



Exploring Feminist Themes in Indian Women's Novels: An Analysis of "The God of Small Things"

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Abstract

This paper delves into the portrayal of feminist issues in Indian women's literature, with a particular emphasis on Arundhati Roy's renowned novel "The God of Small Things." Through an exploration of the novel's characters, narrative, and themes, this study investigates how Roy addresses patriarchal structures, gender inequality, sexuality, and agency within the Indian societal context. Drawing upon feminist literary criticism and postcolonial theory, this paper highlights the significance of "The God of Small Things" as a seminal work in Indian women's literature, offering nuanced insights into the complexities of gender and power dynamics.

Keywords: Indian women's literature, feminism, patriarchal structures, gender inequality

Introduction

Arundhati Roy is one of the brightest writers in the English-language Indian fiction field. On November 24, 1961, she was born in Meghalaya, India. Her first book, *The God of Small Things*, is a semi-autobiographical work. For the book *The God of Small Things*, she won the 1997 Booker Prize. She was the first Indian woman to get this honor. She received the Sahitya Akademi Award in January 2006. Her understanding of current social and political issues as an Indian English writer is evident in a multitude of articles, interviews, and books. Many ingenious readers of the book have called *The God of Small Things* an exceptional work of imaginative art.

Indian women's literature serves as a fertile ground for the exploration of feminist issues and the interrogation of traditional gender norms. This paper aims to examine the representation of feminist themes in Indian women's novels, focusing specifically on Arundhati Roy's "The God of Small Things." The novel has garnered international acclaim for its compelling narrative and poignant exploration of familial, social, and political dynamics in Kerala, India.

In "The God of Small Things," Arundhati Roy doesn't just depict reality; she breathes life into it. Through her unique storytelling, Roy captures her diverse experiences of Indian life, presenting them through her personal perspectives and innovative narrative techniques. She observes the social and political landscape of South India with a wry detachment, yet she meticulously portrays every detail of life around her, revealing truths that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Roy's depiction of women's struggles in South India forces us to confront the harsh reality that entrenched social norms prevent women from asserting themselves as individuals capable of effecting change. Chandra Talpade Mohanty declares, "the assumption of women as an already constituted coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location, implies a notion of gender or sexual difference or even patriarchy which can be applied universally and cross-culturally". (Mohanty, qtd in *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* 1994)

The oppression of women begins within the family unit and persists through generations. Women are denied the opportunity to express themselves; they are marginalized, sympathized with, and belittled by their male counterparts.

Roy does not present her female characters as ideal ones. She is neither exploited by the man nor devastated by the customs in the society. Mammachi is the wife of Pappachi, an entomologist. She has been a silent sufferer from the beginning of her marriage life. Though she is not frustrated in love like Baby but she is an unhappy character. She is like a doll in the hands of Pappachi. Her husband has a very poor opinion about her. In the beginning 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”(p:5)

Mammachi's unhappy and dissatisfied matrimonial life offers the reader another narrative of woe. She is seventeen years younger than her husband. He is a well-known entomologist as well as a guy of respect in society. He is an extremely envious spouse. Mammachi is taking violin lessons. When her teacher compliments her, he becomes upset and ends the lesson quickly. He strikes Mammachi with a brass flower vase every night. When Pappachi beat Mammachi with a brass vase one day, Chacko, who was visiting Ayemenem for the summer, walked Pappachi to his room and twisted his hand back. Pappachi was so enraged by this incident that he never spoke to Mammachi again or asked for her assistance.

Through an analysis of Roy's portrayal of characters, relationships, and societal structures, this study seeks to illuminate how "The God of Small Things" engages with feminist concerns within the Indian milieu.

Feminist Themes in "The God of Small Things"

Patriarchal Structures:

The novel critically examines the patriarchal norms that permeate society, particularly within the Syrian Christian community in Kerala. Roy adeptly highlights how patriarchy constrains women's lives and perpetuates inequality.

In traditional joint families, there exists a neat structure where some women find themselves in positions of authority, wielding greater power over others. However, this intricate setup often conceals numerous tales of personal tragedies endured by women who are unfairly positioned. Their unequal status leads to immense misery, suffering, and hardship, compelling them to endure the oppressive system with a sense of religious resignation and personal sacrifice. The novel illustrates the tragic destinies of women in contemporary South India, whose hardships stem from their upbringing marked by discrimination and persist throughout their lives. The suppression of women originates within their own homes and is a consequence of familial and societal mechanisms that have developed over centuries in traditional Indian culture.

The novelist has presented how the women suffered due to gender discrimination, inequality and deprived of the access to work or education compared to men. The story has been portrayed in three generations by revealing the life story of Ammu, Mammachi, and Rahel to discuss the struggles that they faced in the male-dominated society (Al-Qudaeri& Islam, 2011).

