

A Portrayal of Docile, Submissive Woman Characters in Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract

Practically speaking, the patriarchal system is defined as control by men. This system allows men to have a complete power over women and its forces women constantly to fight for rights and struggle for their survival. The life of women under the system of patriarchy has been described by some authors in their literary works. Arundhati Roy is one among them. Roy tells the stories of various couples whose relationships are distorted because of the patriarchal structure.

Key words: Arundhati Roy, patriarchy, women under patriarchy, *The God of Small Things*.

Introduction

Women are depicted usually as machines for reproduction in history and this concept still exists. The deep rooted patriarchal system does not allow women to realize and express their roles. In the middle ages the condition was worsened with the origin of superstitions which restricted the movement of women. Women were tortured in the name of tradition and religion.

Patriarchy

Patriarchy is “a set of symbols and ideas that make up a culture embodied by everything from the content of every day conversation to literature and film” (Johnson 1997, p: 84). In India, as in all other countries around the globe, violence against women occurs daily. Patriarchy plays a role in this violence. For some Indian women, the possibility of violence occurs throughout their lives, especially with changes in marital status. Practically speaking, the patriarchal system is defined as control by men. This system allows men to have a complete power over women and its forces women constantly to fight for rights and struggle for their survival.

Life of Women Under Patriarchy

The life of women under the system of patriarchy has been described by some authors in their literary works. Arundhati Roy is one among them. *The God of Small Things* is semi-autobiographical and a major part of it captures Roy's childhood experiences in Ayemenam.

Roy tells the stories of various couples whose relationships are distorted because of the patriarchal structure. The most obvious example is that of Pappachi and Mammachi. Pappachi rules his household like a demented despot- beating his wife and children and destroying their prized possessions. Chacko, though less aggressive, than his father, is responsible for his failed marriage. He has no job, but he refuses to help out around the house, and turns lethargic. Ammu's husband is willing to prostitute her to save his job. Roy gives example after example of men's tyrannical actions in their household. Some are physically abusive, but some are more insidious in their domination and sense of entitlement. Even brother/sister relationships are unequal. As Chacko tells Ammu "What is mine is mine and what is yours is also mine".

A Complete Indictment of Patriarchy

Roy's novel can be viewed as a complete indictment of patriarchy. Male domination in all things is the norm in India, whether the domination be in the realm of political, social or financial arenas. Critic Tuppen Kumar Ghosh declares in "Tomorrow Will Never Die: Arundhati Roy's tryst with history in *The God of Small Things*" that Roy's purpose in *The God of Small Things* is to write about an unfair, male dominated society that treats women and low-caste people very badly(184): "Her focus is on the small, individual lives of men and women who, without any heroic pretensions, break the long-cherished social taboos and tamper with the rules that lay down the social codes of behaviour"(Ghosh 186).

A Story of Three Generations

Roy presents a story of three generations in her novel "The God of Small Things". The first generation is from the period before India's independence and the characters involved in this period are Mammachi and Pappachi. The second generation dates from 1940's and the characters involved are Ammu and Chacko. The last generation dates from the 1960's and the characters

involved are Rahel and Estha. In all these generations women are suppressed by the male dominated society in different ways.

In “Women in The God of Small Things”, critic N.P. Singh claims that the first generation has the tendency to “defy the age-old norms of patriarchy” (65). Singh also adds that the women of the Ayemenam house do not have much freedom, since the men rule and decide for their lives (65).

Mammachi

Mammachi’s relationship with pappachi is a male dominated one because he often wants to suppress his wife. In the “Man- Women Relationship in The God of Small Things”, critic Nirmala C. Prakash points out pappachi’s view of marriage as follows: “Wife is but a slave who can be driven out of the house at his will and whose precious possessions like piano can be mercilessly broken...”(180). Prakash argues that Mammachi’s and Pappachi’s marriage is filled with “jealous, violence and hatred” (80). Pappachi cannot bear Mammachi’s success as a business woman who became popular in pickle-making. He started to beat his wife because he feels that as she is his wife he can do whatever he wishes. It is difficult for Pappachi to see the good qualities in his wife. He oppresses his wife and beats her and treats very badly.

Pappachi’s View

Pappachi believes that a man is superior to a woman and he lives his life like that and never lends a helping hand to his wife. “Though Mammachi had conical corneas and was already partially blind, he would not help her in pickle-making, because he did not consider pickle-making, a suitable job for a high-ranking ex-government official like him” (Roy 47). He is too proud to admit that Mammachi is doing a great job. Instead of supporting his wife, he rejects her since he does not believe in women’s power over men or in the independency of women.

