The Voice of Women in Indian Writing in English - Arundhati Roy's *The God Of Small Things*

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Abstract

This paper has been developed to analyze the different elements of Feminism by studying the opinions or views of various scholars from their writings. The Indian perspectives of Feminism have been highlighted in this paper by analyzing and comparing the views of the Indian Feminist writers like Shobha De, Anita Desai, Anita Nair, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy and others. Their reviews have been compared with the opinions of Arundhati Roy by evaluating her text "The God of Small Things" where she has highlighted the issues faced by the Indian women in the male-dominated society. The themes of subjugation, oppression, struggles, domestic violence, and gender discrimination have been discussed in the initial phase of the novel. But, later, the author has portrayed the three major characters like Mammachi, Ammu and Rahel to prove the theme of Feminism. Women against their incessant exploitation, torture and struggle which they undergo because of male dominated conservative society. The women in her stories did not endure the issues and instead protested against the society and its traditional norms to create their own identity. They have shown their self-confidence and inner strength to bring a change in the thoughts of the society.

Keywords: Feminism, The God of Small things, Identity, oppression, Subjugation.

Preamble

Arundhati Roy ridicules the signs that symbolized and materialist separations and discriminations of all kinds, such as the barrier which, in Cochin airport, separates "the Meters from the Met and the Greeters from the Greet" (Roy, 1997, 142). This symmetrical utterance in itself constitutes a humorous transgression of the established lexical and grammatical rules of Standard English. Roy also makes fun of the repressive forces charged with enforcing separations of all kinds, especially when they are based on "differences" that remain imaginary: "Edges, Borders, Boundaries, Brinks and Limits" are compared to "a team of trolls", "short creatures with long shadows, patrolling the Blurry End" (Roy, 1997, 3).

Simultaneously, the text pokes fun at different segregating devices. Ammu's father, Pappachi, devoted his life to the deadly work of entomology, which crucifies insects the better to distinguish and classify them. This habit of taxonomy can be read as a metaphor of the Indian desire to uphold rigid social stratifications in spite of the national Constitution. Nevertheless, through a process of poetic justice in the novel, Pappachi's "Bible", *The Insect Wealth of India*, has become with the passing of years a crumbling ruin, "buckling like corrugated asbestos", and the information it contains, with the classification it defends, is slowly disintegrating: "Silverfish tunneled through the pages, burrowing arbitrarily from species to species, turning organized information into yellow lace" (155). In other words, the result of years of work by distinguished entomologists, eager to partition and compartmentalize, is now being unceremoniously destroyed by primitive, wingless insects of the genus *Eloisa*, whose common name, "silverfish", evokes ichthyology more than entomology, introducing an ironical hybridity into the realm of rigid classifications.

The blurring of boundaries programmatically announced in "boundaries blur as tapioca fences take root and bloom", can also be noticed in the numerous intersexual allusions present in this dense novel. Joseph Conrad's influence is explicitly acknowledged in the reference to Kari Saipu, the Englishman who went native, and who represents the cultural and ideological heritage of in Yet the text suggests that this inheritance also concerns the Anglophile Indian uncle, Chacko, who likes to enumerate his belongings: "*My* factory, *my* pineapples, *my* pickles", exclaims Chacko (57, original italics), blithely dismissing the fact that in the factory his sister does as much work as he does. Chacko thus parrots Kurtz, about whom Marlowe relates derisively: "You should have heard [Kurtz] say, 'My ivory.' Oh, yes, I heard him. 'My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my...' everything belonged to him" (Conrad 1988, 49). Chacko loves to remind his sister that she, "as a daughter, has no claim to the property", and he rubs the message in with unsubtle brutality: "What's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine" (Roy, 1997, 57). Chacko, like Kari Saipu, has become "Ayemenem's own Kurz" (52); and Ayemenem will indeed become "a private Heart of Darkness" (52) for more than one character in the novel. In other words, two dividing lines cross each other here, that between east and west and that between Ammu's love affair with a Paravan, an Untouchable, breaks the rigid boundaries set up between "Caste Christians" that are comically labeled "Touchable" by the narrative voice (73), and "Rice-Christians" (74), most emphatically *untouchable*. As the narrative voice explains didactically, the two categories of Christians were made to have separate churches, with separate services, and separate priests(74), and this insistent repetition of the adjective "separate" recalls the hypocrisy of the language of racial segregation in the South of the USA (the "separate but equal" slogan).

