THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

If Rama Mehta’s *Inside the Haveli* portrays a modern educated woman who is not diminished by the patriarchal structure of the haveli but succeeds in establishing her identity without disturbing its cultural roots, Jai Nimbkar’s *A Joint Venture*, which also deals with an educated woman, shows how she, in the process of her quest for identity, faces reality, realizes the meaning of marriage and becomes more matured. In contrast, Githa Hariharan’s *The Thousand Faces of Night*, deals with the emergence of a new woman who succeeds in defining a new identity for herself.

*The God of Small Things* can be considered a “… postcolonial novel for it seeks to restructure the power centre by giving right to women to live their lives in their own way …” (Sachdev, 102-103) It is a study of various post colonial issues of marginality such as gender bias, domestic violence and anglophilia. It is a radical, subversive and taboo-breaking novel. It is about a woman who seeks to break the age-old shackles and constraints and to assert her right to live her own way. “The novelist focuses on a woman’s need for freedom from her shifting existence; freedom not only from the social set up, but also from her own cultural consciousness in the self-imposed restrictions.” (Singh, 91) *The God of Small Things* is the portrayal of the plight of the women
in society and their marathon struggle for seeking the sense of ‘identity’ in a male-dominated conservative frame work. It is about a woman who yearns for happiness and a life far from constraints.

The novel presents the sad story of Ammu who loves “… not wisely but too well” and has been ruthlessly crushed down by the traditional society which is not only conservative but authoritarian as it prescribes who should love and whom. The whole novel moves around the sufferings of Ammu, a tragic victim, struggling against terribly tyrannical forces.

The novel portrays a detail picture of the lady’s childhood to adolescence, to the experience of marriage to a sympathetic and affectionate mother, to a rebel wife who challenges the age long hypocritical moral stand of a patriarchal family.

(Prasad, 194)

She seeks to be a self-confident individual trying to seek identity in sexual freedom. But there is no escape for her from the traditional and conventional system.

Arundhati Roy presents three generations of women to bring to light the double marginalization of the Indian women, on the one hand, by her own native culture and, on the other, by patriarchy. The first generation of women, Mammachi and Baby Kochamma, are complacent of their subordinate existence and silently approve of male sovereignty.
Thus they submit to the norms of patriarchy being traditional in their outlook. The second generation represented by Ammu and Margaret Kochamma, rebel against the socio-cultural codes of their society. They cross all limits of sexual codes imposed by patriarchal norms. Between the two, Ammu pays a heavy price for her non-conformity and defiance. Rahel, the representative of the contemporary generation, inherits the rebellious attitude of her mother, Ammu, and lives the life of a rebel and a non-conformist free from inhibitions and repressions. Far from being traditional, she is a transgressor. She is guilty of incest which is not accepted even in the contemporary society.

Born in a Syrian Catholic Christian family in a conservative town named Ayemenem, now part of Kottayam in Kerala beside the Meenachal river, Ammu, the protagonist, despite her quest for freedom and identity, is a victim of male chauvinism. The problems of Patriarchal domination and female subalternity and the clash between the two are rooted in the geo-cultural reality of Ayemenem. The family prospered well during the British rule, but since independence, there is a decline in their fortunes.

Ammu’s father, Pappachi is a typical member of an upper middle class Christian family and he carefully maintains imperialist postures. He had been an imperial Entomologist at the Pusa Institute. The greatest
setback in his life has been the moth he had discovered is not named after him. Instead, the moth has been named after a junior officer, whom he had disliked, as Pappachi has retired by then. After retirement he moves to Ayemenem and tries to create an outlandish little England there. He combines patriarchal authoritarianism and misogynistic misdemeanours in his violence towards his wife, Mammachi and daughter, Ammu. After beating his wife and daughter, Ammu, he would turn the two out of the house in the wintry nights of Delhi. To keep the family reputation un tarnished they would seek shelter behind “the mehendi hedge,” so that it will not be known to the neighbours. He would not hesitate to flog Ammu at the slightest provocation and Ammu still remembers the violence with which Pappachi had shredded her favourite gumboots. He dislikes a woman who is vocal and has a vocation for herself. He finds it odd to digest the fact that his wife is seventeen years junior to him. It is also difficult for him to appreciate his wife’s efficient management of the affairs of the family’s Paradise Pickles factory. Perhaps, his jealousy might be the reason for his beating his wife very frequently and mercilessly. His facade of being a perfect husband and father hides his abusive tendencies towards his family, especially Mammachi and Ammu.
In her growing years, Ammu had watched her father weave his hideous web. He was charming and urbane with visitors … He donated money to orphanages and leprosy clinics. He worked hard on his public profile as a sophisticated, generous, moral man. But alone with his wife and children he turned into a monstrous, suspicious bully, with a streak of vicious cunning. They were beaten, humiliated and then made to suffer the envy of friends and relations. (Roy, 180)

Pappachi cannot relish the idea of sending a girl for higher education. His son, Chacko, on the other hand, has been sent to London for higher studies in biology as a Rhodes Scholar. Ammu is the worst sufferer as she cannot go for college education. For a young girl like Ammu, there is very little to do in a place like Ayemenem except attending to household chores. Bored and frustrated, Ammu thinks that she has nothing to do other than waiting for marriage proposals. No proposals have come her way as her father does not have enough money to raise a suitable dowry. She becomes desperate for an escape at the earliest.

