CHAPTER 5

Trends of Marxism, Feminism, Pornography

_The God of Small Things_ is an enigmatic novel as it is amenable to multiplicity of interpretative approaches. It is easy to work out a feminist reading of the novel in a particular cultural milieu, it can also be read as a political novel in its criticism of the hypocritical practices of the communist party or it can be read as an autobiographical novel in which, under the modern trend of pornographical details. There is much to suggest that very often the writer descents to the level of pornography. In short Marxism, feminism and pornography are the three leading streaks which stand out as the problem spot in any study of the novel as a work of art because they seem to deflect our attention from the otherwise compact structural unity attained by the writer. It is necessary therefore to take up these thematic strands so as to understand the mind of the writer.

Even though the close of the 20th century is marked by a failure of the Marxian theory and practice as its star model U.S.S.R. collapsed almost overnight and another example Republic of China moved miles away from the original Marxism as preached by Marx in his _The Capital_, there can be no dispute
that Marx and Freud are the two thinkers who have shaped and moved the mindset of the academic world and of the social and behavioural scientists all over the world. Arundhati Roy has used Marxism as practiced by the so called Marxist in the state of Kerala one of two Indian States where Marxists have been the ruler of the State for a pretty long time. The Novel is set against the Marxist politics in Kerala in the 60’s of the last century when a debate was on whether the Central Indian Government was justified in dismissing the communist ministry. It may be recalled that the debate was acrimonious and sharp. Writing towards the end of the century Arundhati Roy has her own opinion and experience and those opinions are conditioned by the tone and tenor of the novel. The way Arundhati Roy looks upon Marxists is not theoretical as it is based on persons and their doings. Arundhati Roy does not claim loyalty to the theory of communism as she had come a long way away from the days of initial rise of Marxism in Kerala. For her Marxism has degenerated from what it should be, to what it is in the hands of impish old dead woods of Marxist band wagon like Comrade Pillai who use their influence more with selfish motive than with selfless service of the proliterate. When we talk of Marxism and Roy’s reaction to it in the novel we do not mean that Roy is a political novelist and we might have taken things in their own strides if only there had not been the vocal reaction among the Marxists of the opposite brands themselves about which we have earlier spoken.
The idea of Marxism makes a backdoor entry to the story content of the novel through the humorous rather satirical character of local leader K.N.M. Pillai. The other characters amenable to Marxist ideology are Chacko and Velutha. As the novel stands Comrade Pillai and Chacko stand together as persecutors despite professing the principles of the social creed. Velutha alone stands as a case model of the oppressed class. There is no doubt that the novelist is neither in sympathy with Marxist nor is she engaged in any serious debate about the political ideology as an instrument of socio-economic equality. That is why our problem is about the status and quantum of the Marxist ideology in the thematic structure of the novel. One reason why the novelist does not give a full blooded picture of the marxisf’s action is that probably she herself is not sure about the status and quantum of the idea of Marxism to be presented without harming the artistic unity. The theme is concerned with the sad story of a brother and a sister as seen through them in their childhood and therefore she does not have scope for presenting a Marxist novel in the essential sense of the term. It is a known fact that a writer is free to present his or her own idea and creed so long as it does not interfere with the artistic effect of the novel but Roy seems to be taking an impish pleasure in presenting the person of Comrade Pillai (with recognizable personal traits of a great communist leader of Kerala). Just this conversation is enough to support our impression:
'Any issues?'
'No', Rahel said.
'Still in planning stages, I suppose? Or expecting?'
'No'.
'One is must. Boy girl. Anyone', Comrade Pillai said.
'Two is of course your choice.'
'We’re divorced’. Rahel hoped to shock him into silence.
‘Die-voiced?’ His voice rose to such a high register that it cracked on the question mark. He even pronounced the word as though it were a form of death.
‘That is most unfortunate’, he said, when he had recovered. For some reason resorting to uncharacteristic, bookish language. ‘Mostunfortunate’. It occurred to Comrade Pillai that this generation was perhaps paying for its forefathers’ bourgeois decadance.
One was mad. The other die-voiced. Probably barren. Perhaps this was the real revolution. The Christian bourgeoisie had begun to self-destruct. Comrade Pillai lowered his voice as though there were people listening, though there was no one about.
‘And Mon?’ he whispered confidentially. ‘How is he?’
‘Fine’, Rahel said. ‘He’s fine’.
Fine. Flat and honey-coloured. He washes his clothes with crumbling soap.
‘Aiyyo paavam’, Comrade Pillai whispered and his nipples drooped in mock dismay. ‘Poor fellow’.
Rahel wondered what he gained by questioning her so closely and then completely disregarding her answers. Clearly he didn’t expect the truth from her, but why didn’t he at least bother to pretend otherwise?
‘Lenin is in Delhi now’, Comrade Pillai came out with it finally, unable to hide his pride. ‘Working with foreign embassies, See!’ (pp. 130-31)
The above lengthy quotation is enough to indicate the direction of authorial tone and attitude to Marxism. We may easily agree that Chacko is a fake Marxist and Pillai is the shrewd political opportunist. But the question remains about the relevance and desirability of the inclusion of Pillai’s life along with author’s comment and criticism in the body of novel we feel these details superfluous to the artistic effect. Likewise despite the novel being evidently autobiographical the novelist declares at the very outset, “that the characters in it are all fictional”, even E.M.S. Nambodaripad is mentioned by name with intentional misleading statements about his ancestral home highlighted. To think of old communist serving as waiters in the newly built hotels appear to be a strategem for ridiculing communism. The authorial rhetoric is exercised flagrantly for the denigration of Marxist in several ways. We are made to believe that Kerala has been turned into hell by the communist government and persons like Velutha can have little hope for any betterment. The novelist, we strongly feel, makes sweeping generalization intentionally for example on the basis of one bad example of communist functionaries there comes the remark, “So there it was then, History and Literature enlisted by commerce. Kurtz and Karl Marx joining palms to greet rich guests as they stepped off the boat.” (p. 126)

