

CHAPTER-3

Gender and Justice

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is an astonishing debut novel that unfolds diverse themes. Arundhati Roy's socio-political criticism as reflected in the novel essentially moves round three main points; the caste question, gender issues and environmental problems.

Arundhati Roy has a deep concern for the "small things" and her commitment is related to them. "Small things" are the victims of state, society and sheer will of the unthinking powerful. Though the term "small Things" implies a lot and defies an exhaustive enumeration and elaboration, we can broadly put it in the following three categories:

1. Women who are placed in a subordinate position by society and left defenseless by the state.
2. The workers and the Dalits, who are downtrodden, exploited and abused traditionally.
3. The environment which is subjected to wanton acts of manipulation and destruction.

They are the voiceless; Arundhati Roy has raised her voice for.

Arundhati Roy's novel is deeply insightful and sensitive as a study in character and motivation, development and growth. It is also a novel exposing the hypocrisy and entrenched prejudices of traditional Indian society as seen in the micro-cosm of Ayemenem. As a voice of protest against exploitation of the lower classes and of women, it is a novel of rebellion. One of the voices heard in the book is certainly a feminist one.

As a feminist writer who writes about her experiences, the writer's writing also reflect the cultural texture of her childhood. The writer says about kerala that "It was the only place in the world where religions coincide, there is Christianity, Hinduism, Marxism and Islam and all live together and rule each other down (---)' I was aware of the different Cultures when I was growing up and I am still aware of them now. When you see all the competing beliefs against the same background you realize how they wear each other down." (West, 219)

Feminism is a theory of Women's point of view. It is the theory of Judy Grahn's "Common Woman," (Grahn, 63) "Consciousness raising is its quintessential expression." (Rich, 7) Feminism is the first theory to emerge from those whose interest it affirms. Feminist method is consciousness raising. The collective critical reconstitution of the meaning of women's social experience, as women live through it. "A feminist is a woman who negotiates herself into a position where she has choices." (Simmons, 2002)

Indeed feminism and feminist literary criticism are often defined as a matter of what is absent rather than what is present. Although feminism as a political ideology can be traced back at least to the seventeenth century, feminist literary criticism is a very recent invention. We can look back on a rich ancestry of women's criticism informed by feminist concerns, including the work of George Eliot, Virginia Woolf and Simone Beauvoir only after the revolutionary year of 1968 did women begin to think of themselves as feminist critics, approaching literature with both a political perspective formed by the women's liberation movement.

Feminist criticism began when women were students, teachers, writers, editors, or readers, began to note the limited and secondary roles allotted to fictional heroines. Women writers began to ask serious questions about their own relation to literary study. How were

women represented in the men's literary texts? What was the relationship between the textual harassment of women and the oppression of women in society? Why were women absent from literary history? In attempting to answer these questions, feminist criticism has drawn on work in cultural anthropology, linguistics and psychoanalysis fields.

Contemporary Feminist literary criticism begins in the late 1960's and early 1970's. The little of the recent collection of essays – conflicts in feminism – speaks to the situation of feminist criticism at the present.

Feminist criticism is an attempt to describe, interpret and reinterpret women's experiences as depicted in various kinds of literature. It got its original impetus from the women's liberation movement of late 1960's.

The initial efforts of feminist critique was to revise orthodox 'Male' literary history and reinterpret the works of writers in the context of patriarchal hegemony. Jardine offers a definition of feminism. Feminism she writes is generally understood as a "movement from the point of view of by, and for women" (Sahgal 87). Jardine views feminism as a movement by women, which takes on different and very specific forms in different contexts.

All but a few societies make a ruthless cult of male honor and female virtue. Down the ages the halo of virtue has extracted an awesome range of self-denial in return, from the sacrifice of life, as in Sati, to the sacrifice of personality, expression and ambition, depending on the times and more crucially, the culture of the home, especially of its males." (8)

Elaine Showalter in her essay, "Feminist criticism in the Wilderness" deals with the situation of women with in culture rather than outside of it.

