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Ammu's Lugubrious Tale of Alienation in Roy's Man Booker Novel

Varun Gulati, M.A., M. Phil., Ph.D. (Thesis Submitted)

Alienation

“Alienation” is an intermediate stage and is not the end of cognitive or psychic process. Today, the word “alienation” has become an important word and almost all the contemporary authors seem to delight in finding ever different uses for it. Its transmutations have moved from the factory floor to other realms of life, ranging from mass culture to domestic labour. It informs our understanding of such diverse moments and realms as communities, identities, prejudices, popular culture, everyday life and speech and even the nature of transcendence.

“Alienation” is a term which most people understand in terms of their acquaintance with the writings of certain philosophers, psychologists and sociologists who coined the term and applied it in different ways. However, its transmutations and the emergent revolutions in the contemporary world have given a new credence and life to the concept in which old and modern discourses are replaced with post-modern perspectives.

The word *lugubrious* refers to a bundle of features: “mournful, dismal, or gloomy, especially in an affected, exaggerated or unrelieved manner” (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/lugubrious>). Roy's *The God of Small Things* displays these features in several ways.

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Manifestations of Alienation in the Writings of Women Writers

The various manifestations of alienation have been largely dealt with by today's women writers. They focus on the themes of clash between tradition and modernity, identity crisis of their protagonists, women's quest for independence, East-West Cultural conflicts, feeling of alienation and, of course, many others.

In more recent years, a generation of talented women writers has emerged, and they have a style of their own. Among these contemporary women writers, Arundhati Roy has carved out a niche for herself. Salman Rushdie rightly remarks: "Most encouragingly, yet another talented generation has begun to emerge. The Keralan writer Arundhati Roy has arrived to the accompaniment of a loud fanfare. Her novel *The God of Small Things* is full of ambition and sparkle, and written in a highly wrought and utterly personal style."¹



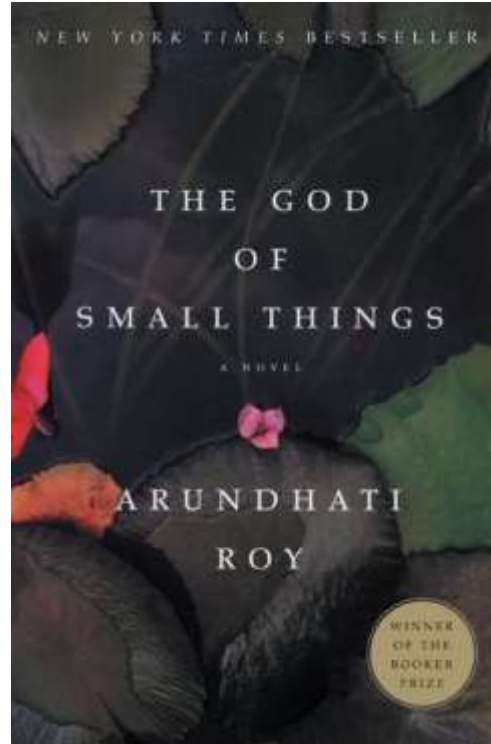
Arundhati Roy's debut and Man Booker Prize winning novel *The God of Small Things* was released first in India, on 5 April 1997. However, it had already received media attention in the West. In India, one of the earliest discussions of the book with the author was conducted by Alok Rai in *The Sunday Review of The Times of India*, April 1997. The novel enjoys tremendous international success but more significantly, it touches the heart of individuals deeply. The novel has been acclaimed highly as a 'brilliant novel' and even a 'contemporary classic.' The novel has a unique story of three generations, but it is detailed in multifarious ways. There are several other novels dealing with such themes, yet *The God of Small Things* leaves an everlasting impact on Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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the psyche of its readers. It maintains its charm and charisma at the every sequential reading. More than 350,000 copies were sold within the first three months after publication.



