

VICTIMIZATION OF WOMEN IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

Khagendra Sethi, Ph. D.

Lecturer, Dept. of English, Ravenshaw University Cuttack, Odisha, India

Mail: sethi.khagendra@gmail.com



Scholarly Research Journal's is licensed Based on a work at www.srjis.com

In the present day society, it is heartening to find women doing well at studies and excelling themselves in various professions. Awareness of the importance of good education for girls is itself a sign of positive social change. However, education does not merely mean being able to read and write or obtain degrees or diplomas. True education provides exposure and refinement. It exposes to sundry influences and refines sensibility. It also helps develop one's personality. An educated and professionally trained woman has access to several careers; she is also likely to make a better wife and mother if she chooses matrimony as her ultimate objective. In other words she can excel in any field she takes up. In the words of Kuldip Nayar, the eminent journalist:

“A woman should be proud to be a woman, not apologetic. It is time that they made society realize the fact that a woman is not a piece of transferable property among men by father, husband or sons. They should realize that it is possible for women to survive as individuals and can lead their lives independently. Women need not lose their femininity in order to rise above their traditional subservient roles. An intelligent, capable woman can hold herself with dignity and courage in any situation” (Excerpts from his address at the first Convocation of the Kanpur Vidyamandir Mahila Mahavidyalaya , Kanpur).

The immediate need of the hour for women is freedom. It is not only from decadent, meaningless customs and superstitious believes but also from dependence and bondage of all kinds. There is a need to cultivate a rational approach towards life and towards the problems of survival in a world full of horrors – dowry deaths, sati, denial of secular justice to women, amniocentesis tests and female infanticide. It is necessary to make a lot of noise about social injustice based on gender. It is also essential to protest in an organized and consistent manner.

Moreover, mere protests are not enough for justice is to be demanded, obtained and maintained.

Keeping in view of these basic issues the Indian women novelists of the Post Modern Age have come forward to revolt in the form of writings to attain complete emancipation and equality with men in the society. They have depicted the life and plight of Indian women in all its depth and dimension. They have understood the politics of the male novelists who have portrayed women as symbols of chastity, devoted wife, dutiful daughter and all sacrificing mother. The male novelists presented before them the models like Sita, Sabitri, Ahalya and a few other mythological characters and expected them to confirm the same trends and lead life accordingly.

Women in developed countries enjoy equal status and rights like men. So they do not feel marginalized like women in Indian society. It is because Indian society is based on patriarchy. India is traditionally and culturally different from those countries where women are completely emancipated but here, its culture, religion, tradition and above all superstitions have imposed restrictions on the behavior and activities of the women.

The feminist writers like Anita Desai, Shashi Despande, Kamala Markandaya and Arundhati Roy have taken exception to the oppression of women. They have beautifully reflected the oppression and infliction of Indian women in one form or the other. The purpose is reformation. They want to reform the Indian society in general and to emancipate and extricate the condition of women section in our society from the patriarchy, tradition and culture that subordinate and marginalize them. Arundhati Roy in her debut novel *The God of Small Things* has presented a feministic touch in portraying the female characters. The women characters like Mammachi, Ammu and Rahel have suffered greatly due to the patriarchal dominance. Cultural and religious believes also contribute a lot to their cause of suffering. The author has depicted the never-ending agony of the women characters who are treated with cruelty, inhumanity, partiality, indifference and discrimination by the male members of the society.

Let me begin with Mammachi. Mammachi's plight of oppression is due to her husband. He tortures his wife without any valid reasons. He wants to show his dominance in the family. He beats her mercilessly. He has been brutal in his treatment of his wife. He beats her in brass vase and rocking chair. The plight does not confine to this. Even Chacko has stopped his father hitting his mother. A mother being beaten by husband in the presence of her adult

children is really humiliating. It is an affliction of both mental and physical torture. Mammachi recollects:

“Even the one time he did return when he stopped Pappachi from hitting Mammachi with the brass vase, and a rocking chair was murdered in the moonlight, he was hardly aware of how stung his father had been, or his mother’s redoubled adoration of him, or his sister’s sudden beauty”(Roy,1997:246)

