Equal Remuneration Act 1976, The Family courts act 1986 etc. are very helpful for women to protect their rights. In spite of a number of laws, women in 21st century is till not completely secure in our society. We have several instances of death of women due to these atrocities. These things are further strengthened by the recent reporting of honor killing of young women in several parts of India. It is a matter of concern that family members of the victim woman are the perpetrators in these incidents. As a woman herself, Arundhathi Roy has distinctly recorded the suffering of woman in different roles as a daughter, as a wife, as a widow, as a sister and as a lover. Through the character of Ammu, is frantic quest in the novel "The God of Small Things".

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