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Resisting Patriarchy- A Study of the Women in *The God of Small Things*

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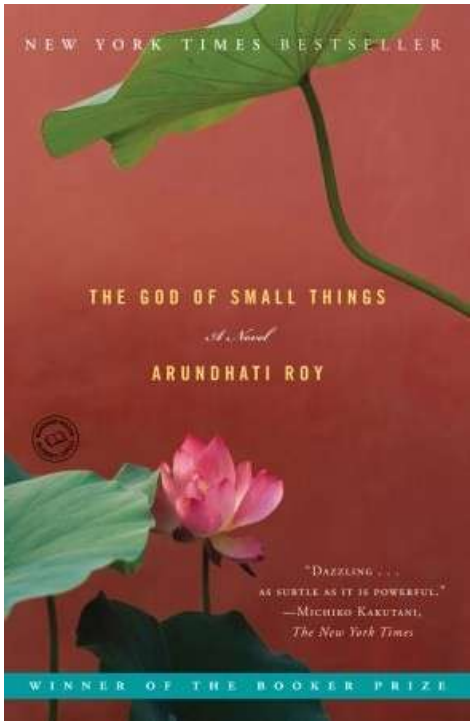

Abstract

The God of Small Things depicts the social reality in the last few decades where organized movements to raise the consciousness of women began. There has been a very strong resistance to harassment, cruelty and discrimination against women, finding an organized expression for assertion of rights. The women in The God of Small Things are depicted as victims by the forces of history, dead convention, false pride, the tyranny of the state and the politics of opportunism and andocentric order. They stand for those women who are aspiring for freedom and equality, challenging traditional ideas and conventions.This idea is brought out clearly by the author in portraying a slow but definite assertion of confidence in the women in the novel, with every passing generation. This defiance of the social, political, sexists and casteist prejudices that society conforms to make the novel end on a promising note- the promise of a better 'naaley'- tomorrow.

Complexity of Small Things in Society

Much has been written and discussed about the wide variety of complex issues dealt within this novel. In one of her interviews, the author Arundhati Roy has said: "Fiction for me has been a way of trying to make sense of the world as I know it…..if I had to put it very simply, it is about trying to make the connections between the very smallest things and the very biggest things and to see how those fit together".(*Roy, Amitabh. The God of Small Things-A Novel of Social Commitment,pg.45)*

The novel thus reflects the author's deep concern for the 'small things' and her commitment to these issues. The 'small things' are the victims of the state, society and the will of a powerful, dominant class. One such category she strongly portrays is that of women who are placed in a subordinate position by society and left defenceless by the state. In her book, *The Broken Republic*, where she writes about the plight of the tribals and marginalised groups in various parts of India, she asks a pertinent question - "When people are being brutalised what 'better' thing is there for them to do than to fight back? It's not as though anyone's offering them a choice, unless it's to commit suicide, like the 180,000 farmers caught in a spiral of debt have done." (Roy, Arundhati. *Broken Republic - Three Essays*,pg.21)

Women Characters in *The God of Small Things*

The God of Small Things depicts the social reality in the last few decades where organized movements to raise the consciousness of women began. There has been a very strong resistance to harassment, cruelty and discrimination against women, finding an organized expression for assertion of rights.

The female characters belong to the Syrian Christian community, a community founded when St. Thomas, the apostle of Jesus Christ, reached Kerala in the first century and established several churches. These women belong to different age groups and three different generations. The novel records their joys and sorrows, successes and failures, and what they have attempted and attained.

Baby Kochamma, Victim of Social Oppression

Baby Kochamma is the daughter of Reverend E. John Ipe, a priest of the Mar Thoma church. Although she and her brother were brought up in a religious atmosphere, she makes use of religion as a deceptive goal to fulfill her biological impulses. She falls in love with Father Mulligan and converts herself to the Roman Catholic faith hoping to be in close contact with him. But this plan of her fails and her parents realize that she would not be able to find a life partner from the Syrian Christian Community and therefore, send her for higher education to America.

Her obsession with the priest who always remains an elusive figure continues even after his death. She keeps writing love notes in her diary and continues to live a teenager's life even at the age of eighty three. By refusing to live like a widow, she tries to live her life backward by living a materialistic life and trying to regain what she did not get in her youthful days. She becomes a narcissist which eventually leads to the extent of sadism.