In “Locusts Stand I”: Some Feminine Aspects of The God of Small Things, critic Mohit Kumar Ray points out that Pappachi’s jealousy on Mammachi does not begin in the moment when he retires but it is from the time of their marriage. For example, when they spend a couple of months in Vienna, Mammachi learnt violin. When her teacher tells Pappachi that his wife is

very talented, he does not let her to continue her lessons (56). “ The lessons were abruptly discontinued when Mammachi’s teacher Launsky Tieffenthal, made the mistake of telling Pappachi that his wife was exceptionally talented...(Roy 50). Pappachi cannot bear the compliments made to his wife for her good work.

Psychological Use

At last when the physical abuse of Mammachi came to an end, a psychological abuse is introduced. In “Dreams Re-Dreamed: A Study of Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*”, critic Surendra Narayan Jha writes that Chacko is the one who is responsible for forbidding his father from touching his mother again. As a result of this, Pappachi finds another way of oppressing her by not talking to her till his death because Chacko has hurt his pride (Jha 161). In this way he shows that he has still power over his wife. Roy argues that Pappachi insults her publically and rejects her every time he gets the chance (56). She also adds that Mammachi accepts her insults and rejections: “She accepted the female role model imposed on her by the society- docile, submissive, ungrudging, unprotesting” (56).

Anything beyond this of how a woman should behave would mean that she has broken the social norms laid down for them. Unless a woman wants to avoid being looked down by people, she should live her life obeying the men. In other words women should not attempt to improve their position in society, as this is a pointless thing to do. Even though Mammachi is doing a great job in the factory, she is still oppressed. But if the circumstances were the other way round and if Pappachi owned the factory, he would have been very proud of his accomplishments and the compliments of the people. Mammachi’s life is destined from the day she is born. She is doomed for the reason that women are submissive to men. She just accepts her situation and does not fight for the equality between men and women.

Ammu

Ammu, the central character in *The God of Small Things* belongs to the second generation which defies patriarchy and the dominant sexual norms of the time. Ammu is a victim of the patriarchal society she lives in. The oppression of Ammu begins when her father Pappachi does not allow her to college. “Pappachi insisted that a college education was an unnecessary

expense for a girl” (Roy 38). He thinks that she should stay at home and assist her mother should do her daily chores which will help her after her marriage. Ammu and her brother Chacko are not treated as equals by their parents. While Ammu is denied education, Chacko got his education in Oxford. Verma a critic writes: whenever Chacko is out of money, his mother sends him more (180). The reason for this mistreatment is that Ammu is born as a girl and Chacko is a boy. Ammu realizes the injustice of patriarchy by the attitude of their parents. Sometimes she feels as if she does not exist. “Her eighteenth birthday came and went. Unnoticed, or at least unremarked upon by her parents” (Roy 38).

Ammu feels that her life is doomed because she was born as a girl in the patriarchal society. In search of freedom and to escape from the mistreatment which she experience in her parent’s house she runs into a marriage that ends in a divorce very soon. “She thought that anything, anyone at all, would be better than to returning to Ayemenam” (Roy 39). Verma points out that the reason for the divorce is that Ammu’s husband, a Bengali Hindu, an alcoholic, urges her to sleep with his boss Mr. Hollick in order to save his job (Verma 180). As Ammu refuses her husband, he beats her brutally. As a strong woman she breaks the social norms and divorces her husband. She dares enough to act according to her wish. She no longer wants to be a mere puppet and decides to break the chains that tied her.

As a divorced woman, she has no other choice than to return to her parent’s house with her twins, Estha and Rahel. Roy said that a woman has only one chance of choosing her husband, and Ammu makes the mistake of choosing a wrong man(Roy 52). Her own family and society now treats her as if she is worthless. Baby Kochamma her aunt points out to Ammu that:

A married daughter had no position in her parent’s home. As for a
Divorced daughter- according to Baby Kochamma, she had no position
anywhere at all. And as for a divorced daughter from a love marriage,[...]
As for a divorced a daughter from an inter community love marriage [...] (Roy 45-46).

Baby Kochamma

Baby Kochamma explains to Ammu how the society unfairly treats the divorced woman. Prakash a critic claims that a divorced daughter is unwelcome in her parent’s house whereas a

divorced son like Chacko is welcomed home and he becomes the inheritor of the family fortune (81). Critic Amina Amin argues in “Breaking Laws, Crossing Forbidden Territory: An Analysis of The God of Small Things”, that even though Ammu works harder than Chacko in the pickle factory, she would not inherit anything from her parents because daughters do not inherit (107). Chacko tells Ammu “what’s yours is mine and what’s mine is also mine” (Roy 57). The factory is Mammachi’s until Chacko returns and after that he takes the full control of it. Verma adds that Chacko does not believe that women should hold power over men (182-183).