All day she dreamed of escaping from Ayemenem and the clutches of her ill-tempered father and bitter, long-suffering mother. She hatched several wretched little plans. Eventually, one worked. Pappachi agreed to let her spend the summer with a distant aunt who lived in Calcutta. (38-39)

Ammu meets her future husband, Baba, in a wedding reception of her relatives in Calcutta. He proposes to her five days after they have
met. Ammu is in a hurry to marry him because she knows that in Ayemenem, people are quite dead against her wishes and so something is better than nothing. She accepts the proposal of a man whom she has known so little in a short time, because her father doesn’t have the suitable dowry for her. And more importantly to escape from the Ayemenem and the clutches of her ill-tempered father, she marries, in a way, a man of her choice. The author remarks:

Ammu didn’t pretend to be in love with him. She just weighed the odds and accepted. She thought that anything, anyone at all, would be better than returning to Ayemenem. She wrote to her parents informing them of her decision. They didn’t reply. (39)

Thus she has an elaborate wedding with a well-built, pleasant looking Assistant Manager of a tea-estate. But very soon things have begun to take a very bad shape. The glitter of her elaborate wedding has faded very soon. She realizes that she has fallen from the frying pan into the fire. He lies outrageously even when he does not need to. He is an alcoholic and he makes her smoke. He beats her frequently. She becomes a mother of twins and by the time they are two year old kids, drinking has driven him into an alcoholic stupor. Due to his drunken ways his English manager, Mr. Hollick, wants to dismiss him from service but offers him a way out to keep his job. The manager has an eye on Ammu and suggests to him that Ammu be sent to his bungalow to be
‘looked after.’ He clearly wants Ammu to sleep with him in return of the favour. Ammu’s husband agrees to this indecent deal and goads Ammu to gratify the Boss. Her refusal draws his fury and she is thrashed black and blue. He grabs her hair and punches her as a tyrant. When he begins to beat the twins, Ammu hits him back. “Ammu took down the heaviest book she could find in the bookshelf – The Reader’s Digest World Atlas – and hit him with it as hard as she could. On his head. His legs. His back and shoulders.” (42) She decides to leave him. What she wants to escape from, in her maternal home, violence, follows her into her marriage. Victimized by her father initially and later by her husband, Ammu appears to be a ‘scapegoat’ who leaves behind one master, her father and chooses the other one in her husband.

Ammu leaves her husband and returns with her twins, unwelcomed by her parents in Ayemenem, to the very same place from where she has tried to run away a few years ago. After her divorce she has no place in her father’s home. She and her twins are considered a burden even by her own mother and brother. Frustration seems to have made her reckless. She starts behaving strangely. She ventures out of her house at night. She begins to wear sleeveless blouses, smokes and swims in the Meenachal river even at midnight. At such times she appears slightly mad or neurotic. Such behaviour of her shocks her family as well as others mainly because she is a divorcee from inter-
community love marriage. The word “divorcee” is spelt, as it is pronounced, as “Die-voiced,” “… as though it were a form of death.” (130)

Baby Kochamma, the sister of Pappachi, is particularly very resentful of Ammu’s return to Ayemenem. Ammu’s presence in the house is simply unbearable to her. At the age of eighteen, Baby Kochamma has fallen in love with a handsome, young Irish monk, Father Mulligan who is on deputation in Kerala from Madras for a year. Much against her father’s wishes and with the hope of to be with Father Mulligan, Baby Kochamma joins a convent in Madras and becomes a Roman Catholic. But all this becomes a futile exercise. Having failed to win the love of Father Mulligan, she becomes restless and unhappy. However, she is forced to return to Ayemenem but is very firm on her refusal to marry. So she is sent to America for further studies from where she returns with a diploma and her love for Father Mulligan intact. Thus she has lost her dreams at a very young age and lives only with the memory of her love. So what is naturally expected of Baby Kochamma is to be very sympathetic towards her niece, Ammu, who has returned to Ayemenem with all her dreams shattered. On the contrary, she hates Ammu and cannot even tolerate her presence in the house. Her growing sadism is evident in her treatment of Ammu.
To Baby Kochamma, Mammachi and the women visitors who came to see the divorced Ammu, divorce is, at least metaphorically, a form of death. It is at this stage that Ammu comes to know of her real status in her father’s home:

… a married daughter had no position in her parent’s home. As for a divorced daughter — according to Baby Kochamma, she had no position anywhere at all. And as for a divorced daughter from a love marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochamma’s outrage. As for a divorced daughter from an inter community love marriage — Baby Kochamma chose to remain quiveringly silent on the subject. (45-46)

Thus at the age of twenty four, Ammu realizes sadly that her life has been lived. She has made an irrevocable mistake of choosing the wrong man and thus the only chance she had been spoilt. In her family as well as in the society, she becomes virtually doomed.

As she grew older, Ammu learned to live with this cold, calculating cruelty. She developed a lofty sense of injustice and the mulish, reckless streak that develops in Someone Small who has been bullied all their lives by Someone Big. She did exactly nothing to avoid quarrels and confrontations. In fact, it could be argued that she sought them out, perhaps even enjoyed them. (181-82)

Ammu, being a single parent, desires to protect her vulnerable children. She knows that they do not get what they badly need from the elders of the family — love and affection. Thus their emotional needs
remain unfulfilled. They are neglected and resented. Though she is aware of all these and has concern for them, she is utterly helpless in such a hostile environment.

