



The Theme of Gender Equality in Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*: A Comparative Study

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Abstract:

*For a long time, Indian English literature has been an important way for women living in a patriarchal society to share their stories. This paper offers a comprehensive comparative analysis of gender equality as depicted in Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975) and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997). Even though these books are set in different times and use different ways of telling stories, they both look critically at how women are oppressed by the system and how their identities are limited by psychological, social, and cultural factors. Desai's work centers on Sita, a sensitive woman grappling with the burdens of marriage and societal norms, whereas Roy underscores gender discrimination through the intergenerational anguish of characters such as Ammu and Rahel. This study examines the critiques of patriarchy, marriage, motherhood, sexuality, and social norms by both authors, highlighting women's resistance and their pursuit of autonomy. The paper shows how Indian women writers use new ways of telling stories and feminist awareness to challenge traditional gender roles and push for gender equality by comparing these texts.*

Keywords: *Gender Equality, Feminism, Patriarchy, Indian English Fiction, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy.*

Introduction:

In modern Indian English literature written by women, gender issues have become a key focus. They are not shy about speaking forth the opinions that feminist writers, for example, would express. Anita Desai and Arundhati Roy represent two authors of novels that highlight the existence of women in a culture in which they are oppressed: one being the realist and the other the socialite. Though they're from two totally separate literary generations and genres, both writings manage to capture the plight of the women in their books due to gender prejudices and oppression. *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* by Anita Desai examines the psychological landscape of Sita, a middle-class person who is trapped within the bounds of marriage and motherhood. And so it is that in *The God of Small*

Things, Roy situates gender inequality within a broader socio-political context of caste, class as well as colonial history. The focus of this paper is to explore the relation between gender inequality and women's resistance in both novels, and its similarities and differences in feminist perspectives. The comparative analysis shows what makes Desai's inward psychological realism match Roy's exterior political critique while together providing a powerful commentary on gender equality in Indian society.

Literature Review:

Academics critiquing Anita Desai's fiction have often focused on her use of the inner lives and emotional depths of women's souls when examining Anita Desai's fiction. Critic Ramesh K. Srivastava is part of a line of

reasoning that Desai's protagonists are "the muted voices of Indian womanhood trapped within social conventions" (Srivastava). Feminist readings of *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* view Sita's revolt in a symbolic and subtle light, a recognition of the limited choices and control women have of their own in urban middle-class environments.

By contrast, *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy has received much critical acclaim for its focus on gender, caste and power. Meenakshi Mukherjee defines Roy's novel as a "radical critique of patriarchal and casteist ideologies that punish female desire" (Mukherjee). Feminist critics focus on Roy's depictions of women being met with brutal consequences for asserting autonomy, particularly with regard to love and sexuality.

Whereas many studies consider all these novels independently, fewer will adopt a comparative lens, considering only gender equality. It is necessary to provide a gap-filling perspective on Indian feminist literature by comparing Desai's psychological feminism with Roy's socio-political feminism to enrich the dialogue of Indian feminist literature and discourse.

Theoretical Framework: Gender Equality and Feminist Perspective:

Gender equality is the term given to a social condition that states equal rights, opportunities, and social respect between genders. Feminist literary criticism analyzes literature as it works to uphold, or destabilize, gender hierarchies and power relations. Simone de Beauvoir noted that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 267), which emphasizes that gender identity has a largely socially constructed nature.

Both Desai and Roy reveal how patriarchal structures limit women to roles

primarily set by their relationships as wives, mothers, and daughters and deny them complete individuality and agency. Their stories reveal that gender inequality does not just manifest as harsh violence but through insidious mechanisms like emotional neglect, moral policing, and women's internalization of patriarchal norms.

Gender Inequality in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*

Sita as a Victim of Patriarchal Marriage:

In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, Anita Desai depicts Sita as a woman stifled by the monotony and emotional emptiness of her married life. Her husband is Raman: reason, order, patriarchal authority, while Sita is emotional sensitivity, depth, and a quiet rebellion. Raman's failure to accept Sita's emotional desires represents the prevailing cultural refusal of women's internal lives and wishes.

Sita's alienation comes from being seen as a functional role — that of wife and mother — rather than a self-contained person. Her pregnancy magnifies her anxiety because motherhood is thrust upon her as an obligatory identity rather than a freely chosen one. Desai challenges a patriarchal assumption that motherhood is the ultimate purpose and source of happiness for every woman.

Female Resistance and Psychological Escape:

Trip to Manori Island by Sita conveys the extent to which she wishes to escape the bounds of a patriarchal culture and reclaim her body and life. The island, she believes, is a temporary, even magical, escape hatch from what society wants her to be. But her struggle is less about a good political statement than it is personal.

Desai depicts revolt as an internal one, underlining the small choices women have in patriarchal systems. When Sita does return to her family at last, she is still uncertain about her choice and the problem of gender bias remains.

This nuanced description suggests that the endeavor towards women's emancipation often involves a convoluted interplay of conflict and ambivalence.

