



IN SEARCH OF A SELF IN THE NOVELS *THE BLUEST EYE* BY TONI MORRISON AND *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS* BY ARUNDHATI ROY

JANE THERESA

Assistant Professor,

English,

SSET, SCMS Ernakulam.

(KERALA) INDIA

ABSTRACT

*There is a quoting in the Holy bible by St Mark, stating that the stones which the builders rejected became the cornerstone of the building, that was the Lord's doing and it's amazing in our eyes .The one who is oppressed, the rejected stone, due to the policies and systems that are developed on the needs of the elite will become the corner stone of the world. All are God's creation and people should realize that even the most marginalized bear the image of God. Everybody has the right to live the life in its fullness. This paper compares the Afro American oppression in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Indian dalit oppression in Arundhati Roy's *The God of small things*. Both the novels use the themes of racism and oppression to underscore the effects of post-slavery. Oppression of the downtrodden is seen in every corner of the world. The literature of Afro American is similar to dalit literature as both are records of the tragedy of their respective histories .The different setting and era in each novel suggest that the oppression and inequality had changed very little even after years later. Dalit literature and African American literature makes the readers understand their respective society and gives the answers of the fundamental questions of life and dignity. The paper also focuses on the oppression of many women who consider them as marginalized. Because of their gender, women are not valued and not respected in the society all over the world. This tragedy is examined through the works of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Given that the two societies are different in terms of place and time, it is understandable that there should be certain limitations and differences in their literatures. On the other hand, there are similarities too. This paper is the study of similarities in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*.*

INTRODUCTION

JANE THERESA

1Page



Arundhati Roy born on 18th February 1931 is a Nobel Prize and Pulitzer Prize winner. Her novels are known for their epic themes, vivid dialogue and richly detailed black characters. Her novels reflect the experience of the black community. *The Bluest Eye* is a novel which focuses on the experience of black women, the existence of the black women's desperate bid for survival in a white man's world. For Toni Morrison, the black artist has a responsibility to the black community, a quality of hunger and disturbance that never ends. Her novels bear witness to the reality of the black community and the reality of the blacks who survived under different circumstances. Morrison's novel is the true voice of the blacks in its original power. Morrison leads her readers to an understanding of racism. Even after the abolition of slavery, the whites have still continued to treat black women under subjection in the matter of the concept of beauty arising self hatred among the black women. The characters of both Alice Walker and Morrison show that they don't exist and always compared them to the whites.

The Bluest Eye deals mainly with the predominant idea of beauty of whites upon the blacks. This novel shows the reader that the concept of beauty is socially constructed.

"Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty."(Morrison 18)

Mother, Father, Dick and Jane live in a pretty green house. The green symbolises that there is life and soul in the house. The red door symbolises the mystery in the story. White symbolises innocence and virginity. In the prologue the author focuses on Jane who wishes to play. Jane sees a cat, but the cat did not play with her. Jane's mother laughs but does not play with her. Her father smiles, but does not play with her. At last a friend comes to play along with Jane. The prologue is repeated word for word, a second time without punctuation. The paragraph is repeated a third time without punctuation and spaces between the words, which transforms the narrative into a rambling and disorienting block of text. The shift from oriented text to the rambling text makes the reader feel that the situation of isolation among the black girl is getting intense and torturous.

"Our house is old, cold and green. At night a kerosene lamp lights one large room. The others are braced in darkness peopled by roaches and mice."(Morrison 26)

A nine year old Claudia serves Morrison as the narrator of the story who is confused but sensitive witness to Pecola's tragedy. The central story is about eleven years old Pecola who is raped by her father and bears his child. The baby dies as it was premature and Pecola sinks into madness, with a notion that she has been granted her wish to have blue eyes and believes that now she is the most beautiful in the eyes of White Americans.

JANE THERESA

2P a g e



When we compare the novels *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison and *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, both blacks and dalits have remained outside their culture excommunicated and exile. Afro Americans were brought directly from Africa to America to become slaves. Forced into slavery all that was left to the black man was his African soul. The blacks were vastly different from the white races. The black Americans are very concerned about the land of his origins. As the years went by legislatures abolished slavery and thereby the black gained freedom. But the inferiority was witnessed in every field they interacted.

The dalit in India is in similar situation. They were excluded from the society. They have been stripped of their dignity and denied basic human rights. They were considered untouchables implying that anybody touching them would be polluted. They were denied access to roads, temples, schools, etc to avoid pollution of other castes. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is one such remarkable work which shows the sufferings and sorrows of the Dalits in a unique style. Booker Prize winner and activist-author Arundhati Roy is usually praised for her efforts in trying to represent the marginalised in her writing. All over the world every society has two categories of people, the higher level and the lower level. The people belonging to the higher level are at the top and they govern and exploit the people belonging to the lower level. Even though many political and economical changes have happened all over the world, the mindset of the people has not changed across the different cultures as well as the social discrimination against them even continue today. If the Dalit is the subjective of India's boycotted society, the African American is the self of Black America. One is abandoned and degraded by the White society and the other by Savarna society. One is brought and sold from their own home land and the other was called untouchable by birth. The women who belong to these outcastes are treated as marginalized. In both Dalit and Afro American society girls have a debased self image. Marginalised women discover themselves in both race and gender discrimination. The aim of this paper is to analyze the suppressed people's state in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. In both novels, the women struggle to survive in the world they live in because of their womanhood. A cross cultural study of both dalit and the black shows the cruel enslavement of both these two groups. The cruel oppression based on caste and race is responsible for the deprivation of the lives of the blacks and dalits.

