4.d Determining gender norms in the novel

Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* is a path breaking novel inasmuch as after Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* this is the first book that created quite a few ripples in the socio-moral as well as literary pool in India. And all this for reasons more than one, a) *The God of Small Things* raised certain pertinent questions and slapped them on the traditional patriarchal society to explore their answers b) Roy broke all the norms to accommodate the feminine principle, c) *The God of Small Things* became the mouthpiece of the subaltern in terms of its open and defiant concern for the untouchable and the marginalized in the person of Velutha and Ammu.

Roy told one of her interviewers: “Writing *The God of Small Things* was a fictional way of making sense of the world I lived in.” Critics like Dr. B. N. Singh have taken note of its predominantly female pattern. The narrative in *The God of Small Things* is not linear. Rahel and Estha’s reading the posters backwards is the breaking of patriarchal conventions. The novel itself persuades the readers that it be read backwards. Howell’s analysis of the feminist mode of writing may well be applied to Roy’s novels:
Perhaps the commonest feature of woman’s resistance to tradition is their mixing of genre codes—like those of gothic, romance, history, gossip and Christian fable—...the difference here is that those stories are all told from the women’s angle, registering a feminized of dislocation within the very tradition in which they are writing.

The novel is a story of transgression in many senses. There is Velutha who dared to forget his untouchability; there is Ammu who crosses the norm of womanly virtues as also dares to forget the very fact that she is a touchable who should not allow an untouchable near her. ‘Locusts Stand I’ (Locus Standi) is forgotten and Ammu dares to feel at home in the Ayemenem House—her brother Chacko’s home. The norms of patriarchy are broken and this brings doom. Only Chacko knows the norms: “What is mine is mine. What is yours is also mine.” This, in essence, is the law of patriarchy that must be obeyed.

Roy’s protagonist dares to break this law but not with impunity. The History House is the lawgiver; it punishes all transgressions that take place in the Ayemenem House. In one sense Roy defines her feminine aesthetics. Ammu breaks the boundaries of how much and who—she defies all phallocentric discourse only to herald a new era when women will make their own choices, even if it entails death in isolation, in a
dingy room. Roy’s use of feminine aesthetics breaks all norms of the phallocentric system, which makes women’s body un-represent able.

Roy’s protagonists revolt against the ‘combined forces of religion, tradition and society.’ because these forces do not operate with oppression in the case of the privileged. “Paravan identity,” says M.K.Naik, “is the albatross round their untouchable necks,” and I’m tempted to add the feminine identity is another albatross or to borrow from Ammu---millstone around the women’s necks. Chacko’s amorous adventures have Mammachi and Baby Kochamma as facilitators of the crime whereas when Ammu decides to satisfy the needs of her body, all hell breaks loose. Men have all the rights to indulge themselves; women must not have any desires. Love laws and need laws are clear and men rule the roost. Ammu’s doom is the failure of the feminine principle inasmuch as she is the voice of defiance of women’s sexuality.

Roy’s protagonists are women with fortitude and gumption. They represent the fluidity of tradition thereby challenging its imposition as a closed phenomenon. On one hand the narrative takes up a cross-caste love relationship and its consequences and on the other hand it also tackles such issues as the daughter’s right to inheritance in her
parental property. Roy also delves into women writers’ favorite theme i.e., defining virtue and honor in the light of humanism.

The Hindu moral code known as The Laws of Manu denies woman an existence apart from that of her husband or his family, and since the publication of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s Rajmohan’s Wife in 1864 a significant number of authors have portrayed Indian women as long-suffering wives and mothers silenced by patriarchy. The ideal of the traditional, oppressed woman persisted in a culture permeated by religious images of virtuous goddesses devoted to their husbands, the Hindu goddesses Sita and Savitri serving as powerful cultural ideals for women.

In mythical terms, the dominant feminine prototype is the chaste, patient, self-denying wife, Sita, supported by other figures such as Savitri, Draupadi and Gandhari. When looking at these narratives silence/speech can be a useful guide to interpreting women’s responses to patriarchal hegemony. Silence is a symbol of oppression, a characteristic of the subaltern condition, while speech signifies self-expression and liberation.

The image of women in fiction has undergone a change during the last four decades. Women writers have moved away from traditional
portrayals of enduring, self-sacrificing women toward conflicted female characters searching for identity, no longer characterized and defined simply in terms of their victim status. In contrast to earlier novels, female characters from the 1980s onwards assert themselves and defy marriage and motherhood.

Recent writers depict both the diversity of women and the diversity within each woman, rather than limiting the lives of women to one ideal. The novels emerging in the twenty-first century furnish examples of a whole range of attitudes towards the imposition of tradition, some offering an analysis of the family structure and the caste system as the key elements of patriarchal social organization. They also re-interpret mythology by using new symbols and subverting the canonic versions. In conclusion, the work of Indian women writers is significant in making society aware of women’s demands, and in providing a medium for self-expression and, thus, re-writing the History of India.

Change and resistance to change in community

The continuity of caste and myth might create the impression of an unchanging social order and community relations in the novels being discussed. Myth and caste appear to reinforce religious, emotional and ritualistic aspects of individual and group existence.
Changes can also occur due to the natural disasters like floods and earthquakes. It happened in Hansulibak Ki Upkatha and partially in Gandevta. External forces like war, technology changes, or disease can result in either partial transformation or major changes. The confrontation between the state and the community can also lead to changes in the given community. The Chamar community in Kab Tak Pukaroo is almost wiped out after the police atrocities. Migration becomes the cause for the changes in the community of Santhali Snake Charmers in Nagini Kanya, yes migration can usher in significant changes only if it is accompanied by a reorganization of the basic relations of production and distribution.

The communities in novels like Hansulibak Ki Upkatha and Dharti Dhan Na Apna exercise strict controls over the lives of their members. Individual identity exists only as a part of group identity. In several other novels too, like Sharat Chandra’s Bangla novel ‘Barididi’, Premchand’s ‘Nirmala’. The subjective identity of the individual is dependant on communities. This pressure to conform may either lead to rapture within the web of relationship or to strengths of the organic bond between the individual member and the community. This could also had to a denial of individuality like in the case of kali in Dharti