

Unrequited Love in the Novels of Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai: A Thematic Study

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the convolutions of 'Unrequited Love' in the novels of Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai. Love per se has multiple dimensions and this theme has liberally been exploited in English literature. But Roy and Desai, the Booker Prize winning authors have dealt with the theme of one-sided love in such an atypical manner that it has opened up many new avenues for further discussions. They not only differ from their predecessors but also from each other when speak about this critical type of love. Being women, Roy and Desai have expressed various shades of personality of their female characters, but they have also shown comprehensive knowledge of male psychology. Both of the novelists are well aware of the different facets of love and they present almost all the shades of love in their works, but the focus of this paper is solely on the somber type of love known as unrequited love. Their lovelorn characters are too deep to be comprehended superficially, as they are multidimensional; they seem to breathe like actual human beings. A deep probe into their psyche is required in order to understand and appreciate the lovesick characters.

Keywords: Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai, Unrequited love, theme, marriage, lovelorn.

Introduction

Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai are internationally acclaimed authors, who are known for not only their striking style, but also for their distinctive and extraordinary treatment of ordinary themes. Roy has bagged the coveted Booker Prize for her debut novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Desai for her second novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), which adds them to the list of literary canon. Roy's much awaited second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* gets published in June 2017 and secures a place in the long-list of the Man Booker Prize. She has spent almost two decades to complete this multidimensional novel. On the other hand, Desai shows her inescapable presence in the literary world with her debut novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998), which keeps the honor to be serialised in *The New Yorker*. The present paper is based upon the thematic implications of 'unrequited love' in the above mentioned four novels of these two luminary novelists.

Theme of Love

The universality of the theme of love has fascinated almost all the writers of various genres. Love has diverse implications for different people; still its acceptability is at the global level. Love is one of the most recurrent themes in the novels of Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai. Both of the novelists have tried to explore love from multiple perspectives with the help of its different nuances. The thematic implication of love is extremely aggressive in the case of Roy, whereas Desai deals with it in a polite manner. Love is one of the most intricate concepts of life in general and literature in particular. Almost every branch of study has tried to explore love from all possible angles and love per se is a ruling theme in the novels of Roy and Desai, who try to present every facet of love. Psychologists, philosophers and thinkers have expressed their notions on love from several angles. The Eastern stance upon love is entirely different from that of the Western and so is the ancient from the modern. Indian mythology has also presented various shades of love such as physical, sexual, sensual, emotional, spiritual, and mystical. Roy is an expert in creating the web of themes which ultimately turns out to be extremely inextricable and Supriya Chaudhuri rightly points it out:

Roy handles the shifting surfaces of past and present with extraordinary fineness and delicacy, producing a controlled, intricate narrative structure through which the themes of love, spite, betrayal, hatred and guilt run like a spider's web. A remarkable achievement. (Cited in Roy *God* n.p.)

Convolutions of Unrequited Love

In most of the cases Arundhati Roy is more belligerent in expression when compared to Kiran Desai, but while presenting 'unrequited love' their roles have dramatically been swapped. Unrequited love that has been taken up by them is not a new theme; rather many of the great writers have already discussed it at length in their works. A critical study of the selected novels indicates that Roy and Desai have handled this delicate theme quite differently in comparison to their predecessors. More interestingly, their treatment of one-sided love is absolutely dissimilar from each other also. There are certain thin layers of subtext veiled within the actual texts, as the charm of their novels lie in its suggestiveness.

Desai presents Sai in a highly restless manner when Gyan prefers his struggle for Gorkhland over their love. Sai feels that their love is a one-sided affair and she violently attacks her lover. In fact she loves Gyan from the core of her heart, but their love is short-lived and she comprehends it well when goes to see him at his residence. She feels that her lover's priority is to rise for his identity and not to fall in love. The novelist very skillfully mingles the theme of 'identity, and 'violence' with that of the theme of 'unrequited love' in the following lines, "You hate me." Said Sai, as if she'd read his thoughts, "for big reasons, that have nothing to do with me. You aren't being fair" (Desai *Inheritance* 260). Suddenly their tender love takes a wrong turn due to a conflict of interests and they become excessively ferocious with each other. Gyan shouts at her and even manhandles the innocent girl. The lovelorn Sai experiences the feeling of love and betrayal at the same time. Gyan along with his sister rush inside his home leaving the uninvited and unwanted guest outside:

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Sai began to follow brother and sister but then stopped. Shame caught up with her. What had she done? It would be her they would laugh at, a desperate girl who had walked all this way for unrequited love. (262)

Similarly, Vesela Mihaylova Vladimirova discusses love in general and unrequited love in particular in her thesis and throws ample light on the scientific as well as psychological aspects of one-sided love. Her study is subjective and based upon her personal unreciprocated love-affair. She hints upon the mental changes that occur when a lover understands his/her one sidedness of love:

When one realizes that their partner is ending the relationship, usually he or she denies the truth because the break up is too cruel to be comprehended. With the realization, the abandoned partner becomes intensely restless. (Vladimirova 20)

Sai behaves exactly in the same perturbed manner with Gyan who stops visiting Sai's residence, which Sai eventually sniffs as a breakup from his side.