Like the Christians, the Communists perpetuate Castes and reject outcastes. Pillai, like Pilate, washes his hands of Velutha, and when Inspector Thomas Mathew takes the precaution of having Pillai fetched in order to consult him, they soon finish their conversation; which is "brief, cryptic, to

the point"; both of them feel that "no explanation seem[s] necessary": Velutha has to be sacrificed. This easy collusion can be explained by the fact that "they were both men whom childhood had abandoned without a trace", and who did not wonder how the world worked, because "*they* worked it. Pillai's betrayal of Velutha is expressed hypocritically in the midst of a jumble of slogans, a rhetoric that begins with sentences, and then lamely disintegrates into unconvincing phrases and words. The narrative voice concludes resignedly that "there it was again", "Another edifice constructed by the human mind, decimated by human nature" (287). Just as Christians maintained racial divisions and separate churches in social systems of segregation and apartheid, Indian Christians and Indian Muslims ignored the hope of escaping from a cruel system which animated recent converts from Hinduism and decided to keep Untouchables at a safe distance. So did the Kerala Communists.

The metaphor of the cocktail is quite ironic here, since the "cocktail revolution" precisely *denies* change and mixture, leaving the Untouchables at the mercy of "the traditional values of a caste-ridden community" (66). After Velutha's death, the newspapers will show "the Official Version", about "the 'police Encounter' with a Paravan charged with kidnapping and murder", and will show Pillai playing the part that is expected of him, the role of a Communist leader blaming the Management for "implicating the Paravan in a false police case" (303). The newspapers will *not* be told by Pillai or anybody else that Ammu denied the rape charges and that crucial evidence, incriminating for the police had promptly been destroyed by the diligent "cartoon platoon". Evidence like the inflatable goose which they burst with a cigarette before burying the rubber scraps: "Yooseless goose. Those scraps of rubber are a sinister echo of another dominant, brutal, tyrannical male character taking advantage of his physical superiority over women. They recall the "sea of twisting, rubber snakes" that resulted from the cutting up of Ammu's beloved gum boots by her father (181).

Therefore the transgression of Ammu and Velutha breaks a tacit rule that has been left unchanged and unchallenged in spite of the fact that the Constitution of India, adopted on November 26, 1949, wished to abrogate the caste system, guaranteeing the right of all citizens to justice, liberty, equality, and dignity. In India, marriages are most of the time endogamous, and arranged. By choosing freely to marry a Bengali Hindu, Ammu (like Arundhati Roy's mother) had broken that implicit rule. By divorcing, she had entered a state of symbolic *sati*, as if she had been a widow, expected by her family to lead a quiet, selfless and sexless life.

Ammu's Christian family (like many other Christian families in India) has integrated the Hindu idea that widows are ritually inauspicious, and should eschew colored saris and ornaments, and the hope of getting married again. Baby Kochamma resents Ammu for quarrelling with "a fate that she [...] herself felt she had graciously accepted.

The fact that Ammu is back in her parents' home deprives her of any social position or prestige, of any right, and Baby Kochamma's quivering, silent outrage efficiently dramatizes Roy's depiction of the ritual impurity and inauspiciousness attached to someone who, in a society still very much in favour of arranged, endogamous marriages, happens to be "a *divorced* daughter from a *intercommunity love* marriage" (45-46).

Getting married again would have been perceived as a defiant rebellion by her family and her society; by having an illicit affair with a Paravan she becomes unpardonable, and makes herself vulnerable to the deliberate humiliation to which she is subjected by the police Inspector, who bullies her and calls her a *veshya*, a prostitute, in all impunity, knowing very well "whom he could pick on and whom he couldn't" (8). Emilienne Baneth-Nouailhetas (2002, 94), following the demonstrations of Subaltern Studies, devotes a chapter of her book to the "gagging" of women.

Ammu's mother feels a deep repulsion at picture that she creates in her own mind, in lurid, graphic detail, of her daughter "coupling in the mud" with "a filthy *coolie*". Her disgust feeds on Velutha's colour, on "his coarse black hand" and his "black hips jerking between her parted legs", as well as on his "particular Paravan smell" (Roy 1997, 257). The logic is precisely the same as in racist societies that fear miscegenation: the body of the "pure" woman has to be preserved like a sacred Temple. (This instinctive fear is very much present in William Faulkner's novel *Sanctuary*, in which the raped heroine is called Temple and her tormentor, even if technically white, is often associated with the colour black). Defilement by the impure is simply unthinkable, and hence the pure woman's body has to be guarded like a vulnerable treasure. Potentially unfaithful wives, potentially seduced daughters, have to be guarded by didn't of ideology or, failing that, have to be locked up and oppressed, for fear of contamination, miscegenation, bastardies.