Ammu and Her Life

The main female character Ammu suffers from extreme sense of alienation. She is often dragooned by the society to live a life of separation and estrangement. Ammu's alienation takes place when she ceases to identify her surroundings just like Hegelian "social substance" i.e., estrangement from the social, political, and cultural institutions. Ammu, the novel's adolescent central character, is the daughter of Pappachi and Mammachi and the sister of Chacko. Ammu from her childhood experiences the sense of alienation from her social environment. She is misbehaved and ill-treated by the members of her own family, badly treated by the police, and abandoned by her brother. Thus, she remains fundamentally anomic, withdrawn, and isolated.

Ammu belonged to an elite family but disapproved Aristotle's conception that man of high ranks alone can have tragic grandeur. Actually, Ammu had her first encounter of alienation and dejection when she was just a little girl. In the author's terminology, she is a "Mombatti" of a big house. During her growing years, the Ipe family has seen the brutal behaviour of Pappachi against Mammachi. Being too familiar with the violent scene, Ammu understood it as a deviational version of children's fairy tale. "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 beatings with mute resignation."² (Roy 171) There was no happy 'Father Bear and Mother Bear' in the Ayemenem House, it was only an ill-tempered father and a "bitter, long-suffering mother" (Roy 38). Knowing well that she

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could not ever change her 'Bear story' into a better one, Ammu tried to be familiar with that. She learned to coexist with it and even find her own fun in it. The "lofty sense of injustice and the stubborn reckless streak that develop in Someone Small who has been bullied all their lives by Someone Big" (Roy 172-173) taught her to cultivate a more tolerant attitude towards the misfortunes in her life caused by the patriarchs.

Ammu became victim of some hellish experiences as she saw the tyrannical face of her father Pappachi who used to beat his wife Mammachi. Ammu could not mask her feeling of humiliation as she was deprived of getting higher education. She wanted to fly high in the sky just like a free bird. "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 the distant aunt who lived in Calcutta" (Roy 38-39). There, in a wedding, Ammu's sense of alienation found a greater chance of escaping the entanglements of her life. She met a person who was an Assistant Manager of a tea estate in Assam. Ammu was in hurry to marry that man: "Ammu did not prevent to be love with him [...] She thought that anything, anyone at all, would be better than returning to Ayemenem. She wrote to her parents informing them of her decision" (Roy 39).

Turned Rebellious

Thus, Ammu, as a prisoner in the family walls, turned rebellious youth from a frustrated teenager. Ammu's husband, the man the author does not even name, made his first appearance in the novel as "a small man, but well built." (Roy 39) He was not that perfect for Ammu in terms of looks, but at least he was having a pleasing personality. The marriage did not go well. Soon after the elaborate Calcutta wedding, Ammu found that the pleasant-looking man had made their marriage completely unpleasant because of his serious alcoholic addiction. When Ammu was about to give life to the newly-coming babies', who later named as Estha and Rahel, this man was "stretch out on a hard bench in the hospital corridor," and he "was drunk" (Roy 40). His addiction to liquor aggravated to the extent that it had not only consumed his vitality but also "had driven him into an alcoholic stupor" (Roy 40). One day he was summoned to the manager's office and was given an ultimatum: either he has to take his beautiful wife to sleep with the lecherous boss, Mr. Hollick, or lose his job. Ammu's husband conveyed this indecent proposal to her. This extreme sense of humiliation generated deep hatred in the heart of Ammu. Thus, a series of fierce physical conflicts between the husband and wife broke out:

Ammu watched her husband's mouth move as it formed words. She said nothing. He grew uncomfortable and then infuriated by her silence. Suddenly he lunged at her, grabbed her hire, punched her and then passed out from the effort. Ammu took down the heaviest book she could find in the bookshelf – The Reader's Digest World Atlas – and hit him with it as hard as she could. (Roy 41-42)

