

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Situating Women in the Novel of Arundhati Roy

Dr. Riazul Hoque, Associate Professor, Deptt. Of English, Rupahi College, P.O. Rupahi, District. Nagaon, Assam- 782125

Abstract: Arundhati Roy drew the attention of the readers when she bagged the prestigious Booker Prize for her debut novel *The God of Small Things* in 1997. The novel throws light upon hierarchical structures of power and oppression at various levels in patriarchal societies. This novel has well established the theme of agony of discrimination portrayed as helpless women Ammu and her daughter Rahel in a middle class traditional family. If we look at the human history, we find that all patriarchal societies see women as secondary humans. However, caste and class differentials generate hierarchies among women and women are the most deprived of all.

Keywords: Feminist, gender, portrayal, hegemonies, gynocritics

When we read a text from feminist point of view we find that it suggests how we should look at “how (it) represents women, what it says about gender relations, how it defines sexual difference” (Belsey and Moore 1). In this context, the feminine sensibility of Arundhati Roy in her debut novel *The God of Small Things* is represented from feminist point of view. A common goal in both post colonialism and feminism is, “challenging forms of oppression” whatever they look like, and each context has its own unique structures of oppression (McLeod 174). In Roy’s novel, several layers of oppression stem from colonialism, patriarchy, religion and caste. Third World women and feminism within the post colonial literary genre there goes an ongoing discussion about first world feminism in relation to third world women (McLeod 174).

Arundhati Roy, an extraordinary novelist, has been widely reviewed by different scholars and critics throughout the world. There was a rush of articles and reviews following the publication of *The God of Small Things*, especially after it received the Booker Prize in London on 14 October, 1997. Umed Singh, in his elaborate article focusing on Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, perceptively highlights how both in manner and matter the novel epitomizes Indian sense and sensibility. The critic observes how the novelists asserts through her novel, her artistic independence shattering all

linguistic orthodoxies, denouncing thereby the hegemonies pertaining to the caste, creed, nation and gender. He writes:

The God of Small Things reverberates with a feel of Indian life and ethos. The very Indian life is brought live on the pages by evoking, economical, religious, cultural, social, political, geographical atmosphere of the country. (Singh 98)

Mithilesh K. Pandey in his insightful paper “The Erotic Scenes in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*” unravels the erotic-vulgar scenes depicted in the novel particularly romantic love relationship between Ammu and Velutha, Estha and Rahel. Roy’s portrayal of erotic and biological needs is akin to Lawrence’s Oedipus complex theory that crosses the Indian social norms. It deals with free, frank yet unusual sex relationship. Rahmat Jahan appreciates Arundhati’s Roy, the author of *The God of Small Things*, as a writer of protest against entrenched social maladies like untouchability. Similar theme was explored by Prakash Chandra Pradhan in his article “The God of Small Things: As Expression of Social Structure” that:

Human society is structured on the basis of class, status and human behaviour. The basic thing about human history is that love, true-sensuality, refreshing social-animating regenerative sex and individual genuine human emotions are not to be restricted to certain old-fashioned artificial conditioning. These entire things do us harm to an alarming proportion. (Pradhan 187)

Ranu Uniyal in her article “Narrative as Pastiche: *The God of Small Things*” writes that:

The book brings out many more complexities of life. It dares to look into the deeper facets of life. It locates the problematic of caste and gender, the life and ideology of communism. It challenges and questions some of the key issues confronting a society poised

RESEARCH ARTICLE

between tradition and modernity.
(Uniyal 39)

Prahlad A. Kulkarni in his perceptive essay entitled "From Frustration to Suffering: A Recurring Pattern in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*" opines that:

It seems that Arundhati Roy uses a particular pattern in the novel. Her characters have their weaknesses and have their distinct personalities. Their unquenched desires, unfulfilled assurances broken marriages, shattered faiths, unreasonable hate, planned revenge- all these form the crux of the novel. These complex and complicated problems bring them nothing but frustration, which later culminates in a perpetual suffering. (Kulkarni 188)

Arundhati Roy is projecting her feministic perspective in her portrayal of the women characters in her novel *The God of Small Things*. She has deliberately depicted the pitiable predicament of the characters of Ammu, Rahel, Mammachi and Margaret Kochamma in her novel with an obviously feministic objective with a view to censuring the patriarchal dominance that is indisputably attributable to the cause of suffering of these women. She has highlighted in the novel the cruelty, inhumanity and indifference of the male members of the society towards women who are treated with discrimination and partiality. Arundhati Roy's portrayal of characters is obviously purported to evoke the reader's sympathy and compassion towards her women characters and to criticize severely the upper hand and highhandedness of the patriarchy over matriarchy.