Chacko has been Mammachi’s only solace and consolation. So she likes to share her suffering with her son in letters. But in vain. It is of no use to tell him her problems because Chacko hardly takes interest in his mother’s troubles. She is also worried about the marriage of her grown up daughter. Pappachi fails to discharge his domestic duties through and through. Neither father nor son is serious in family matters. She takes all the burden on to herself. Sometimes Chacko hardly bothers to know her suffering that is enveloped in the letter. Mammachi recounts her past:

“Mammachi wrote to him regularly, with detailed descriptions of her sordid squabbles with her husband and her worries about Ammu’s future. He hardly ever read a whole letter. Sometimes he never bothered to open them at all. He never wrote back”.
(Roy,1997:246)

Like Mammachi, Nanda Kaul in Anita Desai’s novel *The Fire on the Mountain*, falls prey to patriarchal dominance. She does not get physical torture but is deprived of her freedom. Furthermore, the extramarital relationship of her husband contributed to her mental agony. Oppression on women, may be in different form, is very much there in Indian society.

Ammu, the central character, is synonymous with humiliation, oppression, negligence and suffering. Her plight started with her dropping of her education. Ammu, the only daughter, took interest in studies. But because she was a girl child she had to quit school. Women education is still not encouraged in twenty first century. It is simply on the ground that educating women is not beneficial. So Ammu could not pursue her higher education in city and came back home. Her deprivation of higher education was the first social injustice she faced in life. It sowed seeds of her future misfortune that dogged her till death. The irony of the society is that it encourages male education even though they are reluctant to study. In spite of hesitation Chacko was sent to Oxford. Ammu was deeply pained for this inequality and partiality on the ground of the discrimination of gender. Roy raises her voice against this gross injustice through the character of Ammu.

Anita Desai's Uma and Anamika face the same type of situation like Ammu in the novel *Fasting Feasting*. They have been also deprived of higher education because of social stigma and parental objection. The pathetic condition of Ammu goes parallel with Uma. Uma's brother Arun was sent to America like Chacko to pursue his studies. Anamika has been also deprived of getting higher education. She had a brilliant academic record and was awarded scholarship to study at Oxford. But she became a victim of parental inhibition. So Ammu suffers from social injustice and gender disparity like Uma and Anamika.

Ammu is haunted by a series of social injustice one after the other. It is her brother Chacko who, every now and then, makes her realize that he is the sole heir of parental property. So she cannot even claim because society does not allow property right to daughters. The author says:

“Though Ammu did as much work in the factory as Chacko, whenever he was dealing with food inspectors or sanitary engineers, 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.” (Roy, 1997:57)

Ammu works hard. She works more than Chacko. But he becomes more possessive of wealth only. He always utters the word “my” and “mine” in relation to property. Chacko claims:

“What's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine” (Roy,1997:57)

As a brother he has no sympathy and empathy for his unfortunate sister. His taunting words hurt her sentiment and emotion. Had she had parental property as her resource she would not have run into crises and died a miserable death.

The male members assert supremacy and superiority over female members – they may be wife, daughter or sister. Before marriage Ammu was beaten and treated harshly by her father. As a father he didn't take any step to marry off his daughter. Ammu had to choose her own life partner. After marriage Pappachi didn't pay any attention if his daughter was properly settled. He had developed a cold indifference for his daughter since childhood. Her pitiable condition is accelerated when she left her husband and came to her parent's house. The society which is unjust to the female members becomes more cruel to those who are divorced and stay in parents' house. Baby Kochamma refers to this issue when she says:

... a married daughter had no position in her parents' home. As for a divorced daughter she had no position anywhere at all.(Roy,1997:45)

Though she is a woman she also does not spare her. Here is a woman torturing another woman because the society is so framed. Society takes advantage of the helplessness of the women.

