



## Gender discrimination and child abuse in Arundhati Roy's *the god of small things*

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### Abstract

Arundhati Roy, a Booker Prize winner for her first novel *The God of Small Things*, has occupied a place among the contemporary literary prominent figures like Salman Rushdie, Bharti Mukherjee, V.S.Naipaul, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth and Rohinton Mistry. Roy as a social activist and reformer depicts our degenerated present – a reflection of our political corruption, Dalit subjugation and complexity of women's situation, hollow promises and fractured vision. Roy has profound social concerns and she depicts this crude reality with extraordinary linguistic inventiveness. This paper examines Roy as a novelist who analyses the most problematic contemporary issues of Indian middle class life sex, exploitation, violence, caste- politics, power- politics, hollow conventions and rituals. She shows how the patriarchal system of marriage unleashes a reign of terror, misery and violence palpable in Pappachi's wrath beating Mammachi with a vase. Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, Ammu are oppressed by patriarchy. There is Chacko, a self- proclaimed Marxist, who flirts with the women working in the factory. Estha and Rahel are unwelcomed guests at Ayemenem. Rahel grows up to be a disillusioned adult. The shameful experience with the Orangedrink Lemondrink man at Abhilash Talkies adds to Estha's bewilderment. A sense of guilt keeps haunting him and he prepares his mind by thinking "Anything can happen to anyone ...". Roy appropriately delineates the child's bewilderment at the hands of his own mother, his maternal uncle, baby Kochamma, Kochu Maria, the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man, the Kottayam police and so on. Along with gender-oppression, Arundhati Roy has succeeded in raising the issues of child-abuse and child-negligence. The novel deals with touching and challenging political, social, cultural and personal issues.

**Keywords:** gender-discrimination, child –abuse, patriarchal, belonging, subjugation

### Introduction

The God of Small Things is a complex novel with myriad characters touching political, social, cultural and personal issues. The novel deals with the inhuman effects of the villainous factors of gender, caste and politics. Conditions of women as a subaltern in society has always been closely analysed in Indian literature. Mahashweta Devi, Mukhtar Mai, Amrita Pritam, Anita Desai are the women writers who deal with feminist themes. Arundhati Roy deals not only with the oppression of women but also with the sexual and social exploitation of the children prevalent at various levels. She succeeds in giving a voice to the concern of subalterns through her language inventiveness under the fictional backdrop of Ayemenem changing from colonial antecedents to the modern times. The story of novel moves around Ammu, her son Estha and daughter, Rahel. Mammachi, Ammu, Rahel and Baby Kochamma represents the three generations of women who are victims of patriarchal society.

Ammu, a prostitute who loves ".....not wisely buy too well", falls a victim to the patriarchal society. The first generation of women, Mammachi and baby Kochamma, are content with their subordinate existence and silently approve of patriarchy. They shows how the patriarchal system of marriage unleashes a reign of terror, misery and violence upon Mammachi and Ammu.

The second generation, Ammu and Margaret Kochamma shows assertion and aversion to the socio- cultural codes of the orthodox society. They break the moral norms of the

society and indulge in sexual freedom. Ammu pays a heavy price for her defiance. Ammu is born in a Syrian Catholic Christian family in a conservative fictional town-Ayemenem in Kerala. Male chauvinism and gender biasness are the major hurdles in Ammu's life. She has been confronted with patriarchy since her childhood. Pappachi, Ammu's father, an embodiment of imperial power inflicts violence upon Mammachi and daughter, Ammu. He is not a bit reluctant in flogging Ammu and throwing the two out of the house during the winter nights of Delhi. Ammu's defiant nature challenges him. His jealousy does not let him appreciate his wife's efficient management of the family's Paradise Pickles factory. His frustration leads him to derive pleasure in beating her. Ammu is denied education. To get rid of her patriarchal father, she marries Baba after five day they have met. But her condition gets worsen because her husband was an alcoholic and beats her frequently. After divorce, she comes back to the hell of Ayemenem with her twins. She along with her kids gets humiliation because "die-voince" means dead. Ammu and Chacko both are estranged. But Chacko receives a warm welcome and becomes the inheritor of the property. His profligacy is recognized as "Man's Needs" (168) where as Ammu is treated as a "Veshya". She does not neglect her bodily needs and asserts herself. "She wanted her body back". (222)