The chapter entitled ‘Work is Struggle’ reminds us of Orwellian intentions as the chapter seeks to expose the hollowness of Marxists slogans for serving the opportunistic deception
practiced by Comrade Pillai which again is rounded up with another high sounding generalization, "And there it was again. Another religion turned against itself. Another edifice constructed by the human mind, decimated by human nature." (p. 287)

Thus it is on the basis of these that both Aijaz Ahmed and Kalpana Wilson regard "the novel with a pervasive political subtext". We are inclined to believe the view aired by Manjari Shukla that "Since The God of Small Things is a period novel set in Kerala at a time when the personal and the political, the private and the public inevitably ran into each other, the novelist could not have achieved her realistic project without giving politics its due place in the novel."¹ We may add that for the novelist as well as for us the present socio-political climate makes us to accept Roy's attitude to communism as a means of comic relief in the otherwise grim tale of anguish and suffering of the twin for which the social and familial codes are to a large extent responsible which even the communist regime could not change. While Marxism remains at the periphery in the novel, it is easily possible to take the novel as a perceptive novel.

**Feminism**

The Post Independence Indian English fiction is marked by the trends and tendencies of the European fiction. Feminism which had started in the 18th century now come to have its own sustained effect and identity. In the Indian sociological condition
also the growing opportunities for women with education and a consciousness for their ability and confidence make writings by women writers susceptible to ‘Feminist’ readings of their fictional works. In the Indian context women have been relegated to secondary role as the house keeper and as the adornment in the house to show to the world how well balanced and harmonious is the family life of any particular household. But as women writers came to express themselves they frankly examine their roles and express their frustrations so much so that there is hardly any woman writer who is not open to some sort of feministic bias and its expression in her novels.

Arundhati Roy in a way appears as a pioneer in depicting the misery and the pain of being a woman in the otherwise supposedly advanced and enlightened society of Kerala. The dominance of women in the Nayyar community, female literacy and the absence of Purda, free mixing of males and females combined to create an illusion to the world that the Kerala society is free from the usual oppression of the females in other parts of the Indian subcontinent. But the story of The God of Small Things which essentially is the story of women of different generations suffering and sulking make us aware that women everywhere are the sufferers and the male chauvinism is everywhere having an upper hand. In short The God of Small Things is a moving case study of the tortures that a talented woman of charm has to undergo just because of one wrong decision prompted under the
helpless situation of a broken family. The fact that the novel does not retain one single focus on Feminism alone is because of the multiplicity of interest and foci which make the Indian reality. It may be mentioned that India is a fascinating strange place where currents and cross currents of desperate problems operate at the same time and they together constitute the sociological and social realities to be used and described by the creative writers. In short we can say that pornographical details, Marxism and Feminism are the different hues which together make the content of the novel *The God of Small Things* so glamorous and at the same time so thought-provoking as to invite a spate of critical reviews, articles, condemnations, approbation at the same time.

