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### ARUNDHATI ROY'S THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS: A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

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#### ABSTRACT

The research paper explores the element "of feminism in Arundhati Roy's work, *The God of Small Things*, to study it as a work of feminist writing". It discusses the sedulous donnybrook faced by the female sect against the oppression, ill-treatment and torment they undergo because of the deeply ingrained doctrines of traditional, narrow-minded and chauvinistic society; how they have no right to love, how after marriage they made to feel alienated and estranged in their own parents' house, a place they had once known as 'home'. She touches upon a plethora of issues like Gender Discrimination, restricted freedom to women, the idea of breaking free from the conventional precincts, marginalization of women are to name a few.

#### FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

"Arundhati Roy was born on 24 November 1961 in Meghalaya, India. Her father Rajib Roy, was a Bengali Hindu and her mother Mary Roy, was a Syrian Christian" and a legendary social worker from Kerala. "The God of small things is a semi-autobiographical novel". She was the first woman to be bag The Booker Prize for her novel *The God of Small Things* in 1997. In January 2006 she became the proud recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award. Roy, through her work not only penetrates deep into the psyche of the readers by way of her

extraordinary art of imagination but she also addresses the socio-political issues which form the framework and sometimes become a major concern for the society.

“Arundhati Roy is one of the foremost novelists of the feminist tradition, showing exceptional awareness of the social crises and thoughtfulness towards societal tribulations, obstructions and complications’. She brings to surface the challenges which have been faced by women in our society on account of conservative mind sets, through her thought provoking and intensive work, *The God of Small Things*.

*The God of Small things* is a realistic portrayal of the status of Indian women, their manifold anguishes and torments, concerns and uncalled for pressure not only from the society but at times even from their own family – the family they were raised in. It shows a woman’s constant struggle to seek a sense of ‘identity’ and establish her individuality in a completely hostile and avaricious society. The societal status of most typical Indian women is very unsteady, insecure, uneasy and drowned in distress. It is quite evident in the major characters of the novel like Ammu, Rahel, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma and Margaret Kochamma.

The book delineates four generations. We don’t get to know much regarding the women of the first generation. In the second generation fall Baby Kochamma and Mammachi. “Baby Kochamma the daughter of Reverend E. John Ipe”. This couple gave birth to many children but only two were alive. At the age of eighteen she became infatuated towards a genial, charismatic and captivating, young Irish monk, Father Mulligan. She found him magnetic and enticing. Her passion was so strong that she went to the extent of converting herself into a Roman Catholic. She did so to remain in close proximity with Father Mulligan but on the contrary she failed. To keep her away from Father Mulligan and to change her mind she was sent for further studies across the seven seas. However, distance could not change her feelings. She took good care of her own self even while she was sent away there (that shows that how vane and conceited she was, as most women at that particular age are). The underlying message conveyed here is that most young women seek male attention and they resort to all sorts of means to grab it. They yearn to see the sudden light of appreciation and suppress a raw desire to continue being physically attractive and admired by their masculine counterparts. Baby Kochamma had the habit of writing a diary and she used to write every day in it : “I love you, I love you”. She remained in constant contact with him and he too reciprocated. However, after his death, Baby does not drift to the window mourning her lost love; instead on the rebound, her attention is gratified by applying make-up, winning lotteries and watching color TV. She is seen behaving “like a teenager at the age of eighty three as Rahel observes that it's like Baby Kochamma is living her life backwards” (1.136 Roy).

Thus, we see that this lady was a true reflection of the society she lived in- a society that exposed double standards of morality. She had an advanced thought

process and approach towards life but in her view, it was pertinent only for her. For the rest of the women she had the same traditional, conservative and oppressive conviction. She looked down upon Ammu for being a divorced mother of two and lived to humiliate her twins. It is possible that those people who do not present a decent behavior before a particular person think them to be inferior. She was a woman who loved her 'social status' more than her family and their sentiments. In order to maintain her 'respectable' stance in the society she compromises Ammu's happiness by exposing the love affair between Ammu and Velutha- sells him out which leads to his death. On the contrary she is unperturbed by her brother's advances towards unfamiliar women and further establishing illegitimate relationships, thwarting the ethical boundaries of the family. Eventually, the entire family falls apart and is left to pieces. Hence, these contrasting principles prevailing in the society have always crushed even the basic desires of women and the most hideous actions of a man are accepted with ease.

Moving on and taking a closer look at another female character from the novel- Mammachi, wife of Papachi. She was a taciturn victim of the casualty called marriage. The following lines make it clear:

"Mammachi was almost blind and wore dark glasses when she went out of the house. Her tears tickled down from behind them, trembled down from behind them and tremble along her jaw like raindrops on the edge of a roof"(p:5, Roy)

A patriarchal society can reduce a woman to the status of a mere object, a scapegoat who is blamed for the wrongdoings of others. She is choked for being talented. Her aptitude to perform better than her male counterpart leads her to the verge of household violence, where she is blitzed both physically and mentally, leaving her almost numb and benign. Mammachi too meets the same fate at the hands of the green-eyed, envious Papachi. Mammachi was talented; she was extraordinary at playing violin; her classes were abruptly discontinued by her jealous husband since he couldn't tolerate her glory and have his pride injured. He would rather beat her with a brass flower vase every night; he couldn't tolerate the admiration Mammachi received from others. After her husband's death she provided the family their daily bread and butter by "setting up and successfully managing the pickle factory" but she was not obliged for doing so. By this, Roy clearly highlights the age old fact that the aptitude, innate talent and toil of a woman goes ignored and unappreciated in society.

