

# LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 10 : 12 December 2010

ISSN 1930-2940

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## Homeless in One's Own Home

An Analysis of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*  
and Lakshmi Kannan's *Going Home*

Pauline Das, Ph.D.

### Rights of a Woman to Family Property

The aim of this paper is to project the suffering of women as represented in Lakshmi Kannan's *Going Home* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* with special reference to the Hindu Succession Act 1956 and 2005. The women folk in these novels feel homeless in their own homes. The physical and psychological conditions of women, with no space in their own homes remind us of Virginia Woolf's 'Room of My Own.'

In the preface of the novel, Kannan vents her anger at post- independent Indian society's failure to guarantee property and inheritance rights to Indian women. She points out that while the Hindu Succession Act of 1956 assures the legal rights of a woman to family property, the actual reality of control of assets is another story. Seemingly progressive families, according to Kannan, count upon the "unconditional compliance" of women when it comes to asserting over ancestral property. As a consequence of this "tacit silent acceptance of their lot in the unequal equation between them and their male siblings" (Preface,vii), the larger number of Indian women neither feel at 'home' in their physical homes, nor within their bodies.

### The Plight of Career Women

*Going Home* is also a direct statement on the plight of the married middle class career woman who is compelled to cross over from private sphere to the public. However, this 'outing'

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from the inner courtyard to a larger world is not translated into any real freedom for the self. Society feels that women allowed to work have special privileges accorded to her by the family. The unpleasant reality of it is that she has to work both at the home and in the office. A woman who is intellectual and excellent in academic performances is not even acknowledged in the community. This is the plight of women even two decades after Women's International Year. A woman who may become recognized by scholars and critics as brilliant, and who may draw so many readers compellingly into her books, is only insulted in her own family.

### **Women in India in the Sixties to Eighties**

*Going Home* attempts to study the condition of women in India in the sixties. The novel talks of formally and apparently socially respectable educated women who witnessed a mute, dull, numbing pain and were trying to break their long, oppressive silence. It talks of women who had changed their dress code but nevertheless could not change their status that was still governed by the random accident of their birth. Their growing up in the male dominated society developed a low esteem for them as they saw themselves inferior in the cultural and social context.

### **Voices in a Voiceless Environment**

Indian writers in English have contributed a lot in reflecting the thoughts and aspirations of the Indian mind. Women novelists especially have recorded their voices in a voiceless environment. With the coming of Arundhati Roy in the Indian scene a great deal of attention has been paid to women's writing. Women writers' themes reflect the sad plight of their women protagonists, reflecting our society.

### **The Homeless Women in *The God of Small Things***

Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* talks about the sufferings of women in a male dominated society. The chief reason for a woman's alienation is that of being a stranger in her own home. She becomes a stranger because she does not belong to the house in which she is born, nor does she belong to the house she goes to as a result of her marriage.

### **Talents Shattered**

This is seen in the character, Mammachi, who is no less talented than her husband. She is musically talented and even better skilled in business and management, yet does not have a share in the business she runs. She is a wife who has no rights to her husband's property. Her son Chacko becomes the proprietor of the pickle factory run by her, and the Ayemenem House in which she lives is his, and does not belong either to his sister, Ammu.

### **The Daughter, an Intruder in One's Own Home:**

Baby Kochamma, the spinster sister of Pappachi lives on sufferance in the Ayemenem House, where ironically she has no right to be. Ammu returns to the house after her separation from her husband and she becomes more of an intruder and less of a member of the house. Legally, Ammu has no claim on the property as the inheritance rights are weighed

against her. The main reason why the female characters suffer is due to their economic dependence on male members, for they don't inherit anything, although they belong to well educated families.

### **Can Women Go back Home?**

We see the same plight of women in Lakshmi Kannan's *Going Home*. Published one year after *The God of Small Things*, *Going Home* too reiterates the same theme. The young girl Gayatri repeats time and again that she wants to go home. This becomes the leitmotif of the novel. The home here is 'Retreat', Gayatri's grandfather's home in Mysore. When Gayatri settles in Delhi after her marriage, she is forced to live in a small flat. She feels claustrophobic and longs to go back to her childhood home, 'Retreat'. But 'Retreat' no more belongs to her, her mother being the daughter of the house. The property slips through her fingers to her maternal uncle.

### **Hard Life that Women are Forced to Face with even if They are Daughters of Affluent Families**

*Going Home* reflects the hard life that women have to face even if they are born in affluent houses. For the sake of being born as women they can only make their houses into homes for the other members of their families, whereas a woman has no space in it. Being homeless materially, makes a woman homeless psychologically.

