



# Treatment of Women's Empowerment as a Key Ingredient in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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## Abstract

**Aim:** The present research paper is a humble attempt to find out the elements of women emancipation in the fiction 'The God of Small Things' by Arundhati Roy. The present work manifests several instances of women empowerment in the novel through the portrayal of women characters like Ammu, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, Rahel and Margaret Kochamma. The women characters of this novel struggled hard to attain their freedom and independence in the society. The whole story revolves around the struggles and sufferings of the women characters like Ammu, Rahel and Mammachi etc.

**Methodology and Approach:** The present research paper is based on the novel ‘The God of Small Things’ (2007) by Arundhati Roy as a primary text. It has employed the textual analysis approach to analyze the text of the novel.

**Outcome:** The novel presents many incidents of the marginalization of the women characters like Ammu, Rahel, Mammachi and Margaret Kochamma. Ammu did not surrender to the exploitation of her husband, who wanted her to sleep with his boss. She left him and came back to her home. Rahel too, struggled lonely in the USA, where she had to work on various jobs to earn a living. Mammachi did not oppose her husband directly, but she ran the pickle and jam factory in a smoother manner and got financial independence.

**Conclusion and Suggestion:** The present research paper suggests that the women characters are more powerful than the men characters of the novel, as they struggle against them and make their presence felt. Critics may comment that the women characters of the novel have received pains and sufferings in their family life and sometimes the harassment from their respective husbands. But considering their periods of 1960s and 70s, one can definitely find that the women of this novel were realistically empowered.

**Keywords:** Women empowerment, freedom, intelligent, social acceptance, economic freedom etc.

Arundhati Roy got global recognition after the Booker prize award for her outstanding novel ‘The God of Small Things’ in 1997. This novel had created a keen literary interest in her work. People, who criticized her earlier for the alleged obscenity of the novel, were then reading it, to find out its invisible characteristics. The novel has presented many themes, but women’s empowerment was a significant motif. There are many women characters in the novel e.g. Ammu, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, Rahel and Margaret Kochamma. One thing, which is significant about these women characters, is the freedom, independence and the power that these characters generated in the novel. Critics can comment that the women characters mentioned above had received pains and sufferings in

their family life and sometimes the harassment from their respective husbands, but considering their periods of 1960s and 70s, one can definitely find that the women of this novel were realistically empowered.

Women empowerment means making women powerful to make them capable to decide for themselves, as they are dependent upon the men from the beginning of the civilizations. Professor Yin-Zu Chen of National Taipei University wrote an article named 'Women's Empowerment' in her book 'Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research'. In this article she defined women empowerment in these words. "Women's empowerment as an economic, political and socio cultural process challenges the system of sexual stratification that has resulted in women's subordination and marginalization in order to improve their quality of life." (Chen)

As per the above definition, the women should be liberated from the social bondages and then only, they can move in the process of empowerment. These social bondages are in various forms like economic, political or socio-cultural. After coming out of these restrictions, they will recognize their self worth and importance. Then they will move towards achieving their goals. Here it is necessary to throw light on the social bondages that create hindrance in the path of women's development.

There are following issues/bondages that affect the level of women's empowerment in the society.

#### **(a) Lower Status of Women in the Family**

In Indian society most of the families are combined, where women have a lower status as they keep on working on ordinary jobs like cooking, cleaning the houses and looking after the children and elders. Parents allow their daughters to go out and study. But they hesitate in giving the same freedom to their daughters-in-law. After the marriage, girls are pressured by other women of the family to leave their career and concentrate on family affairs only. Empowerment does not mean neglecting the family responsibility but to make a healthy correlation between career and the family needs.

## (b) Issues in Marriages

Women in Indian society have to make many compromises in their marriages. They do not find the partner of their choice. But they are forced to live in the company of a person with whom they are married, whether they like their husbands or not.

