



Gender Inequality in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract:

Throughout generations, literature has been regarded as an intellectual reflection of life, serving as a medium to give voice to the silent and deprived. Gender inequality has been a persistent and powerful theme in Indian English literature, reflecting the social, cultural, and historical realities of Indian society. Gender inequality, a pervasive issue, has been a focal point for many writers who have personally experienced its ramifications. The literary creation such novels, short stories, poems, etc. are the mirror of society. Gender inequality in Indian English literature reflects evolving societal norms, moving from early depictions of passive, sacrificial women to complex characters challenging patriarchy, with themes exploring domestic confinement lack of autonomy, and the intersection of gender with caste, class, critiquing patriarchal structures while also celebrating female resilience and agency through varied voices from writers like Rabindranath Tagore, Desai and Arundhati Roy. This research paper examines Arundhati Roy's gender inequality, focusing on themes such as patriarchy, marriage, female identity, silence, resistance intersectionality. By analysing Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, the paper highlights the evolution of women's portrayal from passive sufferers to active agents of change.

Keywords: Gender Inequality, Societal Norms, Sacrificial Women, Domestic Confinement, Female Resilience.

Introduction:

Gender inequality refers to the unequal treatment and discrimination faced by individuals based on gender, particularly women in patriarchal societies. This research aimed to analyse feminism and gender inequality in the novel *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy. The writer aims to reveal the types of feminism, gender inequalities are reflected in the novel. In this research, gender inequality theory is used to determine the types of gender inequality experienced by the characters in the novel. The novel uses the tragic history of the family to examine how caste, class, and gender intersect to marginalise individuals, especially women. The narrative reveals how patriarchal power constrains female agency and reinforces unequal social hierarchies. This paper argues that

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* critically exposes gender inequality as a pervasive force that limits women's autonomy, shapes interpersonal relationships, and perpetuates violence within family and community spheres.

Literature Review:

Numerous critics have discussed *The God of Small Things* as a postcolonial text that disrupts linear narratives and critiques social orthodoxy. Scholars such as Meenakshi Mukherjee and Rajeshwari Sundar Rajan have highlighted the novel's engagement with caste and class. Feminist readings, including those by Uma Chakravarti, focus on Roy's portrayal of gendered violence and the patriarchal regulation of women's bodies. (Chakravarti 2001). This paper builds upon these readings by emphasizing

how gender inequality operates through both structural norms and intimate relationships.

Gender inequality in Indian English Literature:

Gender inequality has been a persistent and powerful theme in Indian English literature, reflecting the social, cultural, and historical realities of Indian society. Indian English writers especially from the late 19th century onward have used literature as a space to question patriarchy, expose women's marginalisation, and articulate female resistance and selfhood.

1. Patriarchy and Domestic Oppression:

Patriarchy forms the foundation of gender inequality in Indian society and is a recurring theme in Indian English Literature. Indian English literature frequently portrays women constrained by patriarchal norms such as arranged marriage, dowry, child marriage, and the expected to confirm unquestioningly to male authority. Early texts often depict women as victims of rigid traditions, silenced within domestic spaces. These narratives reveal how gender inequality is embedded in social institutions like family, religion, and marriage. R. K. Narayan's *The Dark Room* presents Savitri as a victim of patriarchal domination. Her husband Ramani exercises control and emotional cruelty, reducing Savitri to silence and invisibility. The novel exposes the psychological impact of male dominance and the limited choices available to women.

2. Quest for Female Identity and Selfhood:

A major concern of women writers in Indian English literature is the search for identity beyond traditional gender roles. Female protagonists struggle to assert individuality in a male-dominated society that defines them only as daughters, wives, or mothers. Anita Desai's *Cry, The Peacock* explores the inner turmoil of a sensitive woman trapped in an emotionally barren

marriage highlighting mental oppression as a form of gender inequality.

