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A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE ON ARUNDHATI ROY’S
THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

Feminism is culture specific and women’s lives are culturally constructed and the processes of socializations are rooted in their social reality. Related to the theme of feminism and desire, the foremost work of fiction under scrutiny is *The God of Small Things* (1997).

*The God of Small Things* is a semi-autobiographical, politically charged novel by Indian author Arundhati Roy. The child character Rahel is so clearly Roy herself that she is a completely plausible character with whom the reader can empathise. Roy’s first novel i.e. *The God of Small Things* won the prestigious honour, the Booker Prize, at the same time she even faced obscenity charges in her native India for a sensual description of inter-caste lovemaking that serves as the novel’s coda and expresses a woman’s desire, so openly discussed. Soon after the book’s release in 1997, a lawyer named Sabu Thomas attempted to have the book’s last chapter removed because of its graphic description of sexual acts between members of different castes. Fortunately for the author and the novel, Thomas was unsuccessful.

Tremendously powerful and lushly romantic, *The God of Small Things* effectively shifts between two time periods: Rahel’s present day home trip to see her mute, haunted twin brother and a December day, 20 years before – the tumultuous day that tears the family apart. With mesmerizing language, this novel ambitiously tackles such profound issues as family, race and class, the dictates of history and the laws of love. Rahel and Estha learn too soon that love and life can be lost in a millisecond.
The highlight of the story is the erotic current between the pickle princess and carpenter. Even the novel’s core issue is identified with the conflated sexual transgressions of the protagonists, Ammu, Chacko’s young sister who has come back to Ayemenem after a failed inter-community marriage and her daughter Rahel. The social convention reified in history offer a vantage point to contemplate love afresh and trespass the sanctioned limits of mutual alliance.

Another bold part of the novel is the incestuous union of Ammu’s twins, dizygotic twins, Rahel and Estha, though shockingly transgressive, may be in terms of psychic “re-memberment” as in Aimé Césaire’s powerful epic poem, Le Cahier d ’un retour an pays natal. Invoking the parallels in the thematic concerns of Césaire’s and Roy’s, Tirthankar Chanda says that traumatized twins, having suffered de-memberment for twenty four years, re-assemble to overcome their precarious and unprotected separation. The transgressive re-union through the ‘Self’s Integration with its lost body’ is enabling and empowering and is probably also the liberation of the silenced voice of the Subaltern. Again, the incestuous consummation may be read as “the twins sustained nostalgia for the golden age of the womb” (Emilienne Baneth Nouailhetas 2002:145)

Arundhati Roy’s debut novel The God of Small Things depicts protagonists who are ready to break social laws and die for desire and for love. The novel flits back and forth between childhood and a wiser, sadder and adult existence, explores two dissimilar sexual transgressions. Ammu of the earlier generation, catapults across Caste/class divisions to pursue an erotic desire for the untouchable carpenter, the “God of Small Things,” Velutha. Daughter Rahel, after a youth gone awry, returns to her childhood home and her soul twin Estha
to rediscover his pain and to offer him her body as an unnameable balm. Both violate the most basic love laws that govern their social existence.

Arundhati Roy evinces her craftsmanship in explaining erotic and emotional scene in the last chapter “The Cost of Living” of her novel *The God of Small Things*, where man- woman relationship find full-consummation. Ammu, the mother of the twins has been depicted as a day-dreamer, an abandoned woman, she remains unrequited biologically. Roy in weaving the character of Ammu is more woman like, more attached, more earthy, more natural. Velutha, the titanic figure resembles Lawrence’s Keeper, fills the love vacuum of Ammu. In the concluding chapter “The Cost of Living” the intense passionate affair between Velutha and Ammu inside the river Meenachal is described in terms of Lawrentian flavour and fragrance. Biologically Ammu’s response to Velutha’s muscular, well-built body is spontaneous because her suppressed womanhood is aroused after a long span of time. But the caste ridden male chauvinistic socio-sexual setup does not provide such relaxation for human considerations. Her night elopement with him for thirteen days, under the threat of incessant heavy down pour due to cyclonic disturbances give her sexual saturation. The stolen hours of the night simultaneously satiate and further sharpen her desire for sexual intimate assuagement. Ammu to some extent is nymphomaniac in her relationship with Velutha. The novelist describes this Lawrentian explosive sexual encounter in tantalizing details.

The Writer says:

Ammu, naked now, crouched over Velutha, her mouth on his. He drew her hair around them like a tent .... She slid further down, introducing herself to the rest of him. His neck. His nipples. His
chocolate stomach. She sipped the last of the river from the hollow of his navel. She pressed the heat of his erection against her eyelids. She tasted him, salty in her mouth…. She felt his belly tighten under her, hard as board. She felt her wetness slipping on his skin. He took he nipple in his mouth and cradled her other breast in his calloused palm. Velvet gloved in sand paper …. At the moment that she guided him into her, she caught a passing glimpse of his youth, his youngness, the wonder in his eyes at the secret he had unearthed and she similes down at him as though he was her child.

Arundhati Roy in her well thought out schema deliberates the same philosophy as D. H. Lawrence explores in the Lady Chatterley’s lover. Connie almost like Ammu has the similar feeling of real birth and integrated woman. Lawrence presents a panoramic picture of man-woman encounter:

And she felt him like a flame of desire, yet tender and she felt herself melting in the flame …

And it seemed she was like the sea, nothing but dark waves rising and heaving … Oh and far down inside her the deeps parted and rolled ascender, in long, far travelling billows and ever, at the quick of her, the depths parted and rolled as under, from the centre of slot plunging, as the plunger went deeper and deeper, touching lower and she was deeper and deeper and deeper disclosed and heavier the bellows of her rolled away to some share, uncovering her, and closer and closer plunged the palpable unknown and further and further rolled the waves of herself away from herself, leaving her, till suddenly in a soft, shuddering convulsion, the quick of all her plasm was touched, she knew herself touched, the consummation was upon her and she was gone. She was gone, she was not and she was born a woman.