Another issue is the Child marriages, in which the girls are married at a very small age, when they are not developed either emotionally or physically. They have to bear the household responsibilities at an age when they should study and play with their friends. These girls become mothers at a very young age, due to that their health becomes weaker.

In most societies widow marriages are still not permitted in India. It is a big problem, as many young widows have to spend the neglected and lonely life without any support from their life partners.

Dowry system is another cause of big concern in marriages, as many girls are tortured by their in-laws for the unquenchable thirst of dowry. This system makes the girls a liability in Indian society, as their parents always worry about the expenses of their marriages.

Unmatched marriages are also causes of concern in the society, as many worthy young girls are married to unworthy or penniless partners or the partners of higher age.

In Indian society, still one can find the lack of inter-caste marriage. Many people do not prefer such marriages because of the fear of pollution of their blood. Lack of inter-caste marriage creates the limitation of choices. The inter-caste marriages provide greater and varied choices for bride and groom.

In Indian societies the divorce is treated like a taboo, and many women and men are tied to unkind partners. Women have to suffer domestic violence in their lives and they are forced to live the subdued lives.

### (c) Lack of Access to Education and Health Facilities

Women have to face many obstacles in society, because of the lack of education and health facilities. Girls are not permitted to move away from their homes for higher studies or preparations of various competitive exams, as their parents fear for their safety. Some parents do not encourage their daughters for higher education, as they will not benefit them. They invest on the education of their sons at the cost of their daughters.

Indian women have a tendency to conceal their sickness, as they are made to feel less significant since their childhood. If the sickness is related to menstrual cycles, then they do not disclose it to their parents. Such negligence leads to infertility and other types of incurable diseases. Many TV serials are also the partners in the crime, as they always show the image of an obedient daughter-in-law, who sacrifices her health, wealth and everything for the welfare of her family. Devika Reshma, a student of Symbiosis Law School has raised the issue of women's limitation through the TV shows, in her article '*Feminism and the Portrayal of Women in Indian Soap Operas*' in these words. "The basic theme that runs across all these TV Operas is the traditional male chauvinism, where women do not aim for anything more than caring husband, loving children and the so-called perfect life." (Devika)

In the novel one can find that women characters suffer a lot through the hands of the society and the patriarchal mindset, yet they fight against them to get some concessions from the society. It shows that the women of the novel are empowered up to a great extent. The women characters of the novel like Mammachi, Ammu and Rahel have a lot of freedom in the novel, as they have access to education, freedom to choose their life partners and to divorce them in case of unkind treatment from their spouses. Such rights were not accessible by Indian women of 1960-70. One can find out the elements of women empowerment in the novel after going through the deeper descriptions of the women characters of the present novel. The major women characters of the novel are Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, Ammu, Rahel and Margaret Kochamma.

**(a) Mammachi**

Mammachi was the wife of Pappachi and she was 17 years younger to him. She had two children Cacko and Ammu. Her husband Pappachi was a cruel and jealous fellow, who used to torture her and her daughter. But still she kept on increasing her abilities. After the retirement of her husband she started a pickle and jam factory. Her husband opposed this idea, as he could not tolerate her growing in her life. But still she continued her efforts and ran the factory well. In this manner she became a financially independent woman. She provided the jobs to the other women of nearby villages. One can find that she was a truly empowered woman who not only got financial freedom for herself but also provided the same to other women by providing them jobs in her factory. At this argument a curious reader may question the validity of the idea of women empowerment in her perspective, but one should understand that the biggest obstacle in the field of women's development is the financial dependency of women on their male counterparts. Mammachi had risen above this obstacle and reached a position to help other women workers of her factory to make them financially independent. This is her most important quality that qualifies her as an empowered woman. Research scholar SK Ibrahim writes in his research paper 'Heart of Darkness in Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things' published in an international journal named 'IJELLH', praises the spirit of empowerment of Mammachi in following words.