A Cycle and a Pattern

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The recurring violence followed by a brief moment of reconciliation, with violence and comfort, formed a cycle which “fell into a pattern” (Roy 42) in Ammu’s marital life. Thus, Ammu experienced alienation as a result of her fragmented marital life and decided to break it off. The sacrilegious tie of marriage ended in fiasco, and Ammu along with her twins returned to the parental home i.e. Ayemenem house. Though in her parental home, Ammu and children are subjected to all kinds of indignities and sufferings, yet her decision was a sheer revolt against the binary standards and male chauvinism prevailing in Indian society. Roy, in words of A. N. Dwivedi, prefers revolution against the pervading sense of alienation: “Arundhati Roy raises her banner of revolt against a male dominated patriarchal society [...] Through Ammu, Arundhati raises a strong protest against the old-age agonies and sufferings of the suppressed class of women.”³

No Relief from Alienation

Ammu’s return to Ayemenem does not provide any relief from alienation, rather in her own house, she is treated badly. Chacko, her brother used to taunt her twins and said that “Estha and Rahel were indecently healthy. And so was Sophie Mol. He said it was because they did not suffer from inbreeding like most other Syrian Christians” (Roy 61). Thus, Ammu developed a permanent sense of alienation from her family. Tortured by her insensitive husband and persecuted in her parent’s home, Ammu’s life transformed into an estranged individual in the society. Roy writes, “She spoke to no one. She spent hours on the riverbank with her little plastic transistor shaped like tangerine. She smoked cigarettes and had midnight swims” (Roy 44). In other words, she became virtually untouchable. Baby Kochamma, the Lady Macbeth of the novel, jeered at Ammu. “A married daughter had no position in her parent’s home. As for a divorced daughter, she had no position anywhere at all” (Roy 45).

Love Blossoms

Ammu decided not to be obedient, submissive, according to patriarchal demands of the society. She cared for no “Love Laws”, when she decided to surrender herself to Velutha, who is an “Untouchable Paravan” at Ayemenem. Ammu loved Velutha from her childhood because he was a talented craftsman. Moreover, it was the secret charm of opposite sex which attracted her attention towards the well-built stout body of Velutha and naturally her suppressed womanhood revived again after a gap of several years. Ammu and Velutha started their love in such a way:

Ammu saw that he saw. She looked away. He did too. History’s fiends returned to claim them. To re-wrap them in its old, scarred pelt and drag them back to where they really lived. Where the Love Laws lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much. Ammu walked up to the verandah, back into the Play. Shaking. Velutha looked down at Ambassador S. Insect in his arms. He put her down. Shaking too. (Roy 168)

This is usually how a love story begins; there are two persons looking into each other’s eyes, and suddenly they realise that they are in love. The lovers stand silently and transfixed unaware of how much time has passed by. May be a century or even longer! Nothing really

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matters at this moment of ecstasy. The whole world quiets down, and time is condensed. There seems to be some kind of telepathy between the two. Without saying a word, they know exactly that they share the same feeling and they are thinking about the same thing. However, in the significant scene when the male and female protagonists, Velutha and Ammu, looked at each other and realised that there was a mutual attraction between them. Roy immediately shifts the focus from the smooth-sailing love story to the socio-historical taboos that commanded the characters to love or not to love.

Initial Hesitation

The turning point in the story is that her love story begins not with the lovers transfixing each other once they have made eye contacts but their turning away from the contact out of hesitation rather than embarrassment as soon as they found their gazes meet. The couple's first reaction to the new found love was to conceal their emotions and then they retrieved to the places they belonged. One was a respectable woman in the upper class, and the other was a man of the untouchable caste. Roy in the novel introduces an oxymoronic condition by combining love with law (which are usually contrary to each other) to convey a realistic point of view that there are, in fact, social, traditional and historical reasons affecting every individual's behaviour as one cannot have his own way in every matter related to life. Thus, love has to face many hindrances.

This confrontation is a serious matter, especially in India, where the love and laws, a strange mixture of patriarchy, are the very foundation upon which the Indian society is able to stabilise itself. Roy does not only examine love from its psychological underpinnings, but in light of social mores that instruct Indian men, how to love. It is just to highlight the clash between the individual and the complicit cooperation of the deep-rooted patriarchy and caste system in India along with the colonial force. Arundhati Roy in one interview with Abraham Taisha claims that "*The God of Small Things* is not a book specifically about our culture – it's a book about human nature."⁴

Indian Cleopatra?