Baby Kochamma disliked the twins, for she considered them doomed, fatherless waifs. Worse still, they were Half-Hindu Hybrids whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian would ever marry. She was keen for them to realize that they (like herself) lived on sufferance in the Ayemenem House, their maternal grandmother’s house, where they really had no right to be. (45)

Ammu consciously attempts to prepare them for the future. She becomes their teacher, insists that they should speak in English and grooms them in good manners. She desires that their preparation should be in such a way that they should be able to face the harsh realities of the world boldly. So she tells them the story of Julius Caesar to prove that “… you can’t trust anybody. Mother, father, brother, husband, bestfriend. Nobody.” (83)

Pappachi dies and Chacko, her brother, resigns his lectureship at the Madras Christian College and returns to Ayemenem. He becomes the head of the family as well as partner of his mother’s Pickle factory. Chacko has met Margaret Kochamma in a cafe in Oxford where she used to work as a waitress. They have fallen in love with each other and
it gradually drifts into marriage much against the wishes of her parents.

Within a year Margaret is disillusioned with Chacko and thinks that he is the wrong person she has married. Meanwhile she meets Joe who is a biologist. By the time she gives birth to Sophie Mol, Margaret has realized that she has to put aside her meaningless relationship with Chacko as she gets fed up with his domineering attitude. Chacko’s patriarchal mind-set and lazy ways eventually lead to divorce.

A year into the marriage, and the charm of Chacko’s studently sloth wore off for Margaret Kochamma. It no longer amused her that while she went to work, the flat remained in the same filthy mess that she had left it in. That it was impossible for him even to consider making the bed, or washing clothes or dishes. That he didn’t apologize for the cigarette burns in the new sofa. That he seemed incapable of buttoning up his shirt, knotting his tie and tying his shoe laces before presenting himself for a job interview. (247)

They divorce each other. Chacko returns to India broken hearted. Just after the divorce, Margaret marries Joe and leads a happy life. But unfortunately, this marriage also has a disastrous end as Joe is killed in an accident. She, along with Sophie, comes to Ayemenen at Chacko’s invitation. As if it were to crown the chain of misfortunes, Sophie Mol meets an unexpected death by getting drowned in the Meenachal river one night when the boat, she is in, capsized.
Ammu and Chacko are sister and brother of the same house. Both marry out of their community, Ammu, a Hindu and Chacko, a Britisher. Both the marriages end in divorce. Ammu alone pays a heavy price as a divorcee whereas Chacko enjoys a lot of privileges since he is a man. Mammachi, mother to the both, subscribes to the double standards of the society by recognizing Chacko’s “Man’s Needs” (168) and has a side door specially built to her son’s room to facilitate the working women to enter and she even secretly gives them money while the same failing in Ammu, her daughter, is considered an irreversible violation of moral codes.

In the Indian society, a daughter has no claim to the property. So, she has to be at Chacko’s mercy and assist him in the Pickles factory, but he claims it as his factory. This is because he is a man and a person in command.

Though Ammu did as much work in the factory as Chacko …

he always referred to it as my factory, my pineapples, my pickles. Legally, this was the case because Ammu, as a daughter, had no claim to the property. (57)

Chacko unambiguously tells her, “What’s yours is mine and what’s mine is also mine” (57) and this is because of the male chauvinist society. Thus the individual space which she deserves in her own right is denied to Ammu.
Ammu, estranged from her husband, is made to feel unwanted in her parent’s home whereas Chacko, the estranged son not only receives warm welcome, but also becomes the inheritor of the property. Profligacy in him is encouraged in the name of “Man’s Needs,” whereas identical behaviour in Ammu is condemned by being locked up in a room and tortured. Thus what is facilitated in case of a man is branded blasphemous and sinful in case of a girl as is evident from Ammu-Velutha relationship.

Velutha, son of an untouchable, Vellya Pappen, returns to Ayemenem, after spending years away from home. Velutha has been to school for a couple of years and also has been trained to become a skilful carpenter. He is hired as the Paradise factory carpenter and he has a way with machines which makes him indispensible at the factory. Appreciating his skill, Mammachi remarks, “… if only he hadn’t been a Paravan, he might have become an engineer.” (75) He is not a stranger to Ammu as she has seen him coming with his father to deliver coconuts to them in her childhood. At that time she has no special feeling for him. But now she notices him as the rarest moments of happiness her children experience are because of him.

That Velutha and Ammu are drawn towards each other is inevitable — they are both rebels and kindred spirits. The fact that Velutha was the one man who spontaneously loved her children, first
draws Ammu to him. However, the attraction between them is vibrantly physical as well. At one poignant moment they become aware of each other as man and woman:

The man standing in the shade of rubber trees with coins of sunshine dancing on his body, holding her daughter in his arms, glanced up and caught Ammu’s gaze … In that brief moment, Velutha looked up and saw things that he hadn’t seen before. Things that had been out of bounds so far, obscured by history’s blinkers. (176)

At that moment he realizes that Rahel’s mother is a woman. Ammu who is grateful to Velutha for his small gifts of wooden boats, boxes and windmills to her children which make them happy, suddenly thinks that she can also reciprocate by giving gifts to him. The gift is her own body. This sudden sexual temptation for Velutha leads her to total annihilation.

Ammu gets sexually attracted to Velutha as her eyes are fixed on the ridges of Velutha’s muscles. She wonders at how his body has changed so quietly, from a flat muscled boy’s body into a man’s body — contoured and hard. Somehow the well-built Velutha created ripples in her. “Velutha’s attraction to her leads her to believe that she has at length achieved the ecstasy of her essential femininity, of her growth and maturity into a full-fledged woman, a complete woman.” (Swain, 145)
Ammu’s first clandestine meeting with Velutha has been triggered off by a song in her transistor. This forces her to go in search of Velutha, to the Meenachal river in the darkness of the night. With the same instinctive belief that she would come searching for him that night, Velutha also goes there.