Viewed from the angles of the gynocritics, the narrative displayed by Arundhati Roy is authentically a feminine one. In *The God of Small Things*, tension rises from the female character's struggle against convention. Some painful personal account is woven into the tapestry of the text to objectify the patterns of power and powerlessness. Ammu is depicted as a woman fighting her family, her motherhood and society and with herself. The right to love a man of her choice is a woman's birth right and this birth right of Ammu is encroached upon in the name of caste. When Ammu establishes physical relationship with Velutha, the self-styled custodians of socio-cultural tradition takes a diabolical vengeance not

only by brutally killing Velutha but also by compelling Ammu to die a despondent solitary death in a grimy room in the Bharat Lodge in Alleppey where she had gone looking for employment. Roy states:

She died alone. With a noisy ceiling fan for company and no Estha to lie at the back of her. She was thirty one. Not old, not young, but a viable, disable age (74).

Hers is the story of the helplessness of the powerless against the powerful. The novel enacts the eternal drama of confrontation between the powerful and the powerless. The focus in Roy's narrative is on the irrationality and injustice of domestic and social life. Roy's assaults, on the lopsided values of male-dominated society, are characterized by their humour seasoned with irony and sarcasm which tend to avoid extremities of aggression and hostility. Most of the male characters in this family chronicle exhibit chauvinistic tendencies which vary in degree.

However victimization of Ammu is not the complete story of Arundhati Roy's novel. A new idiom of retaliation is coined by the woman of next generation, Rahel. Rahel had to be transferred from one school to another because of her perverse demeanor. She was just the opposite-detached and aggressive. Her aggressiveness is a perfect foil to her mother's passive suffering. She concluded her marriage in divorce because she was unable to relate completely with her American husband. She then worked for many years as "a night clerk, in a bullet proof cabin at a gas-station outside Washington, where drunks often vomited into the money tray and pimps propositioned her with more lucrative job offers" (20). It was only Rahel who successfully adjusted herself to such a job as no self-respecting, young Indian lady would take the risk of working in such a thoroughly immoral environment. The struggle also took a heavy toll of her natural womanly self. She developed a typical devil-may-care attitude. It was a natural outcome for a woman who was continually deprived of a warm hearth of a stable home and cursed with the nightmarish plight of a broken family.

In Arundhati Roy's fictional world, man and woman remain only islands and fail to shape up as continents because their relationship lacks mutual love, understanding and adjustments. Marriages too do not

RESEARCH ARTICLE

ensure happiness in Ayemenem household. Respectable family history coupled with high social position remains comfortably divorced from male chauvinism. In *The God of Small Things*, the novelist implicitly advocates greater social reform in the rigid positioning of women. The world of Arundhati Roy's novel is captured in a state of flux where the values of the patriarchal society are under attack from a new world in which self-interest and self-aggrandisement and social equality are forcing their entry. If we see the novel from a feminist point of, it speaks of the violence perpetrated upon women and paternal tyranny engulfing the luckless children.

REFERENCES

- [1]Belsey, Catherine and Moore, Jane. *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*. Malden: Macmillan, 1989. Print.
- [2]Kulkarni, Prahlad A. "From Frustration to Suffering: A Recurring Pattern in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*." *Indian Women Writers*, ed. R. K. Dhawan. New Delhi: Prestige, 2001. Print.
- [3]McLeod, John. *Beginning Post colonialism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998. Print.
- [4]Pradhan, Prakash Chandra. "The God of Small Things and Expression of Social Structure". *Studies in Women Writing in English*, eds. Mohit. K. Ray and Rama Kundu. New Delhi: Atlantic, 2005. Print.
- [5]Singh, Umed. "Indian Sensibility in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*". *Indian Writing in English*, eds. Binod Mishra and Sanjay Kumar. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2006. Print.
- [6]Uniyal, Ranu. "Narrative as Pastiche: *The God of Small Things*". *The SPIEL Journal of English Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, January 2005. Print.