The character of Ammu is like Shakespeare's Cleopatra, who can flirt with Antony with her infinite variety and can go to any extent for the fulfilment of love even in the time of war. Cleopatra's love crosses the boundaries of time and space but Ammu and Velutha's relationship crosses the borders of caste and creed. Shakespeare's Cleopatra is naughty, fickle in flirting with Antony but Roy's Ammu is simple, sober and faithful in her relationship with Velutha. As a tragedy of love, the character of Ammu and Cleopatra bear resemblance in the sense that their love is altogether sincere, intense and irresistible. Ammu is unsatisfied both physically and mentally, and her desire to come closer in the life of Velutha with her sexual passion is irresistible:

Ammu, naked now, crouched over Velutha, her mouth on his. He drew her hair around them like a tent. [...] She slid further down, introducing herself to the rest of him. His

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neck. His nipples. His chocolate stomach. She tasted him, in her mouth. He sat and grew back to him. She felt her belly tighter under her, hard as board. She felt her wetness slipping on his skin. He took her nipple in his mouth and cradled her other breast in his callous palm. (Roy 336)

Similar to Madeline and Porphyro?

Just like Ammu's and Velutha's love affair, John Keats's Madeline and Porphyro in his famous poem "The Eve of St. Agnes" point towards a deathly absence, alienation, and infertility in relation. Madeline's and Porphyro's erotic love affair transcended the barriers of family disputes as Porphyro entered the castle of his enemies and eloped with his beloved. Ammu's portrayal has reversed the order as in place of Porphyro, she stepped out to meet her untouchable lover at the riverbank.

Here, Ammu's condition of normlessness can easily be perceived, since all social rules and obligations lose their hold and fail to regulate her behaviour. For the anomic or normless Ammu, social norms are null and void. Ammu's transgression of the social norms was severely punished. Ammu, who was considered one of "the worst transgressors" of "the laws that lay down who should be loved and how, the laws that makes grandmothers grandmothers, uncles uncles, mothers mothers, cousins cousins, jam jam, and jelly jelly" (Roy 31), was locked away in her bedroom like "the family lunatic in a medieval household" (Roy 239).

Losing the Social Status

After her affair with Velutha had come to light, her social status dropped even lower because for one she was a widow and secondly that she had been "defiled" by a member of the untouchable caste. Inspector Mathews taps on Ammu's breasts in the police station, and it was a "premeditated gesture, calculated to humiliate and terrorize her" (Roy 246), rather than a single isolated instance of sexual harassment. Consequently, she is locked up in the dark room for hours. This alienated experience makes her so crazy that, in a fit of rage, she shouts at her children. Later, her own brother Chacko drags her out from the Ayemenem house. Ammu passed rest of her life in isolation, relative silence, and feeling extreme alienation. Her life becomes virtually irrelevant. Upon her all-but-unnoticed death "in a grimy room in the Bharat Lodge in Alleppey" at the age of thirty-one ("a viable, die-able age"), "the church refused to bury Ammu" (Roy 154), thereby further denying Ammu any record of her participation in the Orthodox Church.

Defiled Woman

Thus, Ammu's alienation leads her on to utter desolation as the lady was declared 'defiled' by society. She becomes totally destitute when even her brother bares his fangs. She was thrown out of the house before condemning her to a solitary cell while her heart touches the depths of despair which led to rebelliousness in her nature. She becomes invisible in the eye of puritans and at the very young age of thirty-one breathes her last and even the church refused to

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bury her. The story of their lives is more bizarre and horrendous than the ‘honour killings’ in India. In the former case the lovers are killed in instalments with an unforgiving heart even by the religious priests while in the latter case the death is meted out in a few strokes of ruthlessness.

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