### **Hard Life that a Poor Woman Faces in Life**

There are the other characters in the novel, like Rama, who does not own a house in the material sense, but even the rented house she lives in does not provide her with the feeling of acceptance into the family. Rama is homeless in her father's home where she is only a third daughter, she is homeless in her rented home in Delhi where her husband dominates the house, and she is also homeless in her in-laws' house where she is a daughter-in-law with little dowry.

### **Hindu Succession Act, a mere Statement on Paper**

According to the Hindu Succession Act 1956, Section 16, a daughter, and even a daughter's daughter has a rightful claim to the family property. But as far as women were concerned, this act was a mere statement on paper. There were two ways to tackle this situation. One was to fight out the case in court. But this would disturb the entire family and ruin everybody's peace. The daughters simply could not bring themselves to act this way. The other way was to grin and bear it. And that was what most women did. They did not want to create unpleasantness or hatred. So they distanced themselves from this and believed that it was happening to someone else other than themselves.

O Lord why have you not given woman  
The right to conquer her destiny?  
Why does she have to wait head bowed,  
By the road side,  
Waiting with tired patience,

Hoping for a miracle in the morrow? (Rabindranath Tagore)

### **The Physical House and the Human Body**

Lakshmi Kannan spends time in exploring the analogy between the physical house and the human body. While the physical boundaries of a house holds the body, the human body in turn houses the 'being'. Gayatri talks to Rama about the need to break free of restrictive boundaries, and yet acknowledges the futility of these attempts. Despite attempts to free herself of both physical and mental fetters, she states, "we only fail in our efforts and return grudgingly to the shell of our body like disappointed tenants, to continue with our lives half-heartedly" (GH, 21).

### **Being Unhoused**

After the loss of The Retreat, Gayatri is filled with a restlessness and an unhoused feeling taking over her which she cannot verbalize. She feels neither at home in the physical house, nor in her personal cage-body. "Does my body belong to me, or is it something that is holding me down, trying to subdue me? (GH 88)

### **Women who have Changed Their Dress Code but cannot Change Their Status**

*Going Home* attempts to study the condition of women in India in the sixties to eighties. The novel talks of formally and apparently socially respectable educated women who witnessed a mute, dull, numbing pain and were trying to break their long, oppressive silence. It talks of women who had changed their dress code but nevertheless could not change their status that was still governed by the random accident of their birth. Their growing up in the male dominated society developed a low esteem for them as they saw themselves inferior in the cultural and social context.

### **Voicing against Inequalities in the Society**

Arundhati Roy and Lakshmi Kannan's analysis of woman's predicament has been executed on several levels: each of the different female roles is examined – woman who is denied a home, woman alienated from her emotions. As writers both have used their words and the voices of their characters to sell their values, stand on social issues and point out the inequalities in the Indian society. Their voices are strong and loud. They have fought for a world that is free from discriminative value systems, hypocrisies and prejudiced laws. They have discarded any negative criticism that they might encounter and have been very straight forward, taking up cudgels against the world through their writings.

### **Women's Writing – Channel for Their Voices**

Both the novels embody agonies of women emerging from the state of subjugation and bondage. They seek to establish their identity and the self. As Margaret Dickie observes in *Contemporary Literature*

If the voices of women are not mute, neither are they the voice of the dominant culture. They are rather new voices at the fringes of society; where, language

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changes and develops, woman's writing has always been a channel for such voices.

### **Social Changes brought about by Women Writers**

The appearance of women novelists like Arundhati Roy and Lakshmi Kannan in India has added a new dimension to the English novel. Both the novels are about the urban middle class, the stratum of society they know best. Social changes do not take place overnight. As our society gradually emerges from its cocoon of prudery and inhibition into progressive permissiveness, the sensitive writers detail out these changes in fictional narratives. They show beyond doubt that women's liberation is at last becoming a part of national progressive consciousness.

### **Redrawing Boundaries – Gender in the New Economy**

Thanks to Arundhati Roy and Lakshmi Kannan who were able to point out to the anomalies, ambiguities and inequalities in the earlier property laws which professed equal share for men and women only in name. The Hindu Succession Act (Amendment) 2005 laid down a uniform and comprehensive system of inheritance that ensures greater property rights instead of limited rights in property. Thus it has removed the gender discrimination in respect of dwelling houses as well as agricultural lands. Further it makes the heirs of predeceased sons and daughters more equal. Now, all daughters including those married, widows, and remarried, have the same rights as sons and grandsons, to reside in or seek partition of the parental dwelling house. The outline of *The God of Small Things* and *Going Home*, stressing on the right to property as important for the freedom and development of women has been realized now to a greater extent.

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