Mammachi's dogged determination to continue the activities of the pickle factory, suggests her rebellion against total subordination. Her entry into the business world, the man's world forbidden for women, is a clear indication of the power she enjoys.(IJELLH)

So, one can make out with these arguments that Mammachi was truly an empowered woman, who had struggled against all the difficulties in the society to step up the ladder of development.

**(b) Baby Kochamma**

Although she is the antagonist of the novel who tries to suppress the weaker characters of the novel, yet she also reflects the glimpse of women empowerment. Baby Kochamma failed in her love with Father Mulligan, a handsome Irish Monk. Despite following him in Madras, she could not get closer to him. Her father came to Madras and brought her back to Ayemenem. After returning from there she was sent to University of Rochester in America by her father, to study. She came back from there after two years with a diploma in Ornamental Gardening. One can find out that she was also an empowered woman, as she was well supported by her father for studying abroad. She had the freedom to change her faith to Roman Catholic. She has been free to fulfill her wishes since her childhood. However she had taken the undue advantage of the freedom she got in her house and became a jealous woman, who tried to suppress the weaker fellows like Ammu, Velutha and the twins Estha and Rahel. But still nobody can deny the fact that she was herself an empowered woman. Although the empowerment she got in her life was not achieved by her but it was facilitated by her parents.

**(c) Ammu**

Ammu was a marginalized woman, as she had to suffer in her life because of the lack of support from her family members. In spite of the adverse conditions faced by her, she reflects the traits of women empowerment. She fell in love with Baba and married him to escape the suppressing atmosphere of her family. After the marriage she started living with Baba in Assam at a tea estate as an honorable lady of high class. Her inner desire propelled her to move out of the family and marry a non Christian man. Her marriage life did not last long as her husband developed the habit of drinking, and started beating her frequently. Her husband forced her to sleep with his manager to save his job. She did not tolerate it and divorced her husband. She came back to her hometown Ayemenem. At the Ayemenem, she was not a welcome member, yet her family gave her the roof to live in spite of her failed love

affair. She dared to make a love affair to a low caste Velutha, although it would be inappropriate to call it empowerment but one can call it freedom. She loved her children and kept herself strong before them so that they may not feel isolated in absence of their father. After being expelled from her home she started doing jobs and had the plans to raise her children herself after getting a good job. She meets a tragic death in a lonely and deserted state. Although she deserved a better life, she got only disappointment from her fate.

Ammu had also got her share of freedom from her family, as she was allowed to have the love marriage with a non Christian man. She herself was a very courageous woman as she refused to sleep with the tea estate manager in spite of being forced by her husband. She is called courageous because she was alone in Assam where her own husband was against her. Still she raised her voice against the injustice. She had the moral power to divorce her husband despite having two small children to look after. When she had to leave her family after the tragedy, she started working to earn her livelihood. It shows that she was a self reliant and an independent woman, who had the courage to look after her children alone. If she had lived longer, she might have provided great care to her children and their life might not have been spoiled the way one found in the novel. So Ammu can be termed as an empowered woman, as she struggled hard to come off the tragedies she faced in her life.

#### **(d) Rahel**

Rahel and Esthappen are the two main characters of the novel. They were so close to each-other that it was impossible to exclude one from the other. Both these children were the dizygotic twins, as they were born from two separate eggs that were fertilized by two separate sperms. Rahel is the more vocal of the twins, as she does not hesitate in putting her opinions. She is a very strong character, as she survives lonely in a very difficult and unsupportive atmosphere. She maintained her calm during the last rites of her mother. She went to study in Delhi, where she married an American Larry McCaslin and moved to the USA with him. But their marriage did not last long and she was divorced by her husband. After this incident she became lonely in a foreign country. Ms. Roy mentioned her



loneliness and failed marriage in these lines in her present novel. "Rahel grew up without a brief. Without anybody to arrange a marriage for her. Without anybody who would pay for her a dowry and therefore without an obligatory husband looming on her horizon." (P 17)