When we look into Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, the blacks have to suffer a lot for their identity.

"We know she is offering us something precious and that our pride must be arrested by refusing to accept." (Morrison 25)



The black characters in the novel consider themselves as inferior when they interact with whites. The story centres on the lives of two black families, the Mac Teers and the Breedloves. The story is based on the children Claudia, Freeda and Pecola, their happy and painful experiences in growing up. The girls often had a loving conversation about how cute Shirley Temple was. Shirley Temple had golden curls, pink cheeks and blue eyes. Everyone loved her. Pecola had black skin. She was so poor and ugly.

“The Breedloves did not live in a storefront because they were having temporary difficulty adjusting to the cutbacks at the plant. They lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly.”(Morrison 53)

The blacks believed that their poverty was traditional and stultifying, it was not unique. But their ugliness they believed that was unique. No one can convince them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly. In her eleven years, no one had ever noticed Pecola. Each night Pecola prayed for blue eyes.

“Frieda brought her four graham crackers on a saucer and some milk in a blue and white Shirley Temple cup. She was long time with the milk, and gazed fondly at the Silhouette of Shirley Temple’s dimpled face.”(Morrison 35)

The whole novel explores the psychological and sociological changes in the protagonist, Pecola. Claudia was younger than both Frieda and Pecola. She had not yet arrived at the turning point in the development of psyche which would allow loving white dolls. During Christmas all exchanged gifts of big, special, blue eyed baby dolls.

“I was physically revolted by and secretly frightened of those round moronic eyes, the pancake face and orange worm’s hair.” (Morrison 36)

Pecola is the character who wants herself to look like the whites and wishes for the blue eyes. She believes that the symbol of white beauty is the blue eyes. She was having a wrong notion that only blue eyes would make her beautiful and believed that only blue eyes will help her in gaining her self-respect. As her eyes can never be altered into blue eyes in reality, her quest for blue eyes ends in madness. She cannot even look at a white girl as she believes that whiteness is the only standard of beauty and satisfies her envy by destroying white dolls.

“I fingered the face wondering at the single stroke eyebrows picked at the pearly teeth stuck like two piano keys between red bowline lips. Traced the turned –up nose, poked the glarcy blue eyeballs, and twisted the yellow hair. I

JANE THERESA

4Page



could not love it. But I could examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable.”(Morrison 37)

“I destroyed white baby dolls.”(Morrison 38)

The truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulses to little white girls. Black females possess hatred towards white women because of the set beauty concept by the society. The staring looks of the whites towards the blacks make them feel that they are ugly and unworthy.

“I saw a pair of fascinated eyes in a dough- white face.” (Morrison 46)

Toni Morrison shows that not all African Americans mindset are dominated by an oppressive culture. Some are very bold enough to survive in the midst of these oppressions. For example, the characters Claudia, the nine year old who is the narrator of the story is against the notion of the white standards of beauty. An independent and strong-minded nine-year-old, Claudia is a fighter and rebels against adults’ tyranny over children and against the black community’s idealization of white beauty standards. She has not yet learned the self-hatred that plagues her peers. She consciously deconstructs the ideology of the dominant society and understands the fact that a doll is a consumer item and tries to constrict Pecola by her destruction of white dolls.

“Younger than both Frieda and Pecola , I had not yet arrived at the turning point in the development of my psyche which would allow me to love her.”(Morrison 35)

In the novel Toni Morrison challenges the white standards of beauty and demonstrates that the concept of beauty is socially constructed.

“Cholly, whose ugliness (the result of despair, dissipation and violence direct toward petty things and weak people) was behaviour, the rest of the family – Mrs.Breedlove, Sammy Breedlove and Pecola Breedlove wore their ugliness, put it on, so to speak, although it did not belong to them.” (Morrison 54)

The Breedlove family are blacks who can never be like whites. Even though human beings look different, the soul is same. This realisation can bring some changes in the beauty concept. The whites looked at the blacks and wondered why they are so ugly. They observed them carefully to find the source of this ugliness which the blacks considered as staring. The realisation was that the ugliness came from conviction. They began to believe that some mysterious all knowing master had given each one a choke of ugliness to wear and they had

JANE THERESA

5P a g e



each accepted it without question. In the novel we can see that ugliness is something which can never be altered or changed, it is inherited from a powerful master.

“You are ugly people. And they took ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it.” (Morrison 55)

The novel helps the readers to understand that the standard of beauty is created by oneself. If the blacks value their blackness; they can subvert the ideology put forward by the white society