In contrast to Sai's insolent behavior, Arundhati Roy designs a docile response of Tilo in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, when she gets to know about the marriage of her lover Musa. Just like Gyan, who gives more importance to his struggle for his community, Musa's priority is also the freedom for the Kashmiris. Tilo is a second choice for Musa, which he proves multiple times. He leaves Tilo whenever he feels like and suddenly enters in her life and desires priority. Tilo knows that Musa's first and last love is for Kashmir even then she extends her unconditional support whenever he requires. Many times she gets the impression that the love between them is absolutely unrequited, but she neither blames nor claims. Musa invites her to Kashmir and when she arrives there she considers herself as "a honeymooner without a husband" (Roy *Ministry* 48), though she doesn't mind even that. In their conversation she comes to know about Musa's wife and his daughter:

Tilo didn't know that Musa was married.

He hadn't told her.

Should he have?

Why should he have? ...

But she did mind.

Not because he was married, but because he hadn't told her. (351)

Tilo becomes silent with her lover to show her discontentment in contrast to Sai who expresses her disapproval with brutality. Tilo's love for Musa is absolutely impeccable and "The silence between them swelled and subsided" (353) in no time. Again her own love turns out to be inquisitive to know more about her lover's marriage, which shows a very deep understanding between Musa and Tilo:

'Did you love her?'

'I did. I wanted to tell you that'...

‘Why didn’t you tell me earlier, then?’
‘I don’t know’
‘Was it an arranged marriage?’
‘No.’ (357)

Musa is close enough to her to share about his love marriage and his daughter. On the other hand, Tilo is also mature enough to handle and absorb this shocking secret, calmly. The issues that hurt her are different and incomprehensible with a superficial understanding of her personality. She doesn’t mind that Musa got married, but he hasn’t informed her is the matter of resentment in her case. Similarly, when Musa seeks her consent to enter in her bedroom, it pinches her because she hates this type of formality between them. “Musa stood at the door of the carved, embroidered, patterned, filigreed bedroom and said, ‘May I come in?’ and that hurt her” (359). Tilo wishes to give all the possible liberties to her lover, but demanding and expecting nothing in return.

The sober presentation of unreciprocated love has already been dealt by Arundhati Roy in *The God of Small Things* through the passionate love of Baby Kochamma with Father Mulligan. In her teens Baby Kochamma starts dreaming about Father Mulligan. “When she was eighteen, Baby Kochamma fell in love with a handsome young Irish monk, Father Mulligan” (22). But he on his part displays more curiosity in studying Hindu scriptures and doesn’t pay much consideration to the Christian girl. “At first baby Kochamma tried to seduce Father Mulligan with weekly exhibitions of staged charity” (23), but it doesn’t get materialised. Luckily her father becomes a bridge between Baby Kochamma and Mulligan. There has been a substantial difference in the age of Father Mulligan and the father of Baby Kochamma, yet they become friends. The Irish monk becomes a regular invitee on lunch at the residence of Kochammas. He becomes flattered with the realisation that a young girl has fallen in love with him such madly. “Of the two men, only one recognized the sexual excitement that rose like a tide in the slender girl who hovered around the table long after lunch had been cleared away” (23). Eventually the moment comes when Father Mulligan has to go back to Madras and all her hopes become dupes.

Baby Kochamma has become the victim of one-sided love; even then she is ready to sacrifice her religion by becoming a ‘Roman Catholic’ for the sake of her love. She imagines a life with her assumed lover who is totally unaware of the intensity of her love towards him. Dead against the wishes of her own father she impulsively travels towards Madras to possess her lover, Father Mulligan. Roy, here again, doesn’t present Baby Kochamma’s aggression for her beloved Father Mulligan. But the novelist very skillfully preserves Baby Kochamma’s wrath for Ammu and her twins in the later part of the novel. Before that Baby Kochamma takes a baby step to meet Father Mulligan by joining a convent in Madras.