Adrinne Rich, a contemporary American poet, describes feminism as “the place where in the most natural organic way subjectivity and politics have to come together” (7). This critical stance allows feminism to protest the exclusion of women from the literary canon, to focus upon the personal, to exhibit a powerful political orientation and to redefine literary theory itself in its concerns with the psycho-sexual aspects of language. In short, feminism represents one of the most important social, economic and aesthetic revolution of modern times.

Feminists examine the experience of women from all races and classes and cultures including, for example African, American, Latina, Asian American, Indian, Handicapped, elderly and Third world subjects.

Despite their diversity, feminist critics generally agree that their goals are to expose patriarchal premises and resulting prejudices, to promote discovery and revaluation of literature by women, and to examine social, culture and sexual contexts of literature and literary criticism. Feminist critics therefore study sexual, social and political issues once thought to be the outside study of literature.

The Second Sex Simone De Beauvoir asserts that ‘a woman is not born but made,’ while K.K. Ruthven argues that a woman is “the product of sex-coding processes of acculturation.” (8)

Virginia Woolf, who, in addition to her fiction, wrote *A Room of One's Own* (1992) and numerous other essays on woman authors and on the cultural, economic and educational disabilities within what she called a patriarchal society that have hindered or prevented women from realizing their productive and creative possibility. She writes a woman's writing is always feminine it cannot half being feminine, at its best it is most feminine, the only difficulty lies in defining what we mean by feminine.

A number of feminists have concentrated, on the woman not as a reader, but on what Elaine Showalter calls 'Gynocriticism' that is, a criticism which concerns itself with developing a specifically female framework for dealing with works, written by women, in all aspects of their production, motivation, analysis and interpretation and in all literary forms including journals and letters. One concern of gynocritics is to identify what are taken to be the distinctively feminine subject matters in literature written by women the world of domesticity. Another concern is to uncover in literary history a female tradition, incorporated in sub communities of women writers who found support in earlier women writers, and who in turn provide models and emotional support to their own reader and successors. A third undertaking is to show that there is a distinctive, feminine mode of experience or 'subjectivity' in thinking feeling valuing and perceiving oneself and the outer world.

The society presented in the novel is patriarchal. On the one hand we have a group of characters, Mammachi, Baby Koachmma, and Kochu Maria, who perpetuate the division of caste, race, and gender. On the other hand, Ammu and the twins, Rahel and Estha, consciously and unconsciously resist these hierarchies. Ammu, the biggest victim of the system, is an archetypal image of a daughter marginalized in a patriarchal society.

Perhaps Ammu, Estha and Rahel were the worst transgressors. They all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tampered with laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much. (31)

Ammu, the central character of the novel, has only a marginal existence in the family structure. A traditional patriarchal society places little importance on women's education. Ammu's father Pappachi, does not like the idea of spending money on his daughter, and she is never encouraged to find her place in life. Marriage is the only

justification of her survival. Ammu suffered a lot in her life. After her divorce from her husband her life becomes miserable. In the end of her life she is alone. She is wandering in the search of a job from place to place so that she can independently care for her children. She becomes asthmatic. She becomes mad.

Mammachi said It ran in their family. That it came on people suddenly and caught them unawares. There was Pathil Ammai, Who at the age of sixty-five began to take her clothes off and run naked along the river, singing to the fish [...] Would future generations say, 'There was Ammu- Ammu Ipe. Married a Bengali .Went quite mad. Died young. In a cheap lodge somewhere.' (223)

Velutha offers what is denied to Ammu, Estha and Rahel in society and family. In the daylight, he is the best companion of the children, who feel suffocated in Ayemenem because of their divorced mother. The outer world is hostile, and only the few moments they spend with Velutha afford real happiness. Ammu meets him in darkness, along the river bank -- a symbol of division between the two classes.