She tries to find completeness in her relationship with Velutha but orthodox society breaks the union of a touchable with an untouchable subaltern. The obscene and lustful behavior of

inspector terrifies Rahel. She feels unprotected and utterly humiliated like her mother. The twins get love and affection from one person who is now killed. Ammu dies. Rahel and Estha are totally disillusioned without love, shelter and protection. Even church refuses to bury Ammu because of her breaking the norms laid down by a caste-centred, repressive patriarchal society. Ammu had observed rightly "Thanks to our wonderful male-chauvinistic society". (p.57) The hostile and extremely desensitized environment of Ayemenem traumatized her childhood as well as that of her children. Baby kochamma calls the twins fatherless waifs". Worse still, they were Half-Hindu Hybrids whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian would ever marry." (45) She takes sadistic pleasure in their humiliation. She does not tolerate their having comfort in each other's company. She shatters the twins psychologically by emotionally blackmailing them. She is also instrumental in parting of the twins at the age of eight. Chacko also rebukes them that they have no right to be there. Even family servant rebukes them. "Tell your mother to take you to your father's house. There you can break as many beds as you like. These aren't your beds. This isn't your house." (p.83). "The two -egg twins' have unbounded love and affection for each other. At an early age of seven, Estha feels an outcast at Ayemenem house.

Arundhati Roy lays bare a child's vision of the adult world in the novel as she herself was an "unprotected child in some ways". Her technical inventiveness lends a unique charm to the novel. She explains the psychological torture of Estha in a very vivid way. Then comes the most shameful incident of child abuse which plays havoc for the poor child. Estha gets completely bewildered after the experience with the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man at Abhilash Talkies. The terrible experience keeps haunting the boy like a nightmare. He feels unprotected "the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man could walk in any minute. Catch a Cochin-kottayam bus and be there" (p.194). The ugly face of humanity imprints a long lasting influence on his mind. He remains afraid that "the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man could just walk in through the gauze door" (197) of the pickle factory. His confrontation with the harsh realities of life distorts Estha's sensitive and innocent vision towards life. His bitter experiences haunt him to have these two thoughts:

"(a) Anything can happen to anyone, And

(b) It's best to be prepared" (p.194).

He makes himself fully prepare to face the worst if that happens. We see later that all his apprehensions become true. He starts losing his sense of belongingness. He loves his mother and sister only. But his mother's stern words hurt his tender mind and compel him to take extreme steps. She extorts: "I should have dumped you in an orphanage the day you were born. You're the mile stones round my neck..... just go away !.....why can't you just go away and leave me alone" (p.253)". This results in Estha's flight from home. Estha and Rahel eventually decide to live in the history house, an old abandoned building. The twins want their mother to apologize. "What if Ammu finds us and begs us to come back", asks Rahel. "Then we will. But only if she begs ", replies Estha (p.292). Further his bewilderment finds an expression in his rubbing out his surname from his exercise book. " on the front page of book

Estha had rubbed out his surname with spit, and taken half the paper with it. Over the whole mass he had written in pencil, Unknown. Esthappen Unknown" (p.156).

This incident indicates his inner self-erasing fury which leads to his self- effacement and self-fragmentation. He is separated from Rahel, his voice. The inseparable twins are separated for 23 years. Estha loses the power to express. Roy talks about the matter of bringing up children which throws light on the early life of the novelist. Ms. Roy is bold enough to show things in realistic way. She frankly talks about the issues which are socio-cultural taboos in south Indian rural milieu.

## Reference

1. Arundhati Roy. "The God of Small Things" (New Delhi: India Ink, 1997).