3. Marriage as an Instrument of Gender Inequality:

Marriage is often depicted as an institution that reinforces gender hierarchies. Women are socialized to accept submission, endurance, and sacrifice as virtues, while men retain power and autonomy. They are expected to adjust, tolerate, and sacrifice while men enjoy authority and freedom. Kamala Markandaya's *Nector in a Sieve* portrays Rukmini as a symbol of silent suffering and resilience. Novel portrays endurance in a patriarchal rural setup where women bear the burden of poverty, motherhood, and submission.

4. Feminist Resistance and Assertion:

A significant aspect of gender inequality is the silencing of women. Indian English literature marks a shift from passive suffering to active resistance. Women characters begin to challenge patriarchal norms and assert autonomy over their bodies, careers, and choices. Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* foregrounds silence as both a symptom and a symbol of women's oppression. Jaya, the protagonist, realizes that silence has sustained patriarchal power. Her decision to speak and write marks a step toward self-assertion and liberation.

5. Education and Autonomy:

Post-independence and contemporary Indian English Literature shows a shift toward resistance and self-empowerment. Education emerges as a crucial means of liberation for women. Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* depicts Virmati's struggle for education and independence against conservative social norms. Her defiance of familial expectations reflects the changing aspirations of Indian women and gradual challenge to patriarchal authority.

6. Gender Inequality and Intersectionality:

Recent Indian English fiction highlights the intersection of gender with caste, class, economic status and sexuality. Women from marginalized backgrounds experience layered forms of oppression. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* exposes how women are punished for transgressing social and sexual norms, revealing the brutal consequences of patriarchal control.

7. Role of Literature in Feminist Discourse:

Indian English literature not only mirrors gender inequality but also critiques it. By presenting women's voices, experiences, and resistance, writers contribute to feminist discourse and encourage social awareness. As Simone de Beauvoir states, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman". This idea resonates strongly in Indian English Literature, where gender roles are shown to be socially constructed and imposed.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*:

Arundhati Roy's debut novel, *The God of Small Things* published in 1997, is a powerful exploration of the social and cultural realities of Kerala, India. Through the lives of two Indian twins, Rahel and Estha, growing up in Kerala, Roy delves into themes of family, love, and social hierarchy, exposing the deep-seated patriarchal norms that govern Indian society. The novel powerfully exposes gender inequality in patriarchal India, depicting how women like Mammachi, Ammu, and Rahel are suppressed, marginalised, and exploited by societal "Love Laws" and male dominance, forcing them to struggle for identity and expression within rigid structures, leading to tragic consequences like Ammu's ostracization and Rahel's fractured life. The novel critiques the double standards where women are both revered and controlled, highlighting their limited choices and the

profound impact of these injustices on individual lives, even as some characters resist patriarchy.

Key Aspects of Gender Inequality in the novel *The God of Small Things*:

1. **Patriarchal Control:** The male-dominated family structure dictates women's lives with men holding power and enforcing patriarchal norms.
2. **Suppression and Double Standards:** Women face constant suppression, yet men exploit them, leading to a system where women's desires and identities are secondary.
3. **Limited Roles:** Women are expected to serve fathers, brothers, and husbands, with little room for self-expression or independence.
4. **Consequences of Transgression:** Women who defy these norms, like Ammu (with Velutha) or Rahel (through incest), face severe social punishment and ruin.
5. **Generational Impact:** The novel shows how women like Mammachi yield to patriarchy, while Ammu and Rahel rebel, but all suffer under the system, showing the deep-seated nature of the inequality.
6. **Feminist Narrative:** Roy uses a unique narrative style to explore feminine perspectives, highlighting the plurality and diversity within women's experiences of oppression.
7. **Characters as Examples:**
 - Mammachi:** She submits to patriarchal control, yet is repeatedly victimised by men. (her husband's abuse, her children's choices)
 - Ammu:** A rebel who challenges norms through her relationships, but is ultimately ostracized and left with few options.

Rahel: Her identity and future are shaped by the patriarchal restrictions and traumatic events surrounding her mother.