In the name of decency and restraint, she submits to the very sexist, casteist and communal prejudices which denied her gratification. Thus she herself becomes a victim of social oppression.

She also maintains double standards in matters regarding sex. So she allows Chacko to carry on relationships with the women labourers in his factory, she denies her niece, Ammu children only because they are 'half-Hindu's.

Baby Kochamma seems detestable when we consider her role in killing Velutha which eventually leads to the death of her niece Ammu and ruins the lives of Estha and Rahel. But she is not only a victimizer but a victim of false notions of society herself. Brainwashed with notions of ideal womanhood, sexist, castiest and communal ideas, she finds her own life ending in defeat and failure.

Mammachi

Mammachi is the sister-in-law of Baby Kochamma, who again is similar in submitting to the traditional notions of male supremacy, love and marriage. However, she is more of a victim because of her unhappy marriage to Benaan John Ipe who is seventeen years older than her.

Mammachi is not only a passive sufferer of her husband's physical abuse but a victim of his jealousy too. By breaking her violin and discouraging her business acumen in running the pickle factory, he turns her married life completely devoid of love, understanding and co-operation.

Although Mammachi is hardworking and deserves to be called better at business than her son, her son cleverly takes over the pickle factory which she had been running successfully. Mammachi submits to the idea of being a sleeping partner and the domination of her son in her old age. Like Baby Kochamma, she subscribes to the ethics of male chauvinism when she silently supports her son's sexual adventures but punishes her daughter for the relationship she has with Velutha. Because of her

caste and class bias, she summons Velutha to her house and is also largely responsible for his murder by the police.

Ammu, the Rebel

Ammu is the daughter of Mammachi and Benaan John Ipe. Because of her father's male chauvinism, education especially higher education is considered "an unnecessary expense for a girl". But the son Chacko is sent to Oxford for higher studies. (*Roy, Amitabh. The God of Small Things-A Novel of Social Commitment,pg.69)*

Ammu, however shows a lot of independence of mind, courage and moral strength, even when she has to live will her ill-tempered father and wait patiently for marriage proposals. She manages to escape to Calcutta and ends up marrying a Bengali Hindu. Thus she transgresses the laws of her family and society by marrying in an unconventional manner.

Ammu shows her strength of mind not only in marrying the man of her choice but also in divorcing him when the choice proves wrong. Ammu refuses to join the axial line of femininity.Seeing her mother victimised by the patriarchal system, symbolised by her unempathetic, dominating father, she becomes the carrier of her mother's rage inside her. She tolerates the atrocities of her husband, a lazy drunkard, for some time, but reacts very strongly when he shows utter disregard for her 'self' and prods her to have a relationship with his boss. She leaves him and returns to Ayemenem, thus rebelling against the patriarchal system.

Unlike Mammachi, she hits him back when he resorts to violence, thus breaking the traditional idea of the ideal Indian woman. She also challenges the andocentric notions of society when she avoids the surname after divorce.

As a mother, she loves her children. When she returns to her parental home after divorce, she creates a very special bond of love and care with her children and resists the hypocrisy with which society tries to sympathize with them.

The rebel in Ammu is seen when she proceeds to reclaim her body through her elaborate dressing and midnight swims in the river. She is attracted to Velutha not just because her children love him, but also because of the rebel she saw in Velutha when he led a procession holding the red flag. So what seems an illicit relationship between a divorcee, touchable women and an untouchable Paravan is actually a union of two rebels protesting against hypocritical laws of society not in word, but in deed. According to Emma Goldman,*"Society considers the sex experiences of man as attributes of his general development, while similar experiences in life of a woman are looked upon as a terrible calamity, a loss of honour and all that is good and noble in a human being*".(Roy, Amitabh. *The God of Small Things* - A Novel of Social Commitment, pg.74)

Even when Velutha dies in the police lock up, Ammu goes to the police station with Estha and Rahel to set the records straight. Here she is humiliated and branded as a 'Veshya' and asked to leave without registering the case. The indomitable courage and spirit she holds on to in such tragic and humiliating circumstances is truly admirable.