Velutha’s father is a mute witness to whatever has gone on near his house and he rushes to Mammachi’s house to give full factual report. He is in a drunken state and also being loyal and superstitious, discloses to her Ammu’s secret nocturnal rendezvous with Velutha. He is angry with his son and profusely apologizes to Mammachi for his son’s misconduct.

Mammachi sends for Velutha. He listens with utmost patience Mammachi’s tirade. She threatens him that she would castrate him like the pariah dog if she finds him on her property the next day. She spits him on his face and tells him that she will get him killed. Out of gratitude for the help rendered by her, Velutha bears Mammachi’s abusive language silently without any retort.

Mammachi cannot accept Ammu having an affair with Velutha, an untouchable. So along with Baby Kochamma, she plans for the physical removal of Velutha. Baby Kochamma gets Velutha dismissed from the factory. Roused to irrepressible fury, she gets all distorted facts
recorded in the F.I.R. She lodges a complaint against Velutha for having forced himself on her niece — “A divorcee with two children.” (259) The Police Inspector, Thomas Mathew, belonging to the same caste, too responds to her ire at the same wavelength. Hence, excessive, unnecessary police force is applied to secure the total decimation of Velutha. A posse of six touchable policemen finds him lying asleep in the back veranda of the History House. All of them in one go start kicking and trampling upon his flat body with heavy boots. His badly bruised shattered body, in a state of unconsciousness, is brought to the police station as a trophy won valiantly in a fiercely fought war.

Velutha is charged falsely with the rape of Ammu. When Ammu goes to the police station with her children Rahel and Estha, to set the records straight the police officer’s behaviour is very brutal and callous. He behaves in the most unabashed manner with Ammu and her children. He stares at Ammu’s breasts as he speaks. He says that Kottayam police don’t take statements from ‘Veshyas’ or their illegitimate children. He even taps at her breasts with his baton. The rudeness and obscene behaviour of the police officer shock little Rahel very much. Ammu feels helpless and utterly humiliated. Her anguish is expressed when she mutters to herself “He’s dead … I’ve killed him.” (8) She knows that she is responsible for the death of her lover.
The plight of Velutha in the police custody indicates social injustice and cruelty of the police. Soon after Baby Kochamma registers an F.I.R against Velutha, inspector Thomas Mathews takes care to verify from Comrade K.N.M. Pillai whether he would come to Velutha’s rescue. The police have gone to Velutha’s house and wake him up with their boots. There is a heart-rending description of what they have done to Velutha.

Boot on bone. One teeth. The muffled grunt when a stomach is kicked in. The muted crunch of skull on cement. The gurgle of blood on a man’s breath when his lung is torn by the jagged end of a broken rib (308).

The semi-unconscious Velutha lies stand still. His skull was fractured in three places. His nose and both his cheekbones were smashed, leaving his face pulpy, undefined. The below to his mouth had split open his upper lip and broken six teeth. Four of his ribs were splintered, one had pierced his left lung, which was what made him bleed from his mouth. (310).

Still they have brought out the handcuffs. Since he cannot walk they have dragged him. It is clearly death in police custody. Inside the lock-up Velutha is beaten black and blue. Estha finds Velutha in a miserable dying condition and the amount of torture inflicted on him is visible.
Velutha appeared on the scrummy slippery floor. A mangled genie invoked by a modern lamp. He was naked, his soiled mundu had come undone. Blood spilled from his skull like a secret. His face was swollen and his head look liked a pumpkin too large and heavy. (319-20)

An innocent, untouchable man dies in police custody because he has none to protect him. Velutha’s death signifies that police are there not to protect a helpless, guilt free low caste-man, but to punish him precisely for his helplessness. “… the viciousness of Baby Kochamma, the heartless disowning of Velutha by Pillai and the savage brutality of the police together conspire to have him butchered to death.” (Amin, 108)

On hearing of Ammu’s visit to the police station, Baby Kochamma has felt that the ground is falling away from under her feet. Sensing an unsafe edge in Ammu, Baby Kochamma plans to get Ammu out of Ayemenem as soon as possible. She manages this by doing what she is best at.

Irrigating her fields, nourishing her crops with other people’s passions. She gnawed like a rat into the godown of Chacko’s grief …. it wasn’t hard for her to portray Ammu as the person actually responsible for Sophie Moll’s death. Ammu and her two-egg twins …. it was her idea that Ammu be made to pack her bags and leave. That Estha be returned. (321-22)
Thus by wrongly associating Sophie Mol’s death with Ammu’s illicit affair with Velutha and by holding Ammu responsible for the child’s death the vengeful Baby Kochamma accomplishes successfully her plan of removal of Ammu from Ayemenem. She also sees that Estha is sent back to his father in Calcutta. Ammu and her children pay a heavy price as they are never happy again. What all they need is a little love and kindness and the one person who gives it to them, is killed.