Baby Kochamma, spending a frozen life in her past, appears as the guardian of system. Velutha, "the Untouchable" is killed by the "Touchable Boots", of the state police. Ammu died in grimy room in the Bharat Lodge in Alleppey, Where she goes for an interview. "She died alone. With a noisy ceiling fan for company and no Estha to lie at the back of her and talk to her. She was thirty-one .Not old, not young, but a viable, die-able age" (161).

Roy tells about the patriarchal society of Ayemenem. Ammu's father beats her mother and her. He is charming and professional man but he becomes monstrous with his wife and children. This is the tragedy of the women in Ayemenem. They are beaten by their

father and their husband. They become used to off this cruelty because they see it from their childhood.

As a child, she had learned very quickly to disregard the Father Bear Mother Bear stories she was given to read. In Her version, Father Bear beat Mother Bear with brass Vases. Mother Bear suffered those beatings with mute Resignation. (180)

Mammachi , the unfortunate wife of Pappachi was destined to be beaten up rather frequently by her husband . In our society the wife who is socially and financially more successful is subjected to constant abuse and harassment by her husband. This happens to Mammachi who becomes the victim of her husband's jealousy. When Pappachi comes to know that his wife is showing excellence in violin lessons, he stops them. "The lessons were abruptly discontinued when Mammachi's teacher, made the mistake of telling Pappachi that his wife was exceptionally talented and, in his opinion, potentially concert class" (50). Later he breaks the bow of violin and throws it in the river. His act of jealousy is manifested also in his refusal to help his practically blind wife in her pickle-making job, because he considers it an unsuitable job for a high ranking ex-Government official. Actually it is a matter of fact that "he greatly resented the attention his wife was suddenly getting" (47). Women's education, ambitions, yearnings and aspirations have no significance for the male chauvinistic society. They are supposed to play the role of a mother, daughter-in-law and wife. That is why they have been deliberately kept illiterate so that they can spend their entire lives in the service of the family. So Mammachi lives a life devoid of love, care, understanding and co-operation. She cries at Pappachi's funeral.

Ammu told the twins that Mammachi was crying more because she was used to him than because she loved him. She was used to having him slouching around the pickle factory, and was used to being beaten from time to time. Ammu said that

human being were creatures of habit, and it was amazing the kind of things they could get used to. (50)

The God of Small Things makes a scathing attack on the patriarchal notions of Kerala's Touchable society, the high caste Hindus and the high caste Syrian Christians. Caste plays a important role within Indian society and the caste system of Kerala was really rigid. The lower castes people worked as servants and laborers for the high castes people. They lived on land owned by the master household and could be evicted at will if they displeased them. They were not allowed to enter into temples, not allowed to enter public markets or bathe in temple ponds. They were not allowed to wear shirts, blouses or covering clothes above the waist. Untouchables are denied the fundamental human rights.

Mammachi told...Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sway their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan's footprint. In Mammachi's time Paravans's like other untouchables, were not allowed to walk on public roads, or allowed to cover their upper bodies, not allowed to carry umbrellas. They had to put their hands over their mouths when they spoke, to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed. (73-74)

Historically, the dalits remain to be the most oppressed section in India. The caste based stratification of the Hindus have rendered the dalits as untouchables. Neither they, nor even their shadows, can touch the upper caste Hindus. The upper caste people treat them as sub-human beings, avoid any sort of contact with them, and if, by chance they happen to be in 'touch' with them (the untouchables) they need to be sanctified. The dalits belong to the lowest scale of the social order; they are the most backward class. The

democratic right to equality, education, opportunity, social justice are denied to them. They are literally the downtrodden, the oppressed of the society, inhuman hatred, exploitation, subjugation, humiliation, social injustice and violent attack have been inflicted upon them.

Ayemenem is place where the differences between Paravan and Touchable are still present. Touchable can't cross the river. They can't talk to Paravan.