The purity of lineage has to be protected at all costs. Inspector Matthews knows it only too well; he has "a Touchable wife, two Touchable daughters - whole Touchable generations waiting in their Touchable wombs..." (259). His way of treating Ammu is not "spontaneous brutishness" but cold-blooded ideology: his gesture was "calculated to humiliate and terrorize her"; it was "an attempt to instills order into a world gone wrong" (260). The punishment meted out to Velutha recalls the treatment reserved for Black men accused of raping a white woman. Women are the most ferocious in such cases: the vocabulary of lynching is to be found in Mammachi's mouth (284) and Kalyani's ("He's lucky they haven't had him sprung from the nearest tree", 288). Baby Kochamma, sharing their sense of mission, of crusade, their sense of being in charge of the Purity of the future generations, acted swiftly and ruthlessly against Ammu and Velutha. "Anointing her thoughts with unctuous oils",

She decided to resort to lies and perjury, fully convinced of her self-righteousness: she "set sail at once. Roy is ironical about the behavior of the Police posse, which acted "with economy, not

frenzy". Unlike the custom of rampaging religious mobs or conquering armies running riot", "they didn't hack off his genitals and stuff them in his mouth", the narrative voice goes on (309), only to conclude: "After all, they were not battling an epidemic. They were merely inoculating a community against an outbreak". In other words, they were discouraging any further cross-caste affairs, teaching once again to the people the lesson they ought never to forget. The feelings that impel the policemen are "born of inchoate, unacknowledged fear - civilization's fear of nature, men's fear of women, and power's fear of powerlessness" (308).

Nevertheless, Arundhati Roy is constantly careful to remind her readers that there is a blind spot in the ideological discourse of Castism. Some exogamous marriages are more desirable than others. Baby Kochamma despises Ammu's husband for being Bengali and Hindu, and cruelly dislikes the twins for being "Half-Hindu Hybrids whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian would ever marry" (45), but, following the warped logic of her "Anglophile", colonized mind, she admires Chacko for having married an English woman and for having fathered a "beach-coloured" little angel (179). Ammu is condemned, Chacko condoned, for exactly the same "crime" of exogamy followed by divorce, and Chacko is aware of this double standard, he who proudly leads his ex-wife and child into the house "like a pair of tennis trophies". As for Mammachi, though she despises Margaret for her lack of social standing and has filed her in her mind under the category "shopkeeper's daughter" (with no doubt the author's wink here at that other Margaret, Mrs. Thatcher), she nevertheless treats her grandchildren differently. The twins are devalued currency in her eyes, while she acknowledges the sterling quality of her "English" granddaughter, whom she "reads like a cheque" and "check[s] like a bank note" (174), and whose physical appearance almost comes up to her Anglophile expectations, since she has "Nalmost blond" hair and "Nnnn...Almost rosy" cheeks (174).

Likewise, there is a double standard towards illicit affairs. Mammachi grows hysterical at the idea of Ammu in Velutha's arms, whereas she does everything she can to pander to Chacko's "Man's Needs" (168, 238). Some "Touchable" Men have no aversion to "touching" Untouchable women, just as white men in racist, segregated countries forced themselves on black women, leaving them with litters of bastard children who were considered "Coloured" in their turn. In his novel ***Untouchable,*** published in 1935, Mulk Raj Anand describes the vengeful fury of a Brahmin priest whose sexual advances to the pretty Sohini, an Untouchable, have been repulsed. There is hypocrisy at work here, "purity" and "untouchability" becomes a variable, relative set of values, not an absolute one. And since the priest cannot enjoy her, he takes revenge on her by accusing her of having defiled him:

When Baneth-Nouailhetas discusses Roy's treatment of "the theme of sexual transgression", she argues that Roy "insists, through semantic repetition, on the kinship between the two forms of transgression, one universal the taboo of incest, and the other local" (cross-caste relations) (Baneth-Nouailhetas 143-144). According to her, this "conflation between rules of caste and universal social

laws (...) inevitably questions the validity of both", which is "undeniably striking and disturbing" for the reader (144). In other words, she argues that Roy chose to interrogate "the origins of the Law", in a deliberate celebration of transgression purse.