Ammu dies all alone in a grimy room in Bharat Lodge in Alleppey at the age of thirty-one. She has gone there to attend an interview for the position of a Secretary. Her death is very pathetic. She often had nightmares, a recurrent dream in which “… policemen approached her with snicking scissors, wanting to hack off her hair.” (161) She dies in the fear of being branded as a Veshya with her hair cut. Ammu had always seen such women in the market, “… the women with vacant eyes and forcibly shaved heads in the land where long, oiled hair was only for the morally upright.” (161) Church authorities have refused to bury a fallen woman and this speaks volumes about the wrath that Ammu’s violation of moral code has evoked in Ayemenem. A dead cockroach being dragged by platoon of ants is symbolic of her insignificance and her place in her family and her society. On being thrown out of the house, she becomes vulnerable without love, shelter and protection.
Since the church refuses to bury her, Chacko wraps her in a dirty bed sheet and takes her to electric crematorium by a hired van. Nobody except beggars, derelicts and the police-custody dead are cremated there. This appears to be a fit punishment for breaking the laws laid down by a caste-bound, repressive patriarchal society. Her cremation is attended by no one from the family except by her brother Chacko and daughter Rahel. Finally they are handed over her ashes, “The whole of her crammed into a little clay pot.” (163)

Uma, of Anita Desai’s *Fasting, Feasting* is passive unlike the rebellious Ammu of *The God of Small Things*. If Ammu is caught in the cultural trappings of a traditional south Indian family, Uma is a victim of a north Indian middle class family. Uma’s desire to go to a convent school is mercilessly crushed by her mother’s conservative outlook. In the same way Ammu’s longing for college studies is thwarted by her autocratic father. In both the cases the brothers are sent abroad for higher studies demonstrating the family value system in which a son is always pampered and held in esteem in comparison to the daughter.

*The God of Small things* makes a scathing attack on the patriarchal notions of the society. Male chauvinism is protested and defiled social order is challenged. Arundhati Roy’s philosophy of life seems to oppose women’s subordination to men in the family and
society, along with men’s claims to define what is best for women without consulting them, thereby offering a frontal challenge to patriarchal thought, social organization and control mechanism.

Through Ammu’s character “… the author seems to raise her genuine concern over the male hegemony prevalent in our society.” (Kumar, 284) Explaining the irrationalities and injustices of the domestic and social life, she attacks the double standards of the society where one sex is to be sheltered and kept from power, while the other runs the world. One sex is suppressed while the other enjoys all liberties. She also censures the lopsided values of the male dominated society. Gopinath Pillai finds well-defined feminist sensibility in the selection and organization of Arundhati Roy’s fictional materials. He comments, “Roy attempts to fashion her artistic strategy with the help of the intense awareness of her role as a feminist operating in a post colonial situation.” (Pillai, 88)

Sanjay Kumar considers the novel a feminist one when he remarks, “It may also be seen as a feminist work, debunking the prejudiced malist culture which deprives a woman from having a life of spontaneity and importance comparable to a male.” (Kumar, 286) Ammu is seen challenging the androcentric notions of the society.
Rebelliously she avoids a surname and refuses to comply with the role assigned to her by the society. “She wanted her body back. It was her’s body. She shrugged her children off the way a bitch shrugs off her pups when she’s had enough of them” (222) reveals that bodily needs are not neglected. She asserts herself and shows that she has her own priorities. This prompts Dasan to remark: “Ammu’s attempt to reclaim her body, to assert autonomy over her own body vividly projects the feminist agenda of the novelist.” (Dasan, 33) Ranjana Harish is also of the same opinion when she says, basing on the same sentence, that claiming right over the body is feministic. She remarks that this “… sentence which brings in a distinct feminist shade of the feminist assertion of female body as female estate.” (Harish, 99)

Neeraja Sachdev too believes that *The God of Small Things* is a feminist novel as Arundhati Roy advocates a woman’s right to marry a man of her choice.

The right to love a man of her choice is a woman’s birth right and should not be scuttled in the name of religion, caste, colour and class. It is in the sense that the novel could be read as a feminist novel or a postcolonial novel for both feminism and post-colonialism aim at destroying the world power structure. (Sachdev, 100-101)
Chhote Lal Khatri, on the other hand, refuses to consider Ammu a feminist character when he argues that to be called a feminist, the woman should either dominate or fight against all odds with fortitude and assert her identity. Ammu, indeed, shows some courage in leaving her husband but makes no attempt to carve out an independent identity for herself. “Ammu always remains dependent upon her parents. She along with her twins are the target of negligence, hatred, severity not only of society but also of family.” (Khatri, 295) She bears all the suffering patiently. Vinoda’s argument falls in line with that of Khatri when she argues “The feminist impulse, as is generally understood would make it imperative that there is, at the basic level at least, an aspiration or struggle for dignity and independence for woman.” (Vinoda, 27) So she fears that neither the novel be called a feministic text nor Ammu, a feminist character. Kh. Kunjo Singh’s denial of the feminist label to Ammu is emphatic. He says that Ammu “… accepts her lot unprotestingly at every stage in her life and makes no attempt at bold and independent life of her own against the odds she faces.” (Singh, 269)

It is a matter of surprise that Ammu’s parents, brother and aunt, who should take care of her when she is in distress are not sympathetic towards her. What surprises one more is her own long-suffering mother
has no sympathy for her miserable daughter. On the top of it, she discriminates Ammu by making her feel unwanted in the house after her estrangement from her husband whereas her estranged son is given warm welcome. Mammachi’s resentment for Ammu, perhaps results from years of conditioning and the way she has been trained by her husband to be a feminine role model. She can never empathise with her unfortunate daughter.

Mammachi behaves as a high caste feudal woman. If ill-tempered Pappachi, is responsible for Ammu’s misery, the bitter Mammachi is equally responsible too. It can be said that if Ammu’s tragedy is originated by Pappachi, it is Mammachi who precipitates it. She loves Chacko’s daughter, Sophie Mol, from the beginning, but neglects the twins of Ammu. She is so heartless and cruel that she considers them a nuisance.