Hence, her marriage with a seventeen year older partner was not only a disappointment but a source of constant frustration and melancholy. Nonetheless, the irony of the matter is that Mammachi, herself being a victim of male chauvinism; advocates the very same principles and ethics to which she had been subjected to. Her conservative mindset turns her into a callous, barbaric savage. Mammachi even after undergoing and tolerating a lot of her husband's nastiness, does not rebel against him. Just like a typical "Indian Woman who does not exhibit any repulsion towards her husband and adapts herself "properly into the conventional scheme of things" (p 122). She, cried on her husband's death because of habit and because the societal dogmas expected it of her and

not out of grief (p 50). "With her eyes she looked in the direction that her husband looked. With her heart she looked away" (p 30)

The structure of patriarchy and gender can be very strongly felt in this work, where the condition of the central character Ammu arouses a sense of pity in the readers. Her misery started when she was a child, woman-haters kept throwing challenges at her, leading her fatefully to a dreadful end. Hence, Roy slams at the hypocritical principles of the society. She uncovers the double standards prevailing in our system, the unnecessary differences between male and female through her protagonist Ammu.

Ammu and her mother both were beaten at the hands of her father every night. Pappachi's conduct resonated of viciousness and ferocity, the distressed "Ammu's" personality. *"Papachi is an orthodox, jealous husband. He is a fanatic who terrorizes his own family. He is a habitual wife beater hits his wife pitilessly either with a brass vase (p 50) or his Ivory handled riding crop" (p 181)* as if she was an animal which needed taming. Papachi's venting out of his anger gives him an innate sense of superiority.

Ever since, she was denied her basic rights. She was refused higher education being a woman, "Pappachi insisted that a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl; she should wait for marriage proposals while she helped her mother with the housework. Since her father did not have enough money to raise a suitable dowry" (Roy 38) even though her brother Chacko was sent to Britain for higher studies. It is still believed by many that college corrupts a woman. Even in today's scenario, although a lot of headway has been made by the progressive mind set in our country but still in some of the remote and interior areas, conservative and surreptitious minds, continue to deprive women from an easy access to education.

According to "Simone de Beauvoir":

*"There is a unanimous agreement that getting a husband-or in some cases a 'Protector'- is for her (woman) the most important Undertaking... She will free herself from the parental home, from her mother's hold, she will open up her future not only by active conquest but by delivering herself up, passive and docile, in the hands of a new master". (352)*

Therefore, we see that Ammu in order to emancipate and evolve herself from her oppressed condition and achieve whatever slight sense of freedom she can get, becomes obsessed with the big idea of marriage and family. It spells freedom for her. As a result she marries a sober-looking Hindu-Bengali without looking back. Much to her chagrin she is almost beaten to death in her marriage and later divorced because when she refuses outright to sleep with her husband's superior. Her strong affirmation in upholding with her self-esteem and morality and not succumbing to her new master is an example of a postmodern self-liberated woman, who does not take life as it comes and returns to her parents. The irony

is that she is tortured and tyrannized even in her very house by her family for being divorced.

Even though Ammu contributed equally towards the growth of their family business but she had no legal right or share in the business unlike her brother. Chacko in the novel is seen saying, "*What's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine*" (Roy 57). His sense of ownership is not something unheard of in the Indian context.

Besides this, Chacko, Ammu's blatant brother used to physically abuse the women workers of the factory. Mammachi is implicitly seen acknowledging it by allowing him access to a special room at home by labeling it as "Man's needs," (Roy 268). He is shown to be involved in "loveless promiscuity". But when Ammu's genuine love affair with Velutha opens up to him he becomes frantic and vehement. He finds it immoral, disgraceful and blasphemous. He says that he has all rights to feel like that as he has the authority and the right to rebuke and castigate Ammu for indulging in such an unsocial act. By and by, we see that she becomes a stranger in the very house where she had been raised as a child. She is further derided for her decision of loving Velutha, an outcaste. She is interrogated, humiliated and ostracized for having an open mind and for making unconventional choices.

The novel discusses the limitation and lack of freedom for women in the novel. Patriarchal domination becomes evident through economic oppression. In the novel, we see the advent of the new woman who is edging ahead and breaking free from the conventional boundaries of societal paradigms, shunning the patriarchal setup and berating the brutal impositions. Ammu, the protagonist breaks out of the excruciating circumstances by divorcing her husband. She progresses from a feminist phase to a phase of self-liberation and self-discovery through self-realization. Much as she wanted to run away from her home, in order to find solace, her destiny brings her back to the same hell, where Papachi forced her to quit education. The novel highlights the sensitivity and self-sacrifice of a woman, who bears all misfortunes and suffering for the sake of her children and in the end, meets a tragic end, broken and shattered.

The novel reminds us of the celebrated feminist Simone de Beauvoir and the lines from her famous work *The Second Sex*, commenting on the situation of a married woman where she says, "Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society". She further says in her work, "One is not born a woman but becomes a woman" (p 445). On similar lines, Arundhati Roy's Novel *The God of Small Things* focuses on the hardships women are still undergoing even in the modern times. She is a woman any woman can identify with. Roy, through Ammu highlights that women still remain the neglected lot in the society. This masterpiece was an eye opener, a path-breaking piece voicing the callousness faced by women at the hands of the so called, self-declared superior male members. Having an open mind and making unconventional choices is not a part of the destiny of a woman. She is bound and gets sucked in by the tribulations which are definitely not of her own making. They long for, yearn for simple pleasures, freedom, happiness, love and respect throughout their lives but they

find themselves in shackles. However, it takes an Ammu to rise above the quagmire and tread the path not taken even if she meets an eventual yet untimely death.

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