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**The Changing Image of Women in Indian Writing in English -
A Study of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things***

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Abstract

In her novel, *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy attacks age-old attitudes and constructs such as phallocentrism, which has social and religious sanction.

Arundhati Roy's Rahel in *The God of Small Things* reveals the changing role of woman in Indian postcolonial literature.

This paper analyzes the character development of Ahel as well as her mother, Ammu. In addition, a discussion on the series of “disappointments in love,” which runs through the novel is pursued to show that the disadvantages and oppression of women run through generations and this has its effect on all, including individuals, families and society.

The roles of male characters in relation to and comparison with the lives of women are also discussed.

Deconstruction of Stereotypical Constructs

In her novel, *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy deconstructs stereotypical constructs about women and we get the message that women can play an equal part with men, only if they gain a distinct voice of their own and learn to transcend the traditional barriers of their silence. Indian society is all bent upon to abuse a woman as immoral when there is even a slight deviation from the accepted ways of behaviour. Roy attacks age-old attitudes and constructs such as phallogentrism, which has social and religious sanction. Phallogentrism is defined as the view “centered on or emphasizing the masculine point of view” (Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/phallogentrism>).

Women in Indian Postcolonial Literature

The roles of women in literature are often quite wide in spectrum. Women were often portrayed as secondary characters to the greater men who carried the story line along, while the females simply offered a supporting role in the midst of the action. However, during the colonial rule and through contact with western philosophies and movements, slowly but steadily, the strength of the women characters was focused upon in the writings of some authors, and this was certainly in contrast to the traditional picture of literary damsels.

Arundhati Roy among Indian Writers

Among the women writers of Indian English fiction, Arundhati Roy has earned a distinct space for her particular attention towards the plight of women and social injustice. Her sensitive portrayal and understanding of intrinsic human nature makes her writings relevant to current interests.

Arundhati Roy's Rahel in *The God of Small Things* helps to establish the ever-changing role of woman in Indian postcolonial literature.

Rahel

Rahel, the woman representing India in the novel under study here, is remarkable and incredibly strong-willed. A sense of self and reason permeates her actions. The novel is claimed to be fictional, but it certainly portrays the new birth of a culture even amidst oppression.

Rahel in Roy's *The God of Small Things* is portrayed as having great intellect which became apparent, even at a young age. Rahel has the power to see past the incidents of everyday, to look beyond the borders and barriers of family and gender, and overcome the oppression of women.

Rahel's pervasive imagination allows her to lead two lives, one completely inside her head and the other as an unfortunate young Indian woman with an increasingly decrepit (fallen into ruin or disrepair, wasted and weakened by or as if by the infirmities of old age, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/decrepit>) family. While her twin brother, Estha, merely accepts the fate that has been chosen for him, Rahel dares to defy the odds and think outside of the box. She is strong-willed, independent, and never sees herself as a victim.

Ammu, the Victim of Phallocentrism

Another notable character in this novel is Ammu, mother of Rahel and Estha. After a failed marriage with a Bengali drunkard in Calcutta, Ammu reached back Ayemenem in Kerala with her children. What all she detested a few years back in Ayemenem, she came to terms now with the reality. But the Syrian Christians ostracized her and this thwarted her desire to live there peacefully. Both her children and she stood orphaned. Though they were physically present in the village, they were socially boycotted and isolated. Similarly Velutha, because of his status as an untouchable, remained isolated always and emerged a playmate for the children of Ammu.

A thin veneer of romance bloomed between Velutha and Ammu. Ammu started viewing Velutha in a strange way. Gradually she lost herself in the world of Velutha. The social constructs of 'love laws' were shattered. When she violated the social barriers she seemed to say that "women are an oppressed class. Our oppression is total, affecting every facet of our lives. We are exploited as sex objects, breeders, domestic servants and cheap labourers. We are considered inferior beings, whose only purpose is to enhance men's lives. Our humanity is denied. (Firestone 127)

Disappointments in Love

Throughout this novel, we witness the procession of disappointments in love, so well characterized by a phrase in Indian languages -- the phrase "love-failures," which is adopted in Indian English as well. The love-failures of Margaret-Chakko, Ammu-Papa, and Mamachi-Papachi move our hearts and mind as human tragedy.

The head of the Ayemenem family is Papachi who is a hardcore male chauvinist.