Characters like Ammu and Baby Kochamma navigate the oppressive dictates of patriarchy, which dictate their roles, behaviors, and aspirations. Ammu's defiance of societal norms, especially in her relationship with Velutha, serves as a challenge to traditional gender roles, emphasizing the subversive potential of female agency.

Gender Inequality:

Roy vividly portrays the gender disparities prevalent in Indian society, ranging from unequal access to education and employment opportunities to the devaluation of women's labor within the domestic sphere. The novel's exploration of gendered power dynamics within families, as evidenced by the treatment of female protagonists such as Ammu and Baby Kochamma, sheds light on the marginalization and silencing of women within patriarchal structures.

Susan Stanford Friedman's excellent essay, "Feminism, State Fiction and Violence: Gender, Geopolitics, and Transnationalism" explains the hypocrisy of Mammachi of her son and daughter. Mammachi implements the rules that govern her own restricted existence. She hinders Ammu and Rahel, yet praises Chacko. She refuses to acknowledge that her hateful insecurities dictate her emotions and expressions towards her female relatives. She is hardly aware that she had already abandoned all her personal convictions and freedom, slipping into the mould of traditional family set-up.

Roy's portrayal of female agency underscores the significance of individual autonomy and self-determination in the pursuit of gender equality and social justice.

Sexuality and Social Stigma:

"The God of Small Things" confronts societal taboos surrounding female sexuality, particularly through Ammu's romantic involvement with Velutha, a man from a lower caste. Roy exposes the hypocrisy and double standards inherent in society's regulation of women's sexual autonomy.

The stigma attached to Ammu's relationship with Velutha reflects the intersection of caste, class, and gender, highlighting the complexities of identity and belonging in Indian society. The intense hostility towards the Untouchables becomes particularly evident in the relationship between Ammu and Velutha, sparking widespread moral condemnation. Interestingly, while Chako's affairs with lower-caste women are dismissed as mere "Men's Needs," the same behavior elicits moral outrage in Ammu's case. This discrepancy highlights the double standard of morality prevalent in traditional Indian families. Men are granted more leniency and freedom, while the family's reputation hinges on the flawless moral conduct of women. Thus, men enjoy privileges while women bear the burden of societal expectations.

Ng Shing Yi, a Singapore writer, wrote in the Quarterly Literary Review, "Peripheral Beings and Loss in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*" states "The God of Small Things is a novel that carries shades of incipient socialism and feminism, the postcolonial condition is reinforced by the added drawback of being an untouchable or a woman, as Velutha, Ammu. ...are, their marginality is so acute that leitmotifs of absence and loss accompany them in the novel".

Agency and Resistance:

Despite the constraints placed upon them, the female characters in "The God of Small Things" exhibit resilience and defiance in various forms. Whether through acts of rebellion, subtle acts of resistance, or moments of quiet subversion, these women assert their agency and challenge patriarchal norms.

In "The God of Small Things," Arundhati Roy vividly depicts instances where female characters assert their agency and resist patriarchal constraints. One notable example is Ammu, who defies societal expectations by pursuing a romantic relationship with Velutha, despite knowing the consequences of their union (Roy, 1997). Despite the risks involved, Ammu refuses to conform to the societal norms that dictate whom she should love and instead chooses to follow her own desires.

Another example of female resistance can be seen in Baby Kochamma's manipulation and exploitation of gender roles to maintain power and control within the household (Roy, 1997). Despite being constrained by her gender, Baby Kochamma uses her cunning and intelligence to manipulate situations to her advantage, demonstrating a form of resistance against the patriarchal structures that seek to confine her.

Furthermore, Roy portrays the character of Rahel as someone who rebels against the expectations placed upon her as a woman (Roy, 1997). Rahel refuses to conform to traditional gender roles and expectations, instead choosing to forge her own path and assert her independence.

These examples illustrate how Roy's female characters in "The God of Small Things" exhibit resilience and defiance in the face of patriarchal norms. Their actions highlight the importance of individual autonomy and self-determination in challenging gender inequality and advocating for social justice. (Roy, 1997).

Conclusion:

"The God of Small Things" serves as a testament to the potency of Indian women's literature in addressing feminist issues and amplifying women's voices. Through its vivid portrayal of characters and their struggles within the patriarchal landscape of Kerala, Arundhati Roy's novel offers a poignant critique of gender inequality while also celebrating the resilience and agency of women. As a seminal work in Indian women's literature, "The God of Small Things" continues to resonate with readers worldwide, sparking dialogues about feminism, identity, and social change.

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