Since Feminism as a movement has been able to inform so much of the fictional writing of the 20th century in general and since the post 1960 Indian English fiction has thrown up a number of women writers with their own brands of perceptions about feminism, it is necessary to say some thing about Roy’s handling of feminism in the novel ‘*The God of Small Things.*’ The reading of the novel leaves us shocked by its indictment of patriarchy and the injustice and oppression faced by a woman in the androcentric society as the story goes woman is victimized everywhere; as a daughter in her parents’ house, as a wife in her husband’s house or as a worker in a factory or as an employee in an office. This is the case not only in India but in America also. It appears
that Arundhati Roy is too sensitive to this gender bias operating all through the globe.

Like the early crusaders for feminine rights of self identity and economic and personal freedom Roy also falls for them. For her Ammu serves the purpose of being a fighter for these causes even though the conclusion is all fore-determined because of the traditional structure of society. To escape the drab atmosphere of her parental house where her mother is beaten up daily and where children live a sacred existence she takes the indiscrete decision to rush into a loveless marriage only to find herself “out of a frying pan into the fire”. While living with her husband on the tea State of Assam Ammu finds her identity and freedom of choice through her manners and behaviours at social gatherings. She behaves with a dignity and determination of an Indian wife to refuse the degrading proposal of her husband to please his British superior by sexual favours. She meets violence with violence. She even quits her husband unmindful of the total economic and cultural insecurity. She returns to her parental home in Kerala only to be tormented frequently by the reminder that she and her children have no locus standi. Even then she continues her struggle in her own way. She has courage enough to retard Chacko about his hypocrisy and phallo-centricism and retains her independence. Like her mother Rahel has to content with equally grim arts. She manages to survive both in Delhi and New York inspite of oppressive male domination.
Roy instead of simply narrating the feminist point of view, wants to probe deeper into the issue of the biology of the female body from the woman’s point of view without any connection with being an object of male desire. On a simple reading we feel that the scene in Ammu’s bathroom is too sordid to be described. Ammu examines the parts of her body and appreciates the beauty of the female form but she is soon possessed by the worries about the gradual decay of the body and feels a suggestion of madness. She loses her sense of identity and regards her body parts as objects of male consumption. She becomes reckless and pursues Velutha fiercely for sexual gratification and in this way as a role model of feminism she fails. Rahel survives the vicissitudes that befall her but ultimately she resorts to a kind of happiness which no feminist would approve. In this way both Ammu and Rahel fail in the desired feminist struggle for self respect and freedom and they end up in degraded sexual pleasures and extreme loneliness. One of them destroys herself in the hope of redemption. If intentions matter much Ammu’s are no doubt lofty and worthy of praise.

It is possible to study the novel from the feminist point of view statically in terms of history. Roy has succeeded in presenting the story of male Chauvinism as a historical trait of the Keralite society. It matters little if the society is no more than that of the upper caste Syrian Christians noted for their intelligence, prosperity, social status and education and government jobs. Roy
seems to suggest that injustice to women is a part of the male social character which remains intact despite all nuances of advancement. Roy definitely has a good historical sense which reveals itself when she comes to narrate female oppression pervading through the generations—right from baby Kochamma to Rahel almost through the passage of at least three generations of women—all competent and dashing enough to be women of substance if only they had got favourable atmosphere for the frusion of their personality in any society at anywhere. They have got an independence, a capacity for making choices and decisions and also an ability to perform if need be.

The God of Small Things does contribute to feminism in another way. Luce Irigaray, an eminent exponent of France feminism observes,

... relationship of women to their mothers and to other women... thus towards themselves—are subject to total narcissistic “black out”, these relationships are completely devalued. Indeed, I have never come across a woman who does not suffer from the problem of not being able to resolve in harmony, in the present system, her relationship with her mother and with other women....

Roy mentions the relationship between Ammu, the mother of Rahel and Mammachi, the mother of Ammu rather distinctly. Mammachi is a mute sufferer and she does not say a word when Ammu is denied further education because her Pappachi considered the education of women an unnecessary expense. This
denial makes Ammu frustrated—her frustration is increased phenomenally through the uncongenial atmosphere at home and lack of a viable alternative through marriage. When Ammu left her husband she was only 24. At this stage she knew that she was “already damned combining the infinite tenderness of motherhood and reckless rays of a suicide bomber” (p. 44). The novel is coarse so far as the evil mood of the patriarchal society is concerned and is perfectly reflected in the views of baby Kochamma who being herself a sufferer has become devoid of all sympathy for suffering women. She also subscribes to the male point of view. Roy observes that she