Gender assumption is a theme that occurs many times throughout the novel. In a quote from the novel we can see how gender assumption negatively affected the woman of India. "Ammu completed her schooling the same year that her father retired from his job in Delhi and move to Ayemenem. Papacy insisted that a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl, so Ammu had no choice but to leave Delhi and move with them. There was a very little young girl to do in Ayemenem other than to wait for marriage proposals while she helped her mother with the house work." (Roy 1997). This quote shows that men insisted that women do not need to study in a higher education institution because they are solely responsible for taking care of the household. As we can see from the above quote, Ammu was prohibited to continue her education due to the fact that she was a woman and higher education was deemed unimportant for her and all women in India. Ammu was forced to follow her father back to Ayemenem to prepare for marriage and take care of the house and children. This is one example of how there is a problem of gender and subordination. (Hidayah, 2006)

Women did not receive equal rights within their own homes, among their own family members, Chacko, Ammu's brother, treated Ammu as if she was not on equal terms with him. When discussing their parent's wealth and financial status, Chacko was set to inherit almost all of the family's assets. Chacko made a statement that clearly demonstrates how women are oppressed in their own households. "What's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine". (Roy, 1997). This is an example of "double standards" as even though Ammu and Chacko are siblings they did not get the same

treatment growing up. Chacko was entitled to the family's belongings because he was a man. Furthermore, Chacko a self-proclaimed Marxist does not only oppress Ammu but also makes the women who works with him feel insignificant. " He would call pretty women who worked in the factory to his room, and on the pretext of lecturing them on labour rights and trade union law, flirt them outrageously". (Roy, 1997). This shows that Chacko has no problem sexually harassing women in the work place, due to the fact that he was a man. He views women as objects and not as human beings. Baba, who was Ammu's husband lost his job when the twins were two years old. He repeatedly told Ammu that he is able to keep his job provided Ammu sleeps with his boss. This is an example of how Ammu's now ex-husband did not view Ammu as a human, but rather as an object that he is able to manipulate as he pleases.

Women are not respected as much as they should be by even their husbands. Ammu refuses to go forward with the act of infidelity and Baba punches her in a response. This is another example of how women are frowned upon by men in the society. When Ammu leaves her relationship with Baba she is scowled by Baby Kochamma. She constantly berates Ammu for her failed marriage while encouraging her brother, who seems to have new and unfamiliar woman regularly. "She allows her brother to have an illegal relationship with unfamiliar women but frowns upon Ammu for thwarting the ethical boundaries of the family". (Sheeba, 2017)

The God of Small Things is a novel that tells of suffering that women endured during this time in India and how Ammu was a victim of the suffering and gender inequality. Ammu had to "bear the brunt of male domination silently" (Sheeba, 2017)

Ammu not only had to flight for everything that she wanted in life but had to do

that with gender inequality and double standards weighing over her shoulders. She fought against inequality in her home life as well as in her relationship.

Ammu is a tragic character as she did all she could for herself as well as her children, but she was no match for the brutality of discrimination and gender hardships.

Discussion:

Through its characters and plot *The God of Small Things* critiques rigid gender norms that dictate who is allowed agency and who is punished for transgression. Gender inequality in the novel is not isolated but deeply interwoven with cast and class, making its critique holistic. Roy shows that patriarchal structures harm not only women but also men like Velutha, whose body becomes the ultimate site of suppressed transgression.

Conclusion:

The God of Small Things offers a powerful critique of gender inequality by portraying how patriarchal norms shape and constrain female lives. Through characters such as Ammu, Mammachi, and Baby Kochamma, Roy reveals the pervasive nature of gendered oppression and its consequences. This novel thus serves as both a literary achievement and a social-political commentary on the injustices that persist in contemporary society.

In essence, the novel uses the “small things” gestures, memories and family secrets to reveal the vast, oppressive system of gender inequality that defines the characters’ lives and destinies.

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