Ammu's marital life ends up with a fiasco. She becomes a victim of frustration and illusion. She is regularly beaten by her addicted husband. Her predicament crosses limits. She gets stunned when she comes to know from her husband that Mr Hollick wants Ammu for the regularization of his service. The author says:

Over coffee, Mr Hollick proposed that Baba go away for a while. For a holiday. To a clinic perhaps, for treatment. For as long as it took him to get better. And for the period of time he was away, Mr Hollick suggested that Ammu be sent to his bungalow to be 'looked after.' (Roy,1997:42)

What could be more tormenting and humiliating than listening to this from a husband's mouth? Moreover her suffering does not stop here. Baba crosses all limits of civility and modesty when he beats her mercilessly for not giving her consent immediately to do the ugly job for him. The absence of morality and humanity is clearly exhibited in the following passage which says:

She said nothing. He grew uncomfortable and then infuriated by her silence. Suddenly he lunged at her, grabbed her hair, punched her and then passed out from the effort. (Roy,1997:42)

Violence became the inseparable part of her life. Physical torture and mental affliction became a common phenomenon in her day to day life. She put up with everything. She had no way out. She was mentally shattered and emotionally battered. She fell into such a practice of violence. But when she found that violence inflicts her children she packed her bag and left her husband for her parental home. The author writes:

"Drunken violence followed by post-drunken badgering. Ammu was repelled by the medicinal smell of stale alcohol that seeped through his skin, and the dry, caked vomit that encrusted his mouth like a pie every morning. When his bouts of violence began to include the children, and the war with Pakistan began, Ammu left her husband and returned, unwelcomed, to her parents in Ayemenem"(Roy,1997:42)

Her suffering does not have a full stop there. She is also harassed by police. Society condemns her relation with Velutha. So also does the police. Police treats her like a whore. This is acute oppression by police administration on a hopeless and helpless woman. Roy gives an account of Thomas Matthew's behavior towards Ammu:

“‘If I were you’, he said, ‘I’d go home quietly.’ Then he taped her breasts with his baton. Gently. Tap, tap. As though he was choosing mangoes from a basket. Pointing out the ones that he wanted packed and delivered”. (Roy, 1997:08)

Rahel, very much like Ammu, suffers due to the male dominance and social system. Her grandfather, uncle and husband have contributed to her suffering and misery. Her life is exactly alike her mother. She lives with her mother in her uncle’s house. Uncle treats her as an unwanted liability. Grandparents, Pappachi and Mammachi have no love for her. Rather they have not hesitated to hurt her sentiment and feelings. They did not consider her to be a member of the family. She was quite devoid of her father’s love and affection. She could not spend her childhood like a normal human girl. She also was debarred from school education as she was rusticated by the school authority on the basis of some minor complains of the other students. Her real sufferings started with the death of her mother Ammu when she was just eleven years old.

Her marital life has been a very pathetic one. It is just like the same as her mother’s. Like her mother she married very shortly to a person she loved. Larry Mc Caslin, her lover-turned-husband was always busy in his research work in Delhi. She could not continue her marital life. Her life got disillusioned by divorce. She returns to Ayemenem. She lives without any dreams. Her plight is multiplied in Ayemenem.

Both mother and daughter have been the victims of male dominance and social system. Baba, Caslin, Pappachi and Chacko are the typical products of patriarchy. They have used them and behaved like pawns at their hands. They have not considered them to be human beings. They are ill treated whimsically and impulsively. They have been accepted and left out in accordance with the mercy of the male members. Gerda Lerner remarks:

“Patriarchy means the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women in society in general.”(Garda,1986:239)

To sign out, the women characters in the novel *The God of Small Things* have been victimized physically and mentally by the male members. They may be their own flesh and blood or the responsible duty-bound police officials. Roy in this novel has raised voice against the social injustice and oppression inflicted on women on the basis of discrimination of gender.

References

- Desai, Anita, *Fasting Feasting*, London: Chatto and Windus,1999.
Roy, Arundhati. *The God of Small Things*. New Delhi:India Ink, 1997.
S. Lerner, Garda, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, New York: OUP 1986.