Shulamith Firestone describes the tyranny of male supremacy in these words: "Male supremacy is the oldest, most basic form of domination... men dominate women. They have used their power to keep women in an inferior position. All men receive economic, sexual and psychological benefits from male supremacy. All men have oppressed women. (Firestone 127)

Throughout the novel, Papachi is found torturing and harassing his wife always quite brutally. In order to escape from these tortures, Ammachi starts scribbling cooking tips which later prompted her to establish a pickle factory. The story ends with the ruins of the pickle factory. Baby Kochamma, Ammu's aunt, falls in love with a Christian priest. With her unrequited love, Baby ruined her life writing "I love you" always.

Ammu, on the other hand, fell in love with a Bengali drunkard betraying and antagonizing her parents. Deserted by the drunkard, she experienced the agony of remaining husbandless. Her relationship with Velutha quenches her sexual thirst which then gets converted into a sensitive romantic affair. "She advocated small weddings in ordinary clothes. It made them less ghoulish, she thought."(44)

Ammu is a rebel struggling inside her to cross the limits that block Indian women. "It was what she had battling inside her. An unmixable mix. The infinite tenderness of motherhood and the reckless rage of a suicide bomber. It was this that grew inside her, and eventually led her to love by night the man her children loved by day." (44)

Ammu, like Velutha, has to pay a heavy price for transgressing the love laws by having an illicit affair with Velutha. Ultimately she is disowned by the society, separated ruthlessly from her children and faces death.

Of all the characters in the novel, Ammu stands indomitable against the hegemonic forces of male oriented society, its cruel tenets and traditions.

Mother and Daughter

Many of Rahel's qualities mirror that of her mother, Ammu. Ammu also did not accept the life that was handed to her; rather, she embarked on a journey with a man she loved - an Untouchable - that begged more trouble than ever anticipated. While her lover had already been from an oppressed caste, Ammu chose the road he had been set upon in order to be with him, and it resulted in her demise.

The strong-willed mother set an example for her independent daughter, and at a young age, Rahel was able to see past the boundaries of death, circumstance, and fate.

While Estha, who had lived much the same life as Rahel, he moved around mutely and lived in a closed-off world, his twin sister dared to dream and let herself go. She imagined what she could not conjure; she believed what she could not see.

Rahel's willingness to see the good in people inherently brings out her feminine qualities, and the relationships she embarks on, much like her mother, reflect this. Her actions showed her determination not to let the world around her shape her, and in this, she defies the world altogether.

Autobiographical Nature of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

Roy presents a most believable and relatable woman in Rahel because her book is slightly autobiographical. Roy herself grew up in the same region, giving an air of authenticity to her protagonist. Flavia Rando, in *The Essential Representation of Woman*, writes, "Both poststructuralists and cultural feminists can be seen working in reaction and in relation to the Western cultural ideal, 'man, a rational individual with free will'" (48). Roy embraces her heritage and her femininity as well as the concept of woman versus man which she expertly illustrates as she juxtaposes Rahel and Estha.

Close to Her Roots and Defining Paradigms

At the time of the publication of this novel, Roy stood close to her roots and stood out among all her female and male peers. Presently, as a social activist, Roy is vociferous against the hegemonic forces and the privileged sections of the society in favour of the voiceless. Because of her prominence in social activism now, it is inevitable that we view an earlier work of hers from the present perspective. What is most significant and interesting is the fact that there is an unbroken thread of life here.

With the publication of *The God of Small Things*, Roy subverts the existing social order by bringing down the privileged dominant sections to the margins and by pushing the “others” towards the centre. In the words of Mukherjee, “Arundhati Roy’s has become a phenomenon in the literary world, especially after the novelist won the Booker prize.” (38)

Roy provides a window through which Indian womanhood can be explored and interpreted.

In reviewing *The God of Small Things* certain recurring paradigms may be identified which personify Indian women. These pivotal defining paradigms are grouped as family and marriage, education and workplace, and the female body.

To Conclude

Roy portrays her women characters as being torn between traditional boundaries and modern free zones. No doubt, Arundhati Roy shifted the issues related to women which were till recently in the periphery. She seems to assert that “a woman is a being. She is not an appendage of man. A woman is not the ‘other’. She is not an addition to man. She is an autonomous being, capable of, through trial and error, finding her own way to salvation.” (Ramamoorthy 115).

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