Gender Inequality in *The God of Small Things*:

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* offers a stark and unflinching portrayal of gender inequality, deeply embedded within the social, cultural, and political fabric of Indian society. The novel exposes how patriarchal norms and caste hierarchies intersect to enforce strict control over women's bodies, desires, and identities, often through brutal and violent means.

Ammu and the Politics of Female Desire:

Ammu's character captures the struggles faced by women who dare to advocate sexual autonomy in an overwhelmingly patriarchal context. Ammu's position, as a divorced woman, makes her vulnerable, marginalized in the family and community. Unlike her male counterparts, for whom transgressions are often forgiven or trivialized, Ammu's disobedience of social convention, particularly her illicit relationship with Velutha, a man from a lower caste, carries serious consequences.

Roy's idea of the "Love Laws," which dictate "who should be loved, and how" (*The God of Small Things*, p. 39), highlights the strict patriarchal and caste codes that govern both female sexuality and relationships. Ammu's relationship with Velutha is not only a literal break with these laws, but a direct challenge to caste, to the male-dominated order, which seeks to police women's choices. Her punishment is swift and merciless: ostracism, separation from her children and ultimately, her untimely death. This path shows the brutal ways of enforcing gender inequality, with women's bodies becoming the battlegrounds of social control.

Intergenerational Female Suffering: Rahel and Baby Kochamma:

This novel investigates gender inequality through the intergenerational trauma suffered by female characters including Rahel and Baby Kochamma. Rahel's fractured identity and emotional collapse represent the lasting psychological wounds of systemic gender and social oppression. Female characters in the novel are denied the possibility of stable, coherent selfhood — unlike those male characters — indicating how patriarchal structures erode women's mental health and status in society.

Baby Kochamma is one of those complex characters of this story and embodies internalized patriarchy. Within the familial chain she imposes oppressive social norms among her own, as well as society's, women such as Ammu and Rahel, in order to ensure herself an individual position in her society. Her role in patriarchy shows how women can serve as the instrument of patriarchy, reproducing patriarchal order from one generation to the next and across generations. It further complicates the feminist critique due to the fact that gender oppression lies not only externally but also internally within various female relationships and social interactions.

Systemic Violence and Social Control:

Roy illustrates the systemically violent basis of gender inequality. The novel reveals that women who dare to push against patriarchal boundaries are marginalized not only socially but also subject to physical and emotional violence. Ammu's tragic fate exemplifies this, as her assertion of autonomy leads to her social destruction and death. The community takes a similar approach when enforcing the "Love Laws." Through gossip, ostracism, and outright violence, it shows how gender hierarchies persist under the burden of oppressive power.

Meanwhile, the intersection of caste and gender makes it all the worse. Ammu's

relationship with Velutha also is doubly transgressive since it crosses caste lines—it shows how caste and gender discrimination are intertwined. That intersectional aspect exacerbates the risks and the consequences women who challenge social norms face.

Motherhood and Denial of Agency:

Motherhood in *The God of Small Things* is depicted as a condition of oppression, which often also signifies control and loss. The way Ammu fails to shield her children from being shamed by society and being torn from them is the image of the way in which motherhood is limited by patriarchy and social ostracism. This suppression of the maternal power also emphasises the confined positions in the social structure that women occupy.

Through three characters, Ammu, Rahel and Baby Kochamma, *The God of Small Things* represents a comprehensive exploration of gender inequality that is entrenched by patriarchal, casteist, and colonial legacies. Roy's depiction demonstrates such cruel enforcement of societal norms that restrict women's freedom, punish what they desire, and perpetuate intergenerational trauma. Critical representations of these dynamics in the novel contribute to feminist discourse as a whole. To this extent, it lays bare the systemic and intersectional nature of Indian gender oppression.

Comparative Analysis: Desai and Roy on Gender Equality:

The comparative analysis of Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* reveals two distinct yet complementary feminist approaches to the theme of gender equality, each reflecting different narrative styles, historical contexts, and socio-political concerns.

Psychological Feminism vs. Political Feminism:

Desai's feminism is largely psychological and pensive. Her narrative explores Sita's inner emotional world, highlighting the muted, sometimes invisible forms of oppression that women are subjected to in the private sphere of marriage and family. Through Sita's alienation, emotional repression, and silent rebellion, it illustrates how gender inequality operates through neglect of emotions and denial of female subjectivity. Desai's approach stresses female internal disputes as they attempt to figure out how to fit into patriarchal settings. This approach emphasizes both personal resistance and psychological escape over overt social activism.

In contrast, Roy's feminism is more overtly political and socio-cultural. *The God of Small Things* sets gender discrimination within a wider matrix of caste, class, and colonial histories while also shedding light on the systemic violence women meet if they challenge social norms. Roy's rendering of Ammu's tragic fate and Rahel's confused and fractured identity emphasizes the severe penalties for violation of the patriarchal "Love Laws." Roy reveals that gender oppression is the result of social isolation, legal restrictions, and physical violence, demonstrating how patriarchy practices social repression through social ostracism, legal measures, and physical violence. Roy's storytelling, then, insists on public recognition of gender injustice and critiques the social structures responsible for inequality.