Resistance to Patriarchal Hierarchy

We find Ammu and her children, Rahel and Estha, constantly resisting the patriarchal hierarchies of caste, race and gender in society. Ammu, the biggest victim of the system, is an archetypal image of a daughter marginalised in a patriarchal society. "Perhaps Ammu, Estha and Rahel were the worst transgressors. They all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tampered with laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much." (Panigrahi, P.K. *Encyclopaedia of postcolonial literature in English*, pg.1073)

Ammu, the central character of the novel, has only a marginal existence in the family structure. A traditional patriarchal society does not give much importance on women's education and so Ammu is married off at a young age. However, the marriage ends in divorce, and she has to face ostracism from her family and society.Ammu, however, learns to despise the ugly face of sympathy.

Finally Ammu and the children are thrown out of the Ayemanam home, which separates three lives and ruins all of them. This is extremely poignant. However she fights till her death against the powerful tyrannical forces and dies early at thirty-one.

Narrative Strategy – Through the Eyes of a Child

The story, told from the child Rahel's point of view is an indictment of society. It also shows how a woman's wishes are disregarded by patriarchy. Our culture idealizes female martyrdom and self-denying women are extolled in the various myths that constitute a part of the Indian cultural legacy. Women are conditioned and brought up through the examples of timeless feminine symbols of Indian womanhood like Sita and Savitri. (Singh, Jyoti. *Indian Women Novelists-pg.31)*

Rahel

Ammu's daughter Rahel is the last in the line of the generation of women in the novel. It seems that Rahel is able to understand the agony of her mother, realise the great injustice and cruelty done towards her and is filled with profound compassion for her. Having lost her parents and facing neglect from relatives, she has grown into an independent, daring and capable woman.

She leaves the Ayemanam house and joins the college of architecture where she drags on for eight years so that she can live and stay on her own there. Her marriage with Larry, a research scholar, turns out to be futile and she refuses to be in the relationship and breaks it soon. Unlike her mother, there is no feeling of shame about the divorce but she takes her decisions with clarity and perception and confidence.

In spite of the difficult situations in her life, she moves ahead and takes up odd jobs in New York, where she has to work under tough conditions. We can also see the great sense of responsibility Rahel has for her brother, who is a part of her own self to her. She leaves her job to look after her brother whose traumatic experiences have turned him speechless. Thus she returns from New York to Ayemanam again.

Validating the 'Self'

The feeling of resistance required for validating the 'self', however, is often stifled by the dominating society or by the pressure of circumstances. Whenever a woman wanted to break her silence and speak out, she has been brutally silenced. Ammu adopts a course that challenges hegemony. Rahel is often an eyesore because of her self-willed actions that are branded as perverted. The march of these women is towards freedom. The author absolves them of guilt and, instead of indicting them for their desires and urges, tries to understand their intentions. They are victimised at emotional and physical levels, but they transcend the image and refuse to ascribe to the given construct. (Singh, Jyoti. *Indian Women Novelists-pg.159,160)*

From victims to victors- a hope for a better future

Thus the women in *The God of Small Things* are depicted as victims by the forces of history, dead convention, false pride, the tyranny of the state and the politics of opportunism and andocentric order. Both Baby Kochamma and Mammachi are conditioned by society to identify with the ideas and forces of oppression. They are in a way dehumanised as a result of suffering in a society dominated by men and money.

Ammu and Rahel, on the other hand, are the rebels who represent the defiance of the present state of society from educated, passionate and thinking women. They stand for those women who are aspiring for freedom and equality, challenging traditional ideas and conventions. Interestingly, the character of Ammu draws some similarities in the author's own mother, Mary Roy. Mary Roy won a lawsuit in 1986 against the inheritance legislation of the Syrian Christian Community in the Supreme Court. The judgment ensured equal rights for Syrian Christian women, with their siblings in their ancestral property.

It is significant to note that resistances pertaining to any victimised group do not spring up out of nowhere. They are tools which over a period of time gather momentum over history. This idea is brought out clearly by the author in portraying a slow but definite assertion of confidence in the women in the novel, with every passing generation. This defiance of the social, political, sexists and casteist prejudices that society conforms to make the novel end on a promising note- the promise of a better 'naaley'- tomorrow.(Roy, Arundhati. *The God of Small Things*,pg.340)

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