... subscribed wholeheartedly to the commonly held view that a married daughter had no position in her parents’ 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 a intercommunity love marriage-Baby Kochamma chose to remain quiveringly silent on the subject. (pp. 45-46)

Roy has made a subtle suggestion that Baby Kochamma resented Ammu because she saw her “quarrelling with a fate” that she herself “had graciously accepted. The fate of the wretched Manless woman.” (p. 45) From the feminist point of view it is interesting to note that although Baby Kochamma is a woman, she is not in sympathy with another woman, that too her own kin, when she is in real distress. Ammu definitely is Arundhati’s role
model as a feminist despite the fact of her failure to stand on her own. Roy’s remark is quite clear on this point,

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. (pp. 181-82)

Thus the novel does possess the potentiality of being a feminist novel but somehow or the other the writer chooses not to work out the feminist hypothesis to its logical end. In one of her interviews Arundhati Roy has assertively said that “it is my story and this possessive note is probably responsible for not making out the feminist potentiality. Probably her historical sense and her preference for the reality prevailing in the 1960s prevents her from making Ammu a successful role model in the cause of feminist freedom. Roy has been an enigmatic writer and she delights in being so as she has kept the details of her personal life and its effect on the novel rather a closely guarded secret. Any how the novel, as it stands, is open to a partial feminist reading. In so far as it throws up the issues concerning the women and the impediments which stalks every woman with a desire for self identity and freedom in her personal choices.

Pornography
The God of Small Things as the title suggests has made much of very small things which normally should have been marginalized or just past over. Among those small things brought to undue prominence are some striking and vivid account of the few fleshy details of the appearance, motions, stimulation and gratification of the genitalia are dealt with. In fact this small thing holds an overpowering attraction for the novelist so much so that in the very opening stages we are introduced to the scene at Abhilash Talkies. The novelist takes special pleasure in making the shocking details graphically vivid. Roy’s command over the language and her ability to muster up striking images makes the whole experience for Estha extremely lucid and repugnant. Likewise there is the bathroom scene where Ammu sticks tooth brushes under her breasts and on her hips as a test of whether there has been any decline in them or not. In the third important account Mammachi is shown to imagine the sexual intercourse between her own daughter and Velutha. The description is no doubt vivid and detailed:

She imagined... a Paravan’s coarse black hand on her daughter’s breast. His mouth on hers. His black hips jerking between her parted legs. The sound of their breathing. His particular Paravan smell. Like animals, Mammachi thought and nearly vomited. Like a dog with a bitch on heat. (pp. 257-258)

Similarly it is really distasteful to watch twins—a brother and a sister—to get involved in incestuous relationship:
There is very little that any one could say to clarify what happened next. Nothing that (in Mammachi’s book) would separate Sex from Love. Or Needs from Feelings. (p. 328)

This kind of physical contact, even if it was the twins’ need, is uncalled for and totally spoils the artistic taste. It is nothing short of morbidity and vulgarity. “Up to this point, the twins had maintained a spiritual bond, but now suddenly they break, ‘the Love Laws’. This breaking of ‘the Love Laws’ is quite irrelevant and undesirable.”

The God of Small Things has been unique in so far as it has invited favourable and hostile opinions in equal measure. The charge of Pornography has been commonly leveled against it and even the critics who seem to appreciate her art or “artlessness” in conjuring up a convincing picture of the Kerala life as an insider, find it difficult to defend her at several places some of which are mentioned above. In the famous case of D.H. Lawrence’s Lady Chatterley’s Lover the writer was absorbed of the charge of pornography on the ground that it was artistically done and that it was not offensive to the taste. But the same cannot be said of Arundhati Roy’s descriptions. She does describe more intimate sexual scene but it rises above mere pornography because of the poetry and the poetic mode used by the novelist in describing those close intimate relationships. While the earlier examples seem unnecessarily open the remaining ones particularly those concerning Ammu and Velutha are literary transmutation of a
purely physical experience. Prof. A.N. Dwivedi has made a valid
distinction between the two and seems to represent the general
critical consensus about the book on the issue. Dwivedi observes:

Arundhati Roy shows her expertise in depicting erotic
and passionate scenes, as in the last chapter entitled
'The Cost of Living' where man-woman relationship
reaches full consummation. But there is a reason for
it—Ammu (the mother of the twins) has been a day-
dreamer having afternoon-mares, and as an abandoned
woman, she remains unrequited physically. Roy, in
portraying the ruthless feelings and passions of
Ammu, is more womanlike more earthy, more natural.
She is not so perverted and unnatural here as in
‘Abhilash Talkies’ (pp. 94-123.).