Mammachi’s reiteration of patriarchy’s tolerance of “Man’s Needs”, done about six times in the novel, by providing a special door built to her son’s room for factory women workers to enter and leave fails to bear with Ammu’s need. She cannot accept Ammu having an affair with Velutha, an untouchable. She thinks that Ammu has defiled generations of breeding and ruined the reputation of the family and therefore it is an unpardonable sin. So, along with baby Kochamma, she plans for the physical removal of Velutha which has devastated Ammu.
Ammu’s first taste of male chauvinist brutality and hypocrisy is through her father only. His extremely desensitized ways and interventions have traumatized her childhood. Inspite of being an educated person with faith in the British culture, he is not of progressive outlook. This narrow outlook leads to the doom of the family reputation and his daughter, Ammu faces problems all through her life. His belief that college education is an unnecessary expense for a girl has ruined Ammu’s life. Ammu becomes the target of his violence and is thrashed by him. His regular and merciless beating of Ammu along with his wife has made Ammu’s life miserable.

In order to escape from the cold calculating cruelty of her father and the suffocating environment of home, Ammu has made the irrevocable mistake of choosing the wrong man. She does this in sheer desperation as her father could not get her married off in time. Ammu’s marriage to a Bengali, whom she accidentally stumbles upon, is a result of such desperation than a well-taken decision. The alienation between Ammu and her father is complete as he is shown to have “… looked at her with cold, flat eyes, and rocked and rocked and rocked.” (181)

Chacko is brutal and unkind to his sister. He, who saves his mother from the violence of his father, mercilessly chases Ammu out of his house. Ammu does as much more in the factory as he does, yet being
a male chauvinist, he always refers to it as “my factory.” He denies Ammu and her twins their share in the family property. He considers Ammu and her children as “millstones around his neck.” (85) The death of Sophie Mol whom he loves so much perhaps turns him into a monster. Instigated by Baby Kochamma, he becomes so cruel and heartless that he breaks down Ammu’s bedroom door and orders her to pack and leave in the dead of the night and thus he has had his share in making Ammu a destitute and finally in her tragic death.

The vicious and frustrated Baby Kochamma plays a major role in the tragedy of Ammu. Baby Kochamma dislikes Ammu for her hybrid marriage and illtreats her in every possible way. Ammu has learnt to swallow humiliation for the sake of her children. Her unfulfilled love for Brother Mulligan, perhaps, made her cruel in her treatment of Ammu. The reason for her hatred of Velutha is, perhaps, her deprivation of true love for which Velutha stands for. She is jealous of Ammu, as she finds love in Velutha. She also hates Ammu for quarrelling with her fate which she has accepted graciously. She has no sympathy for the twins. On the other hand she expresses her dislike for them openly and criticizes them at the smallest opportunity. They are doomed and fatherless waifs for her. “Worse still, they were Half-Hindu Hybrids whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian would ever marry.” (45) Her rebukes have caused damaging effect on their minds.
Baby Kochamma not only hates Rahel and Estha but also envies their togetherness. She expects them to be unhappy but after having observed that they take delight even at little things and draw comfort from each other’s company, she grudges them. She resents Ammu and takes sadistic pleasure in her sufferings. It is her prejudice that makes her comment about the low caste people when she says “*How could she stand the smell? ... they have a particular smell, these Paravans?*” (78)

But the same lady easily accepts Chacko’s relationship with low caste labour women. It is due to her jealousy and bitterness that Velutha has been dismissed from the factory. She enjoyed the way Ammu was punished for her sins. It is her brain behind his arrest and the fabricated charge of rape of Ammu. She has played a dirty game by emotionally blackmailing the twins to say ‘yes’ to implicate Velutha. She has laid two options for them, whether they want Ammu to be saved or sent to jail. She tells them that it totally depends on their verdict and they have naturally whispered ‘save Ammu’. She inculcates sense of loss in Ammu’s mind by excluding her and her twins from family affairs only to make her understand that they have no place in the family.

Baby Kochamma’s frustrated love and repressed desires make her sadistic and instrumental in making Ammu’s life miserable. Unnatural self-repression has made her mean and also prevented to some extent.
She has joined hands with the policemen to hold Velutha responsible for Sophie Mol’s death, though everyone knows it is an accidental death. Baby Kochamma lodges a false F.I.R. and gets him killed by the police. She is responsible for getting Velutha arrested and tortured to death on a false charge. The twins are forced to endorse her F.I.R. at the police station. When Ammu along with her twins, goes to the police station to provide evidence that the charge of rape against Velutha has been a concocted one, the police officer, brain washed by Baby Kochamma insults her by refusing to take statements from veshyas or her illegitimate children.

Baby Kochamma also rejoices in her triumph at the parting of the twins at the age of eight. She is also instrumental in instigating Chacko in driving Ammu out of the house and he with all patriarchal authority tells her “Get out of my house before I break every bone in your body.” (225) Thus Ammu is almost thrown out of the house and die young helpless, sick and alone in a hotel.

Ammu is mercilessly persecuted by the society, and also is cruelly annihilated by the combined vengeance of all her people. Being a Keralite she is bold enough to defy her community and marry a Bengali. But unfortunately she is divorced. Though it is the husband who is to be blamed for it, it is usually the woman who suffers as a consequence.
Much worse is her getting entangled in a forbidden love. The love of Ammu, a high caste woman for Velutha, a low caste man, results in anguish, despair and finally total annihilation. For resisting patriarchy and also for violating the social order, Ammu becomes responsible for Velutha’s death and then she pays with her own life too.