But she did not break and kept on struggling at various jobs to earn her living. She could have returned to Ayemenem, but she had great self respect for herself. So, she did not come back as she might have faced humiliation at home. She came back to Ayemenem only after hearing the news of Estha's return. Like a person of stronger will, she did not care what other people like Baby Kochamma and Comrade Pillai tell about her. She had the guts to accept the realities of life so she revealed the news of her divorce from her husband, to Comrade Pillai. She had a strong will that helped her to look after herself well whether in the USA or in Ayemenem, while her twin brother Estha was a weaker character, as he went into a shell of extreme silence. He could not bear the pains of his life in similar circumstances.

One can find out from the above arguments that Rahel was an empowered girl since her youth. She faced the tricky woman Baby Kochamma in her home after the tragic death of her mother, Ammu. She was an educated and a self sufficient girl, who did not bother before marrying an American. Further, she went abroad with him without any hesitation. After the divorce from her husband, she kept her courage and determination, as she worked in various positions and at various jobs to earn her livelihood. Sometimes she had to work in an unsupportive atmosphere among the uncultured people, but she did not give up and kept on struggling with her life. She returned to Ayemenem to look after her brother Estha, who was an inseparable part of her life. One can find out from the above incidents that Rahel was truly an empowered woman.

**(e) Margaret Kochamma**

She had a smaller presence in the story, yet her role was significant as Chacko's ex-wife and mother of Sophie Mol. Her union with Chacko resulted in a love marriage, which was not supported by her parents. After their marriage, Chacko did not take any responsibilities of the family. He did not support her financially or emotionally. He became a lethargic person, who did not have a job. After the birth of their daughter, Margaret decided to find a better partner for her, who could support her and Sophie Mol. So, she divorced Chacko and married Joe. It was her intelligent choice. She was a responsible and well behaved person as she used to write letters to Chacko about the wellbeing of his daughter Sophie Mol. Sophie joined the same school where her daughter studied, so that she could care for her. After the tragic death of her husband Joe, she kept her patience. Further, she continued to send Sophie to school, so that she might be engaged in her routine work. It worked well for her as Sophie did not feel the deeper pain of losing her father Joe. At Ayemenem also, she won the heart of the family members by her behavior. She met with family members like Mammachi, Ammu and her children gently and paid proper respect to them. After the death of Sophie, she was shattered, so in the rage of the moment, she slapped Est. But later on she wrote a letter of apology to Ammu, repenting of her rude behavior to Estha.

Margaret was an ideal character of the novel, as she did only the right things in her life. She had a solid reason for leaving Chacko and marrying Joe. But she never tried to separate Sophie from Chacko and kept him informed about her wellbeing through the letters. She was a responsible person as she kept on working hard to run her family, when Chacko did not do a job. Because of her magnificent behavior Chacko kept on respecting her, even after their divorce. These attributes show her kindness and empathy for others. She continued going to school, even after the death of her husband so that she may relieve the pain of her daughter and herself. It shows her sense of empowerment and love for her child. Her apology letter to Ammu, repenting her rude behavior to Estha, shows the kindness and the empathy of her heart.

If one compares her to other women characters of the story, he will find that she was a far generous and a faultless person. Other female characters like Mammachi, Baby, Ammu or Rahel are not kind or sensible like her. These arguments show that she was a financially independent person, a kind and generous lady and a sensible person who cares for the feelings of others. So, one can conclude that Margaret Kochamma was the most influential and empowered woman of the novel.

After going through the character sketches of these women, one can find out that they represented a league of empowered women, who could bear the sufferings from the society but they did not compromise with their respect and freedom. Ammu could have accepted the immoral proposal of her husband, if she had been a weaker character. Mammachi could have stopped her pickle factory to keep her husband Mammachi satisfied. Margaret might have been drowned in the sea of despair after the death of her husband and daughter, but she had chosen to face life. These examples of exemplary courage show that the women characters of the present fiction are highly empowered.

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