Unfair Treatment in the Family

Again there is an unfair treatment in the family much to the dislike of Ammu and what she desires. Chacko is allowed to have relationships with the beautiful women workers in the factory, regardless of their castes. But when Ammu expresses her desire for a low caste man, she was banished because it is a sinful act for a woman to express her sexual desires. Ammu breaks the “Love Laws [...] the laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much” (Roy 33).

Ammu’s Revolt

Ammu wants to revolt against the society which has neglected her for so long. Velutha, who belongs to the so-called “untouchable” caste – Paravan, rebels against the society for their rights. Ammu draws towards Velutha because she sees a fighter in him, someone who is against the society like her. In order to keep the family’s honour pride and reputation, Ammu was punished for loving a low caste man like Velutha. Their affair is considered to be both a sin, as it is extra-marital, and also a crime, as it is between the members of two different classes in the caste system.

Tragic End

Velutha was arrested by the police and later he was killed. Ammu’s life was miserable because everyone in the family banished her. At last she dies alone and her body is cremated instead of a burying in church (Roy 162). Ammu believes in the equality between the genders and she hates the fact that society and its norms should decide people’s life. All Ammu wants

from her family is the recognition for her as a woman and to be treated as an equal to her brother. Roy summarizes Ammu's oppressed life as:

Ammu had been humiliated and cornered by her father, ill-treated
And betrayed by her husband, insulted by the police and rendered
Destitute by her brother. Each of them voiced the patriarchal
ideology which commanded that she should have no right anywhere
-as daughter, wife, sister and citizen. She was no individual to her
Society but just an object, a role necessarily submissive. (Roy 54).

Rahel

Rahel, daughter of Ammu, was born in post-independence India. Critic R.S Sharma and Shashi Bala Talwar in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things: Critique and Commentary* claims that as Rahel and Estha are the products of an inter-community marriage, the family treats them as strangers (48). Rahel is cared for only by her mother and brother, whereas the rest of the family never cares for her. Rahel is an innocent victim of her mother's mistake in life. As time goes by, with the arrival of Sophie Mol, the daughter of Chacko and Margaret, to Ayemenam Rahel realizes that her family does not love her anymore. Even though both of them come from an intercaste marriage, they are not treated equally. Verma points out that her family sees Rahel as a demon and Sophie Mol as an angel because she is their son's daughter (181). Rahel is compared to Sophie Mol as follows: "Little angels were beach-coloured [...] Little demons were mudbrown [...] with forehead bumps that might turn into horns" (Roy 179). Rahel is jealous of the attention and the special treatment received by Sophie Mol. Rahel feels it is unfair that her own family oppresses her and this situation is even more worse when Ammu dies. She and her brother is left under the care of the family members who really don't want to care about her. Even her own uncle Chacko thinks that they are a burden to him. Having no one to care for her and to teach the basic things Rahel starts to lead her life as she wishes.

Singh points out that Rahel drifts from school to school because she was expelled for the reason that she does not know how to behave (68). Rahel is against the patriarchal norms of society which puts people in different positions by describing what is considered low as "She

decorates a knob of dung with flowers” (Sharma and Talwar 72). When she grows up, she marries a man of her own choice just as her mother did. But her marriage was not a long lasting one because she divorces her husband the moment he stops to fulfill her needs. As a highly educated and modern rebellious girl, she refuses to accept the fates of Ammu and Mammachi (Prakash 83). When she returns to Ayemenam, she answers to old man who asked about her marriage “We’re divorced” (Roy 130). She lives her life the way she wants to and does not care about the consequences. Rahel represents contemporary woman in India, where the women live their lives as rebels and do not let social norms decide their lives. Even though the women in this novel develop and grow braver in each generation, the men do not change their patriarchal behaviour against the women at all.

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi addressing the All India Women’s conference in 1980 said

..... I have often said, that I am not a feminist, yet, in my concern for the unprivileged, how can I ignore women who, since the beginning of history, have been dominated over and discriminated against in social customs and in laws...?. In the west, women’s so-called freedom is often equated with imitation of man frankly, I feel that is merely an exchange of one kind of bondage for another. To be liberated, a woman must feel free to be herself not in rivalry to man, but in the context of her own capacity and her personality. We need women to be more interested, more alive and more active not because they are women, but because they do compromise “ half the human race”. Whether they like it or not, they cannot escape their responsibility. Should they deny its benefits. Indian women are traditionally conservatives but they also have the genius of synthesis to adapt and absorb. That is what gives them resilience to face suffering and to meet upheavals with a degree of calm to change constantly and yet remain changeless which is the quality of India herself.”

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