Though the Earth woman made a lasting impression on the Twins, it was the History House- so much closer at hand-that really fascinated them. They thought about it often. The house on the other side of the river .Looming in the Heart of darkness. (54)

These Paravan people have a particular Paravan smell. Baby Kochanma says about Vellya Pappen-“How could she stand the smell? Have you noticed, they have a particular smell, these Paravans?” (78) The river is a powerful symbol in the novel. It is wild, deceptive and unpredictable. The river is polluted now by the people of Ayemenem.

“Eventually, by evening, the river would rouse itself to accept the day's offerings and sludge off to the sea, leaving wavy lines to thick white scum in its wake. Upstream, clean mothers washed clothes and posts in unadulterated factory effluents... On warm days the smell of shit lifted off the river and hovered over Ayemenem like a hat. Further inland, and still across, a five-star hotel chain had bought the Heart of Darkness” (125)

Arundhati Roy has exposed the dirty picture of the society based on caste system, and has discussed the chapter which was till undisguised. Velutha's grandfather Kelan along with other untouchables adopted Christianity. They thought they will get redemption from untouchability by adopting new religion but it was just a blunder which they realized later.

They had jumped from the frying pan into the fire. They were made to have separate churches with separate priests. As a special favour they were even given their own separate Pariah Bishop. After Independence they found they were not entitled to any Government benefits....because, officially on paper, they were Christians, and therefore casteless. It was a little like having to sweep away your footprints without a broom, or worse, not being allowed to leave footprints at all. (74)

Velutha is a paravan, a community of untouchables in Kerala which has been subjected to inhuman cruelty, indignity and exploitation through the ages. He is encouraged to go to a school for Untouchables only. He finishes school at age sixteen and is by then also a trained carpenter, despite his caste. He works as a carpenter and mechanic in the pickle factory and around the Ayemenem house, maintaining and mending everything from clocks and water pumps to the bottle machines in the factory. "Mammachi (with impenetrable Touchable logic) often said that if only he hadn't been a Paravan, he might have become an engineer" (75). The quote reveals that Velutha has achieved an extraordinary position after all, despite being a Paravan. Velutha is an excellent carpenter and very good at machines. But his qualities are not acceptable to the touchable workers in the factory of Mammachi. Mammachi pays Velutha less than she would pay a touchable carpenter.

Mammachi told... paravans were not to be carpenters. And certainly, prodigal paravans were not meant to be hired. To keep others happy, and since she knew that nobody else would hire him as a carpenter, Mammachi paid Velutha less than she would pay a touchable carpenter more than she would pay a paravan. Mammachi did not encourage him to enter the house (except when she needed something mended or installed). She thought that he ought to be grateful that he was allowed on the

factory premises at all, and allowed to touch things that touchables touched. She said it was a big step for a paravan. (77)

When Velutha has an affair with Ammu, he breaks an ancient taboo and incurs the wrath of Ammu's family and the Kerala police. He breaks the rigid social rules of the caste system and therefore, the authorities must punish him. Roy describes the policemen's violent actions as being done out of fear, "...civilization's fear of nature, men's fear of women, power's fear of powerlessness" (308). Velutha faces inhuman treatment by his own countrymen because:

If they hurt Velutha more than they intended to, it was only because any kinship, any connection between themselves and him, any implication that if nothing else, at least biologically he was a fellow creature- had been severed long ago. (309)

Caste acted as a colonial crapulence. The novel portrays the yawning gap between the touchables and the untouchables; the exploiters and the exploited, and the powerful and the powerless. The novel is a veritable saga of unending pain. The novel has such a rich texture that it is eminently amenable to multiple approaches and interpretations. Velutha, the outcast, can never co exist peacefully with the "touchable" communities for so long as the stigma of untouchability attached to him and countless others like him. Velutha is "highly intelligent," an excellent carpenter with an engineer's mind, but he is also "The God of Small Things" --He left no footprints in sand, no ripples in water, no images in mirrors" (265).

