

# Female Identity and Marginalization in the God of Small Things: A Review

Md. Wasim Akram\*

Research Scholar, Dept. of English, Patliputra University, Patna

**Abstract - Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is a rare work of fiction which has made a significant impact in Indian English Literature in recent years. She is one of the few Indian English writers enthusiastically interested in contemporary socio-political issues which are adequately documented in a number of articles, interviews and books she authored on various topics in recent years. Indian history, politics, caste distinction, and suppression woman and her independence as human being, all these distinct elements are brought together by Roy, to shed vivid light on the plight of women and how they live under oppressive forces including their relationships with men who control them. There is no exaggeration to say that women are treated as an object of lust and sexual gratification. They are robbed of basic amenities of life. They are forced to live in a system of social structure and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women.**

**This present paper is an attempt to have a review of female identity and marginalization in Roy's *God of Small Thing*, which has been widely acclaimed as an important book of the post-modernist literary trend.**

**Keywords - Significant, Socio-political, Caste, Sexual gratification, Post-modernist.**

-----X-----

## INTRODUCTION

The God of Small Things (1997), Arundhati Roy won the Booker prize, one of the most prestigious British awards, was translated into twenty one languages, reached sales records and became world famous. She was also awarded the French Prize of the Universal Academy of Cultures in November 2001, for her contribution to fight intolerance, racism and sexism.

Among the many Indian women writers I could select for this study, I picked texts with a committed hedge, which is only logical if one considers that the theories which, structure my literary analysis (feminism and the postcolonial debate) have a high potential for political activism and social criticism. The wealth of issues addressed by Arundhati Roy, plus the style of her writing made of her first novel a clear option.

In the plot of *The God of Small Things*, during the colonial period, in the last decades of the Raj, although the high status of British culture remains a current social reference in the 60s/70s, when the main events of the plot take place. The whole time frame of the plot encompasses the life of four generations of the same family, in their Ayemenem house by the river, in the state of Kerala, south India. Only the adult life of the fourth generation (the twins Estha and Rahel) escapes an Anglophile environment. In fact, in the nineties, when the twins are thirty-one, America has replaced Britain as the most current foreign influence, although

America never becomes a stylish, upper class reference. America means "money".

Great-grandparents Reverend E. John Ipe and his wife are the oldest generation of the family to be mentioned in the text, but they are quite secondary in the structure of the novel. The plot really develops around the last three generations of the Kochamma family, and the central events take place in 1969. At the time, Estha and Rahel are seven years old, and they are living with their divorced mother (Ammu) and her family. The events that became a turning point in the life of the twins started with the arrival of their uncle Chacko's ex-wife (Margaret) and their daughter (Sophie Mol), during Christmas holidays. These new comers are British, and the way their Indian relatives receive them is important to frame one of the dimensions of Anglophilia in the text. Margaret and Sophie are expected to embody a superior civilization, and thus, receiving them, is regarded as a motive of pride and joy for this Anglophile family. For most of the members of the Ipe clan, there is a strong emotional investment in the British relatives as the means to claim membership in a "superior" and "progressive" community. This is a case of true assimilation of colonial propaganda, and the behavior of the characters expresses their agreement with colonial views of India.

According to Homi Bhabha, individuals learn through a series of available pedagogic and performative

narrative strategies, which inculcate in the individual dominant codes of collective identity and their corresponding life-styles. In this way, individual subjects create a sense of who they are and with who, or where, they belong. The assimilation of a sense of collective identity provokes, in the individual, a strong emotional identification with the dominant ideologies of the group, shaping one's subjectivity to consent the perpetuation of existing power structures and adapting one's projects and hopes to the promoted life-styles. In the case of Anglophilia, the colonised citizen assimilates British self-promoting colonial discourses, adjusting his/ her frame of mind to see colonialism as the civilising mission of a superior culture committed to the improvement and development of a backward one. Hence, the drive to imitate British ways is given free hand, so as to claim one's integration in the most powerful, dominant culture.

The status awarded to the British ex-wife and the half-British child overlap Anglophilia with sexist issues. For the three older women of the Kochamma family, Mammachi (widowed grandmother), Baby Kochamma (single aunt, younger sister of the deceased grandfather) and Kochu Maria (servant), the man of the house (Chacko) is, undeniably, the head of the family. He will provide for their future, as son, nephew and master, and his half-British daughter, Sophie Mol, means the continuity of the family, and its promotion to a more sophisticated class. In any case, the status of the son, Chacko, and his daughter Sophie, would always be much superior to the tolerated daughter, Ammu, and her twin children Estha and Rahel. The fact that both son and daughter are divorced does not mean the same thing. Chacko is a man, and he divorced a British wife. Ammu's divorce is only a source of shame and embarrassment. According to local mentality, women do not divorce: they endure.

I will deal with the sexist dimension of the novel later on, in the next section. At this stage, I am more concerned with Anglophilia as the assimilation of racist/colonial views, leading to consent and agreement with colonial arrangements. In order to be up to the level of civilisation of their half-British cousin, the twins Estha and Rahel are forced to practice their English pronunciation, and they are forbidden to speak Malayalam, their mother tongue, even among themselves. They also have to witness the excitement provoked by the arrival of Sophie Mol, a reaction that spells out for the unfortunate twins their lower racial status and "fatherless" situation. These distinctions between the children, imply wider racist schemes of social reference, the stereotypes of colonial propaganda, which become concrete and humiliating in the small things, there would be two flasks of water. Boiled water for Margaret Kochamma and Sophie Mol, tap water for everybody else".