It is moreover in the third successive sexual intercourse that Connies all consciousness is gone. The unfathomable, unspeakable, blissful charm and gaiety is lyrically delineated by Lawrence in the following words. He says:

And this time his being within her was all soft and indecent, purely soft and indecent, such as no consciousness could seize. Her whole self quivered unconscious and alive, like plasm. She could not know what it was. She could not remember what it had
been. Only that it had been mere lovely than anything ever could be. And afterwards she was utterly still, utterly unknowing, she was not aware for how long and he was still with her, in an unfathomable silence along with her. And of his they would never speak.

A number of sympathetic critics have explained the greatness of Roy’s novel in terms of her ability to display contradictory social and psychic elements which, when perceived in terms of deep structure, attain a unity. The smelly perverse behavior of Murlidhavan -- the orange and lemon drink Man in the *Abhilash Talkies* -- handing over his penis into Estha’s hand saying the latter to move it up and down till the seminal discharge further deepens the down slide destitute of mankind to which the children of the locality become a prey.

The brother-sister physical reunion after a considerable gap of twenty-three years in Ayemenem suggests an unusual, socially impermissible incident at a rainy, wet night. What prompts them to this act is not “happiness but hideous grief”.

In the heart of this artistic framework four women characters are shown grappling with problems and plights of life and being repeatedly defeated. Among these four women characters Ammu, Margaret, Rahel and Baby Kochamma some succumb, suffer and finally die in the deplorable condition and some live death in life.

*The God of Small Things* pretty well fits into a feminist text foregrounding many invisible barriers patriarchy has continued to raise in women’s way to gain parity with men. One of the key issues which very often figure in contemporary feminist discourse is the patriarchal powers within the household, the society and the economy. It is so because “inspite of a number of
face saving laws made by the state, practices like dowry-based violence or female foeticide are carried on with impunity within the household.” In their attempts to make ‘sense of the world’ in which they live, women writers have written *A Literature of Their Own* (Showalter, 1986) which is conspicuous for what Jameson calls “the concomitant dismissal of the intermediaries – liberals, First World intellectuals – who had hither to claimed to talk in your name” (312). In order to articulate the genuine female consciousness they have broken out of the restrictions imposed by the ‘literary canon’ which is authoritarian and male-dominated. Sandra Bartky points out the “feminine consciousness is the consciousness of victimization” and when Ammu says that nobody – mother, father, brother, husband, best friend, even her own son who could grow up to be an MCP – can be trusted, she echoes Millet’s outrage: “While we may niggle over the balance of authority between the personalities of various household, one must remember that the entire culture supports masculine authority in all areas of life and – outside of the home – permits the female none at all.”

Kate Millet points out that one of the most potent and powerful institutions of patriarchy is family as it “affects control and conformity.” Despite her ceaseless efforts to enhance the factory productions she does not have any say in it. As Chacko tells Estha and Rahel, “Ammu had no locus stand I”. He being the head of the family, “thanks to our wonderful male chauvinist society” as Ammu calls it, believes that “What’s yours is mine and what’s mine is also mine”, denying thus the individual space Ammu deserved in her own right.

Roy’s gentle feminism surfaces in the text on various occasions, but becomes fairly pronounced when she tries to see the inhumanity and brutality
inflicted on the breakers of “Love Laws” through the eyes of children, children being much closer to the basic maternal instinct. Estha and Rahel with their mother, Ammu and her lover Velutha are fellow sufferers, they are all fellow travellers into “the History House” by the same boat, “the boat that Estha and Rahel found, the boat that Ammu would use to cross the river to love by night the man her children loved by day” (202). It is the feeling of the basic instinct that has been conveyed even through the incest between Estha and Rahel and the illicit sexual relationship between Ammu and Velutha. While describing the scene of incest between Estha and Rahel, the novelist makes it clear that “they had never been shy of each other’s bodies, but they had never been old enough (together) to know what shyness was” (92) When Estha appears wet and Rahel follows him to his room and voyeurs him naked, a kind of feeling overpowers her which is more inspired by the ‘maternal instinct’ than by that of incest:

… Rahel watched Estha with the curiosity of a mother watching her wet child, a sister a brother, a woman a man, a twin a twin … She flew those several kisses at once …He was a naked stranger met in a chance encounter. He was the one that she had known before life began. The one who had once led her (swimming) through their lovely mother’s cunt…Both things unbearable in their polarity, in their irreconcilable far-apartness (93).

Mary Roy, Arundhati’s mother, a fellow sufferer in real life like Ammu in the novel, says that Arundhati Roy has written neither about people nor about the 1960’s; Rather

She is talking about a situation where a touchable woman -- Syrian Christian, Nair or any other -- falls in love with a man of lower caste. Would it not create a struggle even now? Whereas if it is the other way, it is a man from
the higher caste having a liaison with a woman from a lower caste, there won’t be any problem, then or now. I think Arundhati is making a point here. Nobody is bothered about the way. Chacko has always had these woman coming through the side entrance to satisfy his ‘Men’s Needs’ (Frontline 8 Aug, 1997.)

Thus *The God of Small Things* very well fits into a feminist text.
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