A deep probe in the psyche of Baby Kochamma shows that she has been suffering from another crude form of unrequited love, which is termed as ‘Limerence’ by Dorothy Tennov, a prominent psychologist in her book entitled *Love and Limerence: The Experience of Being in Love* (1979). According to Tennov ‘Limerence’ involves regular thinking about the limerent person and the victim seeks solace through imagining reciprocation of love, which Baby Kochamma experiences for a very long time:

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With special dispensation from the Vatican, she took her vows and entered a convent in Madras as a trainee novice. She hoped somehow that this would provide her with legitimate occasion to be with Father Mulligan. She pictured them together, in dark sepulchral rooms with heavy velvet drapes, discussing Theology. That was all she wanted. All she ever dared to hope for. Just to be near him. Close enough to smell his beard. To see the coarse weave of his cassock. To love him just by looking at him. (Roy *God* 24)

Although it is a herculean endeavour for a girl like Baby Kochamma, but she sniffs its futility very soon. Now she desires to leave the convent as her all hopes have met with a deadly end. Baby Kochamma's unrequited love makes her not only a volatile person, but also a killjoy. She goes to the extreme end to spoil the happiness of twins and the life of their miserable mother. But in her heart of hearts she keeps on adoring Father Mulligan. "And every night, night after night, year after year, in diary after diary after diary, she wrote: *I love you I love you*" (298).

Roy's female characters are decent and docile even after getting an otherwise treatment from their male counterparts. They may exhibit their boorishness to other characters, but not to their lovers. Desai's girls such as Sai in *The Inheritance of Loss* and Pinky in *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* on the other hand, are vindictive in nature. When their lovers don't respond accordingly Sai "scratched his [Gyan's] arm in red streaks" (*Inheritance* 261) and Pinky bites her lover and "A piece of his [Hungry Hop boy's] ear lay upon the ground" (*Hullabaloo* 113).

There is an interesting, but sharp contrast between Thomas Hardy's treatment of unrequited love in comparison to Roy and Desai. Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* has been brimming with the heartrending situations of unreciprocated love; it may be the major characters like Tess and Angel or Retty, Marian and Izz, the minor ones. Tess becomes so friendly with the milkmaids Retty, Marian and Izz, but all the four girls fall in love with Angel Clare. Hardy presents a remarkable scene of unrequited love at the time of Tess and Angel's wedding. The rest of the three lovelorn girls find no charm in their lives as their beloved Angel has married to Tess. Retty, who is obsessed with Angel, tries to end her life by drowning herself, Marrian is found excessively drunk in a shabby gutter and Izz goes into a severe depression. Their one-sided love has culminated with the advent of Angel's wedding with Tess. Hardy's female characters unlike that of Roy's and Desai's deem it as a verdict of the Almighty and he throws the ball in the court of fate. "They were simple and innocent girls on whom the unhappiness of unrequited love had fallen; they had deserved better at the hands of fate" (Hardy 196).

Through the character of Biplab Dasgupta, Arundhati Roy creates a unique type of one-sided love affair that he maintains with Tilo. Biplab, Naga, Musa and Tilo are classmates, but all the three boys fall in love with the same girl. Musa is the luckiest one who gets her unconditional love in return. As far as Naga is concerned he becomes her husband though the foundation of their marriage is not love but need. Biplab on the other hand helps her in the most perilous time of her life when she gets arrested as an acquaintance of a terrorist. He rents his apartment to Tilo and helps her in every possible manner. His love for Tilo remains a conundrum, which she never deciphers. He knows that his upper class Brahmin family would never accept a girl like Tilo who has no background at all. He starts with an infatuation that grows into a real love, which never gets fructified:

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Because all my life, ever since I first met her all those years ago when we were still in college, I have constructed myself around her. Not around *her* perhaps, but around the memory of my love for her. She doesn't know that. Nobody does, except perhaps Naga, Musa and me, the men who loved her. (*Ministry*149)

Biplab Dasgupta, the Deputy Station Head for the Bureau comprehends intelligently that “At no point did she ever offer me a hint that she might be open to a relationship of that sort” (149), still he presents a significant example of selfless one-sided love. When Tilo gets married to Naga, it gives a final blow to his flickering hopes and he admits again that “I loved her without pride. And without hope” (161). Roy, in comparison to her counterpart Desai, exhibits more comprehension of male psychology in the case of unreciprocated love and its intricacies.

To Conclude

Unrequited love, which is being considered as a malady of mind in the domain of psychology, has efficaciously been dealt in literature by Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai to untie its complex knots.

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