Although *The God of Small Things* is a very rich text, dealing with several political and social issues, the anti-colonial critique of Anglophilia is a very clear and quite extensive topic, absolutely seminal for the meaning of the events in 1969. Without the Anglophile

obsession of this family, one cannot fully understand the impact of Sophie Mol's death. It is because of all the dreams of social mobility that die with Sophie that Ammu and the twins have to be "punished" for that accident in such a wild way (their separation, the indifference concerning Rahel's education, the refusal to help Ammu, even when she was terminally ill). The drowning of Sophie Mol means the end of all the future projects of the Ipe family, such as Chacko and Mammachi were dreaming them at that stage. Ammu and the twins are mere "guests" who never counted as subjects for the future of the family, and even less as possibilities to claim respectability and improvement.

On the margins of Arundhati Roy's narrative, there are other secondary themes that are worth mentioning in connection to a critique of Anglophilia. The fact that America has replaced Britain as mythological land of wealth and power suggests that to emigrate to America is the current equivalent to "family connections in London". Arundhati Roy makes three points on this new fascination. Emigration is not necessarily, worth trying (Rahel's story is her narrative translation of this argument), "progress" is not necessarily development, and Americanisation is not an improvement on the split identity of the colonised subject. Rahel's marriage to Larry as a night clerk McCaslin and her emigration to America end up in a grim job as a in a bullet-proof cabin at a gas station. Back in India, what Rahel recalls from her American experience is drunks vomiting in the money tray, pimps and their job offers, one or two men being shot and stabbed.

Feminism can also be viewed as a political construct which gained its ground in consequence of the rising tendency of male chauvinism. It signifies women's conscious struggle to resist patriarchy, which subordinates the female to the male, to treat the female as inferior to the male and this power is exerted, directly or indirectly, in civil and domestic life to constrain women. It also campaigns on issues such as reproductive rights, violence within a domestic partnership, maternity leave, equal pay, sexual harassment, discrimination and sexual violence. Themes explored in feminism include patriarchy, stereotyping objectification and sexual oppression.

Women, as represented by several legends, mythology, history or traditions have several aspects. There are some who have termed woman as temptress or enchantress. She is said to have feline cunningness, a vile character of a serpent. By some she is the one who is not to be trusted; her charms can cast a spell and disaster. She is termed as a vain glorious creature who seeks pleasure in coquetry. While in some mythologies she had been put to severe tests despite all her sincerity, truthfulness and honesty to prove her purity!

But obviously all these things point to one thing- '*Bias*'. There are the biases for women, harboured by

various people at various ages and they present the rigid and very narrow outlook.

Woman, in turn, if observed in her authority, is God's most beautiful creation. She is most emotional, sensitive and soft to core, perhaps, this is the reason why God chose her to create and procreate and nurture little kids. She is the one who generates life; she is the centrifugal force of the family whereby playing the role of a mother, a wife, a daughter and a daughter-in-law, a sister-in-law, she attracts each member towards herself; and she is the core of the family. Great writers of their time have written about the highly potential female characters. G.B. Shaw has placed Candida on a very high pedestal and has portrayed her in such a manner that she becomes the epitome of womanhood to be praised and followed.

Woman is the one who steers a man, as it is said behind every successful man there is a woman. She, as a better half of a man, gives him the much needed love, strength and support. She is the one who shapes the density of her home and children. The contribution of a woman can be gauged from well brought up children to continue to become the worthy citizens of the country. As is implicit in **The God of Small Things** that Ammu's life is ruined because of her tormented childhood and the negligence of her parents and the same fate befalls her own twin Estha and Rahel, who turn to be sorry figures because throughout their lives they have hankered for love, affection, care and attention.

The line of thought which makes Arundhati Roy represent emigration in a less positive light is an extension of the argument against Anglophilia. Both themes are addressed to demonstrate that the solution for the internal problems of India was/is never abroad. The future of India depends on the Indian people and the ideas and values they choose to hold on to. Similarly, Western money does not mean internal "progress" for India. In fact, economic growth and modernisation are treated in the novel as ambiguous advantages which, by themselves, do not solve any of the problems: five star hotels and their speedboats bring tourists, but leave a gasoline film over the water; open air sewers are left to exhale an awful smell in hot days, but hotels have got air conditioning; the view over the river is beautiful, but the water is polluted and toxic, so, no baths are allowed. Like Sahgal, Roy is not indifferent to the poverty of the Indian people around her, and both of them refuse to accept the lack of governmental solutions in spite of the amount of capital invested in India. Arundhati Roy's point is that, in the nineties, government seems to think "progress" is the exchange of environmental pollution for profitable private business. For Roy, industrialisation, with poisoned fishes rotting in the sun, and the same poverty as ever, is not worth the effort. If World Bank loans only mean pesticides, then these loans are not helping India in the right way, and Roy, as a committed and intervening writer, does not welcome this kind of help. Even in cultural terms, Roy denounces tourism as

a new form of colonialism, an industry that corrupts Indian culture, selling it as picturesque folklore for example when "ancient stories were collapsed and amputated. Six-hour classics were slashed to twenty-minute cameos".

## WORKS CITED

1. Rao, Ranga The booker of the year. *The Hindu*, Sunday, Nov. 16, 1997
2. Dhawan, R.K. *Arundhati Roy, The Novelist Extraordinary*, New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1999 print
3. Krishna Kumar, P : 'Ayemenen & Ayemenam', *Frontline*, August 8; 1997
4. Roy, Arundhati : *The God of Small Things*, New Delhi : India Ink Publishing Co. (P.) Ltd.; 1997.
5. Millett, Kate : *Sexual Politics*, New York : Avon Books; 1970.

---

## Corresponding Author

**Md. Wasim Akram\***

Research Scholar, Dept. of English, Patliputra University, Patna