In contrast to Velutha, Chacko can get away with his debauchery -- or his "man's needs" as his mother terms it -- because he is a "touchable". Roy has justly put the issue when she says, "Change is one thing. Acceptance is another" (279). Ayemenem is a place of social, Political and moral corruption. Ayemenem is truly seen as the Heart of Darkness.

It is the place where evil still resides. The Touchable Police force is glad to beat Velutha to death. “His skull was fractured in three places. Four of his ribs were splintered, one had pierced his left lung, which was what made him bleed from his mouth. The blood on his breath bright red” (310).

For Pillai Velutha dead is far more useful to him than Velutha alive. The difference between touchable and untouchable pushes the helpless Ammu into the tragedy. She is locked in the room. Her life is in the hands of her family members. Nobody cares for her feelings. There are different laws for a man and a woman in Ayemenem. Mammachi understands the needs of Chacko but doesn't understand the needs and feelings of Ammu. Nobody cares her. She is told to leave the house and care for herself. Estha and Rahel are forced by Baby Kochamma to say yes before the policeman in the police station. They are frightened by imagining themselves in the jail.

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This injustice is perpetrated by a group of the characters who are themselves the victims of injustice. Mammachi, Ammu's mother, who endured her husband's abusive attitude, ignores Chako's sexual exploitation of the female workers, but she cannot tolerate her daughter's love affair with a Paravan. Baby Kochamma, the defender of the system,

would go to any limit to save the so-called family honour. The novel shows the process of creating and labeling Parvans within the high class families -- the people who go beyond the unwritten laws of society in pursuit of happiness.

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Another major aspect of Kerala which is discussed in the novel is environmental pollution. The river Meenachal in *The God of Small Things* evokes many images in the mind of Estha and Rahel. They often dreamt of the river in their childhood. They had

reasons to do so. “It was warm, the water green like reapplied silk. With fish in it. With the sky and trees in it. And at night, the broken yellow moon in it” (123).

As an object of beauty it seemed a joy forever. When Rahel returned twenty three years later the river “greeted her with a ghastly skull’s smile, with holes where teeth had been and a limp hand raised from a hospital bed” (124).

Despite the fact that it was June, and raining, the river was no more than a swollen drain now. A thin ribbon of thick water that lapped wearily at the mud banks on either side, sequined with the occasional silver of a dead fish. It was choked with a succulent weed, whose furred brown roots waved like thin tentacles under water. Bronze winged lily-trotters walked across it. Splay-footed, cautious. (124)

The river which had the power to evoke fear was no more than a “slow, slugging green ribbon laws that ferried garbage to the sea now” (124). Estha too found that the river, “smelled of shit and pesticides brought with World Bank loans. Most of the fish had died. The ones that survived suffered from fin-rot and had broken out in boils.” (13).

Shit and pesticides are the two sources of pollution mentioned here. The children of the shanty hutments on the other side of the river defecating in the river bed may be responsible for it. The water of the river is also used for washing clothes and pots upstream and receives ‘unadulterated factory effluent’ as well. Little wonder then that in summer “the smell of shit lifted off the river and hovered over Ayemenem like a hat” (125).

The river along the banks of which Estha walked smelled of shit which is quite true of most of the rivers in Kerala. The fin rot disease and the resultant death of fish as a result of the excessive use of pesticides as part of the much eulogized green revolution with World Bank loans, is a generally accepted fact in contemporary in Kerala. The river is not the only sufferer in the novel. Ayemenem once known for freshness, matchless greenery

and rural quietness has changed when Rahel returns to it. Its population has swelled to the size of a little town. Estha now finds the “new, freshly baked iced, Gulf money houses built by nurses masons, wire benders and bank clerks who worked hard and unhappily in faraway places” (13).

Arundhati criticizes the state government for its lack of concern for the prevention of pollution and preservation of existing rivers and above all for the absence of a comprehensive policy on Ecology and Environment. Even in June - the beginning of Monsoon in Kerala- the river is no more than a swollen drain.

