



GENDER POLITICS AND SEXUALITY IN *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*

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ABSTRACT

Arundhati Roy's debut novel The God of Small Things tries to bring out the 'utopian' possibilities of eroticism and sexual experience, especially where this experience is socially impermissible. In doing so, she analyses the politics of desire which germinate in the private sensitive realm of personal sexual relations, are not disassociated from the world of public politics. The God of Small Things have protagonists who are ready to break the social laws and die for desire, for love Ammu of the earlier generation slings across caste/class divisions to engage an erotic desire for the untouchable carpenter, the 'God of Small Things', Velutha Ammu's resolute dedication to her 'deadly attraction' for the untouchable Velutha as lacking the true grit that her character had promised—true grit being tantamount to the truly political in a sphere outside of the personal Velutha, though fostering anti caste/ class inhalations in love/ desire, is seen as a more fully committed political being because of his involvement in the communist uprisings in the state. The politics of Ammu's perspective—and therefore perhaps her less 'intricate' choices—in terms of her gender, is largely ignored.

Keywords: gender, transgression, desire, and eroticism.

INTRODUCTION:

The manners through which European Imperialism 'colonized' women have been registered in many postcolonial critical texts. As early as 1986 essays, depicting the 'double colonization' of women by patriarchy and colonialism were appearing on the scene. More recent studies have explored the relationship of colonialism with other types of sexuality (homosexuality, lesbianism etc). Women's role, condition and status in post colonies have been taken in law, literature and social sciences. In terms of literature, gender and sexuality have become major themes in the last decade of the twentieth century. Gender and the role of women are the pivotal factors of the recent novelists. The women's movement affiliated with second-wave feminism in the 1960's and 1970's struggled to challenge the systemic censure

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of women and the naturalization of gender ideologies within hegemonic knowledge productions. Early feminist scholars focused on women as a discrete group from men, who have to negotiate two sets of gender ideologies and relations. The intersection of black and postcolonial feminist critiques towards credulous notions of sisterhood and the broad postmodern transmutations towards multiplicity, positionality, and fragmentation have led to a vexation with difference within the category of women. Here the question arises: How do gender, class, race and sexuality intersect and comprise each other in particular contexts and mobilizations and cultural productions? Gender not only refers the social and cultural construction of what it means to be woman and a man but it also denotes to relationships characterized by power differences. An intersectional analysis has been intrinsic to the move away from conceptualizations of gender as social and cultural constructions of 'female' and 'male' and in more impalpable terms, a state of being, to an analysis of 'gendering' in terms of processes in which hierarchies are established, reproduced and challenged (Al-Ali 2009).

Women's rights and the politics of gender and sexuality – is the most significant in terms of the plot and thematic centre of *The God of Small Things*. It is also the most difficult to summarize because of the diverging perceptions of gender differences held by India's various cultural and religious communities and the circumferential historical association between women's rights groups and other political movements, such as the nationalist struggle and environmental and land-rights campaign. Nevertheless in *The God of Small Things*, Roy's narrative is inexorable in its need to endure witness to the mundane harshness of the patriarchy (male authority), and women characters are consistently bullied, molested and made to defer to the needs of male relatives and family members. If we delineate the structure of Roy's novel in musical terms, then the subjugation of women forms a central refrain that repeats, in diverse elaborations, throughout the text. At one point, Roy accentuates the crucial nature of Ammu's plight, and by extension, the desperation of all women marginalized and 'gendered' in conventional Indian communities, in a remarkable 'terrorist' metaphor: 'What was it that gave Ammu this Unsafe Edge ? [...] It was what she had battling inside her. An unmixable mix. The infinite tenderness of motherhood and the reckless rage of a suicide bomber' (44). Here, the contradictory, potentially taboo breaking force of Ammu's foiling is described in the most suicidal terms, and how she sometimes tries to break it. The women's movement in India aroused in religious reform affiliations in the early nineteenth century; and by 1917 women had began to set up their own pressure groups.(such as the Women's Indian Association), which accosted for women's greater involution in education and politics. Indian women played a scathing role in the anti-colonial nationalist struggle of the 1930's and 1940's and took part in many political and land-right struggles after independence such as the 1948 Telangana peasant uprising.¹²⁹ In the post-independence period, however, more empowering feminist images of women as daughters and workers replaced an older cult of the mother, as women's groups drew attention to the social mistreatment of women and their

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right to political recognition and economic self-reliance. At the same time dalit and tribal women began to constitute their own lobby groups, and it is more precise to say of the present 'women's movement' in India as a beamy spectrum of different political struggles, channeled out by women from diverse backgrounds, rather than a united nationwide campaign.

Roy's concerns as feminist without considering about their local articulation. It is pertinent to remember that 'gender' is a term which describes the cultural and social construction of femininity or masculinity and, therefore cannot be detached from the culture that produces it. In contrast to western or 'First World feminism', the struggle for women's right in the so called 'Third World' must be looked in the circumstance of a colonial past, as well as the gender politics of specific religious and territorial communities. Conceiving about precisely this issue, some critics have ideated women's experiences in the Caribbean, Africa and India in terms of process of 'double colonization'. It is this fact of 'double colonization' that informs the historical background of Roy's novel and underscores her concomitant non-fiction assertions on women's rights.