Before we come to examine the artistic rendering of the
physical encounter it may be pointed out that even those critics
who have a sympathetic leanings towards Arundhati Roy seem to
point a finger towards her for formula writing. Prof. R.S. Sharma
is one of them who unable to digest the reality uses the word
cornography instead of pornography and extends his own logic for
it. Using the word cornography he says, “We are here using this
term instead of sexuality or pornography because we are
disinclined to presume an unfavourable or negative connotation
right at the outset.” Even the scenes of voluptuous love-making
involving Ammu and Velutha are difficult to digest. Despite the
fact that the scenes are well accounted for and that they may be
taken as the essential structural units of the plot because the novel
is basically the story of Ammu and her children. We somehow are
made to feel that “the general pattern of events is not much different from what we find in modern Western formulaic fiction which seeks to find place for various kinds of sexual activities. Roy’s description is almost pornographic and often descends to naked descriptions.” However, the scenes involving Ammu and Velutha have got an artistic way of presenting the reality where love scenes are felt to be the outcome of the artistic design of the novelist. It is in the last scene significantly entitled ‘The Cost of Living’ that these scenes occur and there in man-woman relationship on the purely sensual level reach their full consummation and as A.N. Dwivedi says, ‘there is a reason for it—Ammu (the mother of the twins) has been a day-dreamer having afternoon-mares, and as an abandoned woman she remains unrequited physically. Roy in portraying the restless feelings and passions of Ammu, is more woman like, more earthy, more natural (than the scene at Abhilash Talkies).’ The descriptions on p. 336-37 contains both the bizarre or formulaic and the artistic descriptions of love making. The description of naked Ammu crouching over Velutha is followed by a description echoing deeper and wider sentiments involving not the carnal but the larger issues of acute human considerations:

Once he was inside her, fear was derailed and biology took over. The cost of living climbed to unaffordable heights; though later, Baby Kochamma would say it was a Small Price to Pay. 
Was it?
Two lives. Two Children’s childhoods.  
And a history lesson for future offenders. (p.336)

The method used by the novelist is that of constant contrast between the personal and the universal issues involving the children and their future. The second method used by the novelist of redeeming her descriptions from mere pornography to an artistic rendering of the primary human emotion like Love is that of the investing the purely sexual experience with a poetic suggestiveness which looks much beyond the act itself. In short her descriptions are redeemed from pornography by the poetic mode and the superior narrative skill in which poetic images uplift the descriptions from the level of the bizarre to that of the imaginative. We can say that even her literal statements which is a permanent aspect of cheap sensational writings are enlivened by intelligent flashes of poetry which mask and elevate the naked facts of the sexual act. A fine example is found on p. 335 where the literal is followed by the veiled suggestiveness and therefore by poetry:

Biology designed the dance. Terror timed it. Dictated the rhythm with which their bodies answered each other. As though they knew already that for each tremor of pleasure they would pay with an equal measure of pain. As though they knew that how far they went would be measured against how far they would be taken. So they held back. Tormented each other. Gave of each other slowly. But that only made it worse. It only raised the stakes. It only cost them more. Because it smoothed the wrinkles, the fumble
and rush of unfamiliar love and roused them to fever pitch. (p. 335)

The experience of Ammu and its profound implications both positive and negative are well commented by the narrator in a language which is poetically suggestive enough to lift the ordinary to the height of the unusual. The narrator says:

Seven years of oblivion lifted off her and flew into the shadows on weighty, quaking wings. Like a dull, steel peahen. And on Ammu's Road (to Age and Death) a small, sunny meadow appeared. Copper grass spangled with blue butterflies. Beyond it, an abyss. (p. 337)

One general defence for these verbal excesses in describing the very personal intimate experiences is that of feminism operating behind such liberties. Roy by presenting Ammu as an active partner seems to claim woman's right as an equal. Seen in this light and particularly in the light of what French and American feminist so vociferously regard as natural rights of woman, the way Ammu behaves and the way Roy describes it appear justified. But at the same time as we have noticed earlier Roy does not take feminism to its logical end because the characters with possibilities of being exemplary end up rather miserably. Neither Ammu nor Rahel bring any credit as examples of the Feministic freedom. It may be mentioned that it is on these grounds that the descriptions cited above may not be dismissed summarily as
blatant pornography. The next point to ponder before making any simple generalization is the deeper shade and larger implications which are brought to operate even in the mere physical act by the way the writer describes it. Her poetry definitely elevates the purely mundane to the level of art.
References