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The vested interests of the political parties and the government is made explicit in their building of a salt water barrage down the river, in exchange for votes from the influential farmer lobby. Arundhati describes the river which has already become narrow and weed-filled and to which the disposable plastic things are dumped as sludging green ribbon lawn that ferried fetid garbage to the sea. The river which had the power to evoke fear was no more than a “slow, slugging green ribbon laws that ferried garbage to the sea now”(124).

Roy also points out the undue importance given to the promotion of tourism industry and the devastating effect on our natural rivers and environment in the novel. The persistence of the foul smell and the helplessness of people is described by her, she said on warm days the smell of the shit lifted off the river and hovered over Ayemenem like a hat.

Since water in the sea has become toxic, the tourists are forced to enjoy their swims and bath in the artificial swimming pool in the Kari Saippu's house converted five star hotel. To a person who had been living in Europe for a long time it is quite natural that the airport at Kochin looks like a local bus depot. No tourist could help noticing the bird shit-covered spot stained kangaroos, the vehicle crammed roads especially those around the airports. The novelist also refers to the inefficiency and corruption in the public service Departments like K.S.E.B. and the P.W.D. Arundhati is reiterating the clamor made by environmentalists in Kerala for the wrong Development Policies and the result-ant disaster caused to our environment. The novelist also points out the degradation it has caused to the cultural tradition of Kerala, especially to our ancient tradition of classical performing arts like Kathakali globalisation and the market economy had forced the kathakali men to sell their cultural tradition as another commodity to eke out their living.

"Ancient stories were collapsed and amputated. Six hour classics were slashed to a twenty – minute cameos" (127). The more pathetic is the plight of classical artists who are forced to make their performances in swimming pool. "Their truncated swimming pool performances. Their turning to tourism to stave off starvation" (229).

All these glimpse and many others scattered across Arundhati Roy's book present a very dismal picture of environmental degradation brought about by human callousness towards other living beings and inanimate things and senseless pursuit of money.

The God of Small Things is neither an anti-communist propaganda, nor is it a mere projection of the orientalist image but projects an insides view of Kerala society. With her inner eye, extraordinary command of language and radical sensibility, she has portrayed ordinary things in an unusual way. Her artistic courage and frankness in critiquing Kerala and her boldness in attempting to transgress oppressive social fetters are extremely

remarkable. Like Velutha and Ammu, Arundhati also have been housing and living, breathing anger against the smug ordered world and the novel is a reflection of what she sees when she looks back in anger. Having noticed the unnoticeable, she thinks the unthinkable and says the unsayable. More than anything else Arundhati's hitting the socio-political ball has caused flutters in Kerala and those who reacted emotionally and vehemently to her work as an attendant rhetoric of sheer condemnation failed to see the other equally important issues which form the focus of the novel.

Arundhati Roy has produced in this book a unique reductive style which acquires a remarkable degree of condensation and concreteness. *The God of Small Things* is a fine example of architectonics. We know that Arundhati Roy was previously a student of architecture in Delhi University. So she, like Thomas Hardy, has brought architecture into the novel. The whole story of the book can be seen in the opening chapter of the novel in an enigmatic nutshell. In one of the interviews, Roy herself stated that the entire thing is exposed before the reader in the very beginning. She says about the structure of the novel

I think that one of the most important things about the structure is that in some way the structure of the book ambushes the story.... it tells a different story from the story the book is telling. In the first chapter I more or less tell you the story, but the novel ends in the middle of the story, and it ends with Velutha and Ammu making love and ends on the words 'tomorrow'. And though you know that what tomorrow brings is terrible, the fact that the book ends there is to say that even though it is terrible it's wonderful that it happened at all. (Wilber,46).

R. K. Dhawan says:

A writer whose novel is authentically Indian as is her writing style. She is one who has put India on the map of the English-Speaking world. Roy is the novelist

extraordinary....Her victory for a first timenovelist is the culmination of a fairy tale.

(Dhawan, 11)

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