A prominent example of this link of subjugations happens in *The God of Small Things* in Ammu's early married life, when Mr. Hollick, the English tea estate manager who employs her husband, purports that he 'look after' in return for her partners continued employment. Ammu divorces her husband after he trounces her for not agreeing to the offer, and returns to Ayemenam where, as a divorcee, she confronts the disfavor of local society. Ammu quandary then, is one in which her body becomes a gendered sign of both desire and ignominy, and the dreadful price of her refusal to wench herself in the prototypically colonial setting of tea plantation is her transmutation into a 'ignominious' figure in the patriarchal Syrian Christian community. [When Ammu tries to arrogate under the law by making a statement at the police station after Velutha's arrest, the police inspector rejects the statement, outrages her calls her a veshya or prostitute]. Nowadays the 'double colonization' that immures women in post – independence Kerala is less likely to take the form of dialogue between oppressive traditional values and colonialism that between tradition and 'neo-colonial' aspects of globalization [such as the objection of women in the global media]. Roy points out in one of her interviews: A lot of women who are involved in resistance movements [...] are also redefining what 'modern' means. They are really at war against their community's traditions, one the one hand, and against the kind of modernity that is being imposed by the global economy, on the other. They decide what they want from their own tradition and what they will take from modernity. It's high-wire act. 132.

A milestone in the Indian women's movement came in 1974, when a report into the social, politics, economic condition of women commissioned by the United Nations and entitled

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Towards Equality revealed that, even though women rights were written into the Indian constitution, there was a gap between these principles and women's actual experiences. In *The God Of Small Things* we discover that the decussate forms of oppression that Ammu confronts are further reinforced by her hapless legal status or locus stand I, or, as her children misconstrue it, her lack of 'locusts stand I' as a Syrian Christian woman [ch.2. p.57] . By including denotations to the legal inequality between Ammu and her brother Chacko- who realises his own power of inheritance by telling her 'what's yours is mine and 'what's mine is also mine' [ch.2. p.57]. Roy reaps attention, obliquely, to a history of eviction and a struggle for women's rights in which her own mother was deeply involved.

The legal and social that cabals against Ammu in *The God of Small Things* and create a situation where 'there would be no more chances' [ch.2. p.43] are especially upsetting when we recall that, by the late 1960's. Kerala was starting to acquire a reputation as a social and economic success story. [The region still has some of the best life-expectancy and literary levels' and the lowest infant-mortality rates, in India]. As Robbin Jeffrey points out, women's literacy and ability to find salaried work and willingness amongst families to educate their daughters and permit them to marry later than usual have been crucial factors in the state's development. Jeffrey goes on to admonish, however that even given these breakthroughs, 'women still do not play a major role in public politics'. 134. In counterpoints to the traditional deficiency of women's property rights in Syrian Christian community, the pre-colonial social structure of certain Hindu castes such as the nayars may have really set the base for Kerala's present, comparatively progressive phonograph on women's rights. Unlike the great majority of Hindu family structures, the nayars operated a direct family system in which women had inheritance rights on land and property. With the arrival of British colonialism in Kerala, Syrian-Christian women experienced similar confounding changes in their status: even though they were legally discriminated against and had to conform to intransigent codes of sexual behavior and endogamy [marriage within one's own community], they were in the first half of the twentieth century, often better educated than other Indian women due to their attendance at vocational and educational institutions set up by missionaries.

In *The God of Small Things*, Ammu's 'unsafe edge' is a scourge to the conventional order not only because it carries the promise of her 'reckless' challenging of sexual proscriptions-it also brings into play supposedly 'unmixable' aspects of her sexuality. [Motherhood and amorousness] that society and especially-it also brings into play supposedly 'unmixable' aspects of her sexuality. [Motherhood and amorousness] that society and especially caste laws would normally keep separate. In some conspicuous ways, the taboo breaking force of Ammu's sexuality is redolent of powerful Hindu goddesses, such as destroyer goddess Kali, personification of providential energy or shakti, who was mobilized as political symbols in

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the early nationalist movement and who has since been reappropriated by Hindu feminists. As Radha Kumar reminds us, one of the most significant developments in Indian women's demands for equality has been a scooch away from the 'concern for women's bodies as sites of racial and national regeneration' [represented as form of motherhood] , towards more right-based assertions that women's bodies should not be treated as the 'subjects of social control'. 138. It is the fact of her [divorced] maternal status that makes Ammu such an easy subject of social control, and her reaction to her children, whom she loves intensely but describes in a moment of rage as the 'milestones around my neck' [ch.13. p.253] , accentuates this tension. When Ammu leaves her husband because he wishes her to license the plantation manager's sexual requests, Pappachi resists to believe her story: "' [H]e didn't believe than an Englishman, any Englishman, would covet another man's wife.'" [p.42].

While traditional gender roles make Ammu's place as a divorced mother impermissible, Roy's novel also continually traces the restrictions of masculine gender norms in domineering or sexually rapacious male characters such as Pappachi, Kari Saipu, and the Orangedrink Lemondrink man. Indeed, if we see Velutha's affair as an immaculate 're-envisioning' of the actual families in *The God Of Small Things*- argues Anuradha Dingwaney Needham – 'it is the roles of the father and husband/partner [the novel...] suggests, that need to be recast'. 139. On these terms we can read Ammu and Velutha's affair not as much as a transgression of gender politics but as a visionary moment that envisages their transformation and imagines the possibility of a family unit in which women and children are freed from long-established patterns of subordination.

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