Marriage, Motherhood, and Female Identity:

Both women critique marriage and motherhood as institutions that tend to promote the patriarchal state instead of women's empowerment. Marriage in Desai's novel is a restricting, emotionally barren place where Sita's individual voice is stifled. Her husband Raman represents rationality and authority which is a part

of a patriarchal order that also does not respect her emotional demands. Motherhood, far from being a source of happiness or empowerment, is depicted as an identity imposed from above and exacerbating Sita's anxiety and alienation.

Similarly, Roy critiques marriage and motherhood through Ammu's experiences. Ammu's status as a divorced woman marginalizes her within her family and society, highlighting how patriarchal society punishes women who do not abide by set roles in society. Her illicit affair and subsequent estrangement from her children illustrate how motherhood can function as a site of containment and deprivation in place of wholeness. Both novels thus critique the cultural stories of ideal feminism's focus on womanhood as merely marriage and motherhood—a place with all that brings and nothing more.

Modes of Female Resistance:

Desai and Roy also differ on the resistance of women against gender inequality. Sita's rebellion is largely internal and psychological; her retreat to Manori Island represents an individual pursuit of freedom and selfhood. But her eventual return to the family fold signifies the limited scope of such resistance in systems rife with patriarchal forces and traditions. Desai's story implies that an act of psychological rebellion, while noteworthy, might not, necessarily, lead to the breakdown of systemic gender oppression.

Roy's characters, in contrast, represent more explicit and tragic forms of resistance. Ammu's defiance of caste and gender roles through her relationship with Velutha is a direct challenge to the authority of patriarchal figures — however, punishment of her actions and her death follow. Rahel's fragmented identity and Baby Kochamma's complicity further show how complicated it has become for resistance and enforcement to operate in society with patriarchal systems. Roy puts a spotlight on the personal

costs associated with resistance and pervasive social mechanisms that suppress female autonomy.

Intersectionality, Social Context and Feminist Consciousness:

Where Desai's concentration is primarily on the psychological and domestic; Roy's writings integrate an intersectional lens, emphasizing the ways gender inequality is woven together with caste, class, and colonial legacies. This intersectionality intensifies the oppression of women such as Ammu, who face multiple oppressions. Roy's socio-political feminism is thus a feminist critique that extends beyond gender based on its concern to encompass systemic social hierarchies.

For all their differences, both novels take a strident stance against patriarchy and gender-based discrimination. They reveal the ways that women's sense of self is limited by social norms and how these societal norms inhibit women's capacity to live autonomously and express themselves. Desai and Roy, by their very nature, foreground women's awareness and dissent, and the fact that, even resistance, when it is curtailed or tragic, is still an important assertion of agency. Both of these narratives contribute to feminist discussions by being an antidote to established gender roles and pushing for gender equality. Combining Desai's psychological realism with Roy's socio-political analysis, one gains a multifaceted view of how embedded and intricate gender inequality in Indian culture is.

Different Views on Gender Equality in Desai's and Roy's Novels:

This study is an examination of Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* to contrast two different feminist perspectives towards gender equality. Psychological vs. Political Feminism Desai's feminism pays attention to the inner turmoil of Sita and how

women suffer quietly through emotional neglect and restrictions in marriage and family life. Roy's feminism is more political and social. How gender inequality is tied to caste, class, and history emerges from her novel. Ammu's story shows the punishing consequences women face for violating social norms. Roy discusses the issues of violence and discrimination in society as part of the call for society to name its injustices and move forward. Both authors critique marriage and motherhood.

In Desai's tale, marriage constricts Sita and prevents her from emerging as herself. Her husband embodies the patriarchal system that dismisses her thoughts. Her motherhood compounds her stress and feeling trapped. In Roy's novel, Ammu's existence as a divorced woman illustrates how society punishes women who don't adhere to conventional roles.

Desai depicts women doing the resistance quietly inside themselves. Sita's escape to Manori Island is an attempt to escape, for freedom, but soon she returns—a bitter reminder of how difficult it actually is to escape the grip of patriarchy. Roy's characters act openly in their resistance, but they suffer harsh consequences. Ammu comes to a tragic end in defiance. Other characters illustrate the complicated ways women can both challenge and reinforce patriarchal rules. Roy's story illustrates the price for fighting gender inequality. Both books are critical of patriarchal regulations and gender discrimination. They demonstrate how women's lives cannot move forward thanks to society's constraints and how women battle for identity and freedom. They differ in style yet work in tandem to complete a picture of gender inequality in India.

Conclusion:

The comparative analysis of Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* reveals how both authors engage with the theme of gender equality through distinct yet complementary feminist approaches. Desai's focus on psychological alienation and Roy's depiction of socio-political oppression illuminate the pervasive and multifaceted nature of gender inequality in India.

Both novels challenge patriarchal norms, question traditional gender roles, and foreground women's struggles for autonomy. Although their female protagonists do not achieve full liberation, their acts of resistance—whether quiet or outspoken—serve as powerful critiques of systemic injustice. These literary works affirm the vital role of Indian English literature as a space for feminist expression and the ongoing pursuit of gender equality.

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