My contention however is that in spite of the undeniable similarities and verbal parallels, in spite of sentences repeated like a poetic burden in both love scenes "it was a little cold. A little wet. A little quiet The Air. / But what was there to say?" (Roy 299, 328, 338), Roy is spelling out the differences much more than she is identifying the two transgressions. "It would be easier" writes Baneth-Nouailhetas "to dismiss the scene as a metaphorical, slightly excessive representation of fraternal, geminate love" (2002, 144). I believe the metaphor is different, and that the breaching of the incest taboo is meant to embody the final logic of endogamy, of the refusal of exogamy. Endogamy does not only lead to the tragic ending of a drama (what Baneth-Nouailhetas calls "the facility of - the all in all familiar story - a 'star-crossed' love", 144); more practically, this incestuous union becomes an ironical metaphor for an excessive "purity" which leads to a genetic dead-end, and to the end of lineage and life; in other words, to the "Inbreeding" denounced by Chacko, who praises the "indecently healthy" appearance of his daughter and his nephew and niece: "He said it was because they didn't suffer from Inbreeding like most Syrian Christians. Rohinton Mistry, an Indian expatriate now living in Canada, treated the same theme of Inbreeding in his novel *Family Matters*, set in Bombay, in which a Parsi father reproaches his son for loving a non Parsi. He is a Gujarati Parsi, she is an impure outsider, a "Maharastrian" whose behaviour would put a Parsi girl to shame, the father thinks, and if his son married her he would taint and betray his "pure Persian race" (Mistry 2003, 482). In a similar vein of protest, Nadeem Aslam, a British writer who emigrated from Pakistan at the age of fourteen, denounced forced arranged marriages between first cousins in his beautiful, lyrical novel *Maps for Lost Lovers*. Often such inbred marriages result in the birth of malformed offspring (Aslam 2004, 189).

Conversely, in his novel *Shalimar the Clown*, Salman Rushdie celebrates the tolerance for which the Kashmiris were famous, and depicts a hero who scorns the very ideas of purity and endogamy:

> The words *Hindu* and *Muslim* had no place in their story, [Noman] told himself. In the valley these words were merely descriptions, not divisions. The frontiers between the words, their hard edges, had grown smudged and blurred. This was how things had to be. This was Kashmir. (Rushdie 2005, 57).

But the incestuous relationship between the twins is more than just an excessive, sarcastic metaphor pointing inexorably towards the warped logic of "purists"; it is also a metaphor for a futureless life, a life that has turned into a blind alley, pushing the twins into a regressive desire for

safety and the pacifying of pain, at all costs. Like the characters in Graham Swift's *Water land*, "whose lives have stopped though they must go on living" (Swift 102), the adult twins have no prospects, no hope, no desire, and exist only in the protracted anguish of an eternal present. The incest scene begins with verbs in the present tense, like "she whispers", "she moves her mouth" (Roy 1997, 327), whereas the love scene between Velutha and Ammu is narrated in the tense of myth and story-telling, the preterit.

The emphasis on the symbolical death-in-life of the twins explains the frequent recurrence of the ironical, ambiguous jingle, "viable/ die-able", which reminds us that in the diegetic, chronological time of the story they will be thirty-one years old in a few months, in November of 1993, and therefore will be as old as their mother was when she died, "Not old. Not young. But a viable, die-able age" (3, 92, 161, 327).

Her mother, Sophie thinks, was the only one to escape, but there will be no way for the twins to get out of their own stifling cupboard; Pectin, Hectic and Abednego may build an ark, "like Noah's sons", in order to save. But Estha and Rahel will not be part of the voyage: on this ark, "Twins were not allowed" (196). Nor will they have a God to bring them unscathed out of the fiery furnace, as did Shadrach, Meschach, and Abednego (cf. Book of Daniel, chapters 1 to 3).

The love scenes between Estha and Rahel on the one hand, Velutha and Ammu on the other are in fact far from "similar", they are altogether different. The two lovers live an intense, oxymoronic parenthesis of threatened wonder, agonized delight, disbelieving bliss, whereas the two twins do not share happiness, but "hideous grief" (328). The twins have become allegories of dull, empty-minded absence, of aborted potentialities that will never be fulfilled: they embody "Quietness and Emptiness, frozen two-egg *fossils*" (236, italics mine). Separated from mother and sister, Estha fell silent, and his quietness created in Rahel "a hollow where [his] words had been", a dark hole of withdrawal and reticence that always puzzled her husband during their short-loved marriage:

The lovemaking between Estha and Rahel is not at all, as it is in Ammu's and Velutha's case, a deliberate, willful Transgression of the Law, quite the contrary: it is a blind, groping desire to regress to the warmth and security, the freedom from pain, the apartness from the cruelty of life and the world, that the maternal womb provides. When Rahel discovers "the silver bowl that Baby Kochamma had installed on the roof", she imagines herself there with Estha, in a half humorous, half wistful longing for the fontal state: "If they slept there, she and Estha, curled together like fetuses in a shallow steel womb, what would Hulk Hogan and Bam Bam Bigelow do?" (188). As for Estha, the octopus of Quietness soothed him, because it "rocked him to the rhythm of an ancient, fontal heartbeat" (11, italics mine). This constant need to flee from trauma is poignantly present in the paradoxical comfort that Rahel draws from a mad woman in New York, because "it drew her closer into New York's

deranged *womb*. Incest can be interpreted as Roy's way of demonstrating, through an absurd example, how warped the logic of endogamy and "purity" is. If left to their own devices, animals, including the human species, will tend to feel attracted towards animals of the opposite sex that will best increase the genetic pool, thus ensuring genetic diversity; whereas racist or ideological considerations about the "purity" of the "blood" or the "race" are much more likely to lead to degeneration. Hence the idea that it is not only romantic "elective affinities", as Goethe would say, which make Ammu suddenly notice that Velutha's "flat muscled boy's body" has suddenly turned into a "contoured and hard" man's body (175). That deep seated, "biological" seed of desire is then nursed by grafting onto it romantic ideas about soul and character:

Ammu's rage and "effrontery" (180) have not been acquired at university or in books: "she was just that sort of animal" (180). Ammu is made and programmed to refuse the docile, submissive, quiet role models of ideal Indian womanhood, the role models of Sita or Parvati. Like Kalyani, Pillai's wife. Or like Deven's wife in Anita Desai's *In Custody*. The songs Ammu listens to on her little tangerine radio turn her into a "witch" and make her "walk out of her world" "to a better, happier place" (44, 332). One of those Bellwood film songs is from the film called Chemmeen, well suited to push Ammu to rebellion since it is the tragic story of a forced arranged marriage which crosses the true love of two lovers and ends with everybody dying (218-219). At such moments, there is "something restless and untamed about her", and the "infinite tenderness of motherhood" becomes "an unmixable mix", mixed up as it is with "the reckless rage of a suicide bomber" (44). Rahel and Estha, before the Terror, share her daring, rebellious mood; they refuse to obey the law that they should stay away from the house of the Paravans "because it will only cause trouble" (220). They refuse to be cowed, and Miss Mitten thinks they have "Satan in their eyes" (60). Ammu refuses to stay on the right side of the dividing, forbidden line: "she sets herself on the Usage Edge" (44). Yet the Terror finally breaks up their spirits, turning Ammu into a broken, prematurely old woman, linked by the motif of phlegm to the mad old woman that Rahel sees on the New York subway, and turning the twins into numb zombies, the victims of an indelible trauma.

The order of the narrative places the description of the truly transgressing love scenes between Ammu and Velutha at the very end of the novel, although in the chronological order of events the incest scene should have come last. This is of course deliberate, and the last word, "Tomorrow", though it echoes sadly since the reader knows the two lovers have no future to look forward to, nevertheless expresses a hope in a more distant future, when future generations will at last have managed to do away with stultifying fantasies of purity, imposing in their place hybridist, and the limitless potentialities of "bastardies".

We can answer our initial question by asserting that if Roy celebrates the deliberate, free transgression of the Caste boundary by Velutha and Ammu, her depiction of the transgression of the

taboo incest is depicted as the blind *regressive* desire for tranquility of two broken beings, not as a willful transgression. The latter, far from constituting a social progress, can be felt as the monstrous ultimate aim of phantasms of purity, while the former points towards a longing for a better, happier future. Far from being similarly two transgressions which betray a nostalgia for a "pre-social" endemic golden time of prelapsarian innocence, "an equally childish and mythical conception of life "before" the Law", as Baneth-Nouailhetas (145) argues, the two types of love scene show that Roy is not interested in a purely abstract questioning of the origins and validity of the Law, and especially of the universal taboo against incest. On the contrary she is very committed to seeing a change in the enduring injustices and the sheer waste of human potential linked to caste prejudice, therefore she is committed simply to social progress. However Roy, ever the militant, warns us that this progress will not come from the west or from a globalize economy:

"Tomorrow", "les lend mains qui chanting", as the French say, will not come from liberalism but from those free souls who have rage and anger enough within them, and courage enough, to place themselves "on the dangerous edge of things", to recall again the resonant phrase borrowed by Rushdie from Graham Greene's autobiography *A Sort of Life*, and which Greene had originally taken from Browning's poem "Bishop Brougham's Apology". Progress will come from those courageous souls, helped and encouraged by the potent voice of literature. Arundhati Roy is one of them, both a brave, committed activist who is never afraid of breaking unjust bounds, and a delicate, gifted literary artist.

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