Arundhati Roy, describing Ammu’s nature with the metaphors of madness and animality, shows how a woman with high passion and strong will poses a threat to the tyrannical order of society which quickly brands her as someone dangerous. Growing up in an atmosphere of fear and violence, Ammu develops the mulish, reckless streak that would later bring her in confrontation with the world. She also stays away from reality. (Chitra, 66)

Ammu has experienced emotional insecurity at the hands of her husband, therefore, is always in search of someone to hang on to. Her feeling of dejection, loneliness and futility of life makes her look for someone who serves as an anchor to hold on to. She realizes that she has no space of her own, no identity, no chance of happiness, unless she strikes out again on her own. So she takes a lover who brings back to her whatever she had thought she had lost, love. Unfortunately for her he is socially unacceptable being an untouchable. But he symbolizes for Ammu rebirth and transformation, and “Seven years of oblivion lifted of her and flew into the shadows on weighty, quaking wings … And on Ammu’s Road (who Age and Death) a small, sunny meadow appeared.” (337)
Ammu surrenders to the wide allure of Velutha to overcome her deceptive hypocritical existence. It cannot be ruled out that her getting into such a situation is also due to her temptation for Velutha. Due to the extreme neglect and humiliation she faces at home, she chooses to live solely according to the dictates of her heart. She becomes physically attracted to Velutha. Her desire for him perhaps stems from her repressed sexual norms and her awakening as if from the dead, to her body. It does not occur to her that the caste and class barriers cannot be surmounted at any cost.

It is perhaps natural that Ammu with her trodden youth, oppressed existence and frustrated dreams should drift towards Velutha, though an untouchable as both of them try to seek solace in each other’s warmth. Both have realized this in an epiphanic moment of self-recognition; “Centuries telescoped into one evanescent moment” (176) when they realize that both of them have gifts to offer to each other. But the fact that she can go out of the way to love a Paravan, an untouchable, shows her moral courage in accepting a man not as member of any particular class of the society but just as a human being, capable of authentic human feelings.

The sight of cruelty and hypocrisy, which she had to bear with from childhood makes Ammu an alienated individual with visions of her
own, which often lead to disastrous. “She developed a lofty sense of injustice and the mulish reckless streak that develops in some one small who has been bullied all their lives by Someone Big.” (181-182) It makes her seek consolation in the company of Velutha whom her children love by day and she loves by night. Actually it is the intimacy of the children with him, which draws her towards him.

Biologically Ammu’s response to Velutha’s muscular, well-built body is but spontaneous as her suppressed womanhood gets aroused after several years. But it has no sanction from the male-chauvinistic and caste-bound Indian society. Her night escapades with him in the History House for thirteen days give her physical self-fulfilment to her fill.

Velutha is not merely a sexual outlet for a lonely and frustrated Ammu. He shows her what it is to love and how love can bring back to life her inner soul. What her husband has failed to be and Velutha succeeds is this — to be her true partner in the real sense of the term. Sometimes, he is even a father-figure to the twins as they get from him what is denied to them — love. The twins, Estha and Rahel, enjoy playing with Velutha, as it is only he who provides them love, care and company they need so badly. This could be one reason for her to feel drawn to him.
When Velutha is killed for his presumption, she has to finally leave Ayemenem in disgrace. She is punished for her self-assertion, for seeking love outside the institution sanctified by the community. Accordingly, she is damned as a Veshya and is deprived of her children. She begins to suffer from a fatal illness that destroys her little by little. Finally she dies in misery and loneliness. For having defied the patriarchal hierarchy, Ammu has been ostracized and disowned by the family. Even after her death the relentless hostility of the society continues to haunt her. The result is denial of the dignity of a decent funeral.

Thus through Ammu-Velutha relationship, Arundhati highlights the intransigent social hatred, targeted at the individuals who challenge the established orthodoxies of the society, and flails the taboos which do not allow people to rise beyond their narrow circumference. (Kumar, 286)

It can be said that, in a way, it is lack of her self-control, or lack of restraint that ultimately destroys the lives of her children. As a mother, Ammu should be responsible and cannot afford to throw her life and morals away for Velutha, exposing her children to face its consequences. She has, no doubt, courage and individuality enough to flout the norms of society. If she has channelized it in a positive way and perhaps, if she has instilled these qualities of individualism and courage in her children and has given more importance to their
emotional needs, she would have created a strong self-dependent generation. Adrienne Rich comments, “… institutionalized motherhood demands of women maternal ‘instinct’ rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self realization, relation to others rather than the creation of self.” (Rich, 42) She fails to realize that motherhood demands a huge element of sacrifice. She sadly lacks perception and wisdom to learn from past experience. “She wins as a woman but fails miserably as a mother.” (Wilson, 11)

It may not be fair to dismiss Ammu as a failed mother as how strong her love for her twins is illustrated through many incidents in the novel. In fact she loves them more because she is aware that her children are deprived of their father’s love. They are not liked by any in the house, not even by her mother. On the top of it, they are humiliated and told in many ways that it is not their home. But the children in their innocence love everybody. Roy remarks: “Ammu loved her children (of course), but their wide-eyed vulnerability, and their willingness to love people who didn’t really love them exasperated her…” (43) She feels happy whenever she finds her children happy. Her belief that Velutha is the only man in Ayemenem who really loves her children could be one important factor that has pushed her towards him. And it is possibly on account of her concern for her children that she does not dare to come out into the open and declare her love for Velutha.
But even when she is almost destroyed, her tenderness and affection for her twins knows no bounds. During her last visit to Ayemenem she spends the whole morning with Rahel in her room. “With the last of her meagre salary she had bought her daughter small presents wrapped in brown paper with coloured paper hearts pasted on.” (159) The presents are suitable for a child of seven, but Rahel is nearly eleven. Possibly she, “refused to acknowledge the passage of time,” wants her children to remain children till she can get a suitable job and earn enough for all the three to live separately and independently.

Of all women in the novel, Ammu is the worst sufferer. She becomes the victim of the male dominated society. Unable to go for higher studies, at Ayemenem, she has lived the life of a prisoner. Out of sheer desperation, she has somehow, managed to go to Calcutta, where she meets a young Bengali who has made a hasty proposal to her which she has accepted with an equal haste mainly to escape from Ayemenem. He is an alcoholic and a compulsive wife-beater. Moreover, he has acted as a pimp for his boss, the English manager of tea estate. Her refusal has brought physical torture which has forced her to leave him and as a divorcee with two little kids she has reached her place, Ayemenem, which is not her place any longer.
Rahel is nearly eleven, when her mother dies at the age of thirty one. As a child she is a witness to her mother’s sufferings. Now Rahel as a young woman, still remembers how she and her twin brother are made instrumental by Baby Kochamma in doing wrong to their mother. After the death of her mother, Rahel also leaves Ayemenem. When she returns to Ayemenem, after twenty three years, she is also a divorcee like her mother, but she has no child, to be a ‘Millstone’ round her neck. She has no regrets over her disastrous marriage. She develops a casual attitude to life and does not submit to the various restrictions imposed by the society. She represents the non-traditionalist, non-conservative, liberated woman.

If Baby Kochamma represents the voice of the past, a past that is dead and irredeemable, Ammu and Rahel represent the voices of the present and the future that could still find redemption. So the women in this novel bridge the gulf between the past and the future. They have guts and the courage and the candour to go it alone and achieve fulfilment, perhaps, partial fulfilment in spite of insurmountable odds.

Committing incest with her brother does not create guilt or fear in Rahel. She defies male chauvinism and violates moral code. She seems to echo Arundhati Roy’s convictions about a woman and her role in the
male dominated society. She has the power to look beyond the barriers of family and gender which gives her necessary strength to oppose and overcome any kind of oppression.

Through the character of Rahel, Roy tries to break the chains of old tradition. Rahel is more aggressive and active than Estha. She is a girl of rebellion like her mother. She silently protests against dogmatic and conservative outlook of the family. Compared to her grandmother and her mother, she has greater confidence and a clear perception of life with which she achieves fulfilment of the self. The contemporary generation of women is represented by Rahel who is a rebel and a non-conformist through out her life and proves herself. She is strong willed, independent, and never considers herself a victim which prompts Mohit Kumar Ray to remark that, “To a large extent Rahel is an emancipated woman.” (Ray, 60)

The novel offers some rays of hope and seems to suggest a distinct possibility of redemption. “The last word of the book, ‘Naaley’ meaning ‘tomorrow’ is intended to bring a glow of hope to a dark story.” (Parasuram, 103) Despite the tragic deaths of the two protagonists, Ammu and Velutha and the resultant emptiness, Roshin George also affirms that the word, “Naaley signifies optimism and a hope that the existing things may change and tomorrow may bring in happiness.” (George, 177)
Ammu is bold enough to have a clandestine affair with Velutha. Her affair is purely sensual, not motivated by love. It is a blind blissful state of intimacy with Velutha without bothering about the consequences, even without a second of thought for herself, for her children or for Velutha himself. It is surprising that Ammu who has exhibited courage to beat up her husband, to smoke openly, to wear sleeveless blouses to be sexually aware and to cross class and caste boundaries for her passion allows herself to be insulted by the policeman, to call her a *Veshya* and swallow all the humiliation without a fight. Her attempt at breaking away of the patriarchal set up and yielding to the passions of Velutha result in the death of Velutha and the death-in-life existence of Ammu and finally her pathetic death at young age.

However, Ammu’s plans of starting her own school, and her desire to take up a job, all represent her intense wish to stand on her own legs. Her pathetic plans to be independent from her brother do not materialize. Instead, she has to suffer physically as well as mentally. She has to fend for herself, taking odd jobs. Being homeless, she has to stay in cheap lodges and finally die in a cheap lodge in Alleppey. The scars left on her mind as a young girl, the guilt she feels about her first rebellion and marriage, and the neglect that she faces at home, leaves
her with no will to fight. The death of Sophie Mol makes Ammu feel defeated without a fight even before she begins. And she gives up and gives in without a fight. Ammu feels guilty, helpless and is full of despair and dejection.

Though Ammu shows some individuality in her affair with Velutha, she is not able to show enough courage to make a life with him. Social opposition proves too strong for her. For all its recklessness, it can be seen that Ammu’s character and mental make-up come across as essentially weak-willed.

Compared to Mammachi, Ammu definitely registers an advance. From her childhood she exhibits a combative spirit. It is certainly a bold step when she exercises her choice in choosing her man but unfortunately made a wrong choice. But again she refuses to compromise with him when he tries to use her as a bargain for retention of his job. She shows admirable self-respect in walking out on him. Again she displays courage in choosing an untouchable as her lover. But unfortunately Ammu, the rebel, gets destroyed at the end. This is because she has been tyrannized by her father before her marriage and betrayed by her husband after her marriage. After her divorce, she, along with her kids, has been humiliated by her aunt, ill-treated by her mother and rendered destitute by her brother. Each of them voiced the
patriarchal ideology which decreed that Ammu, being a woman, should have no right anywhere. “The way she rattled on and her hysterical behaviour, her wishful thinking, her battle with destiny, her frantic and frenzied effort to live and love make her the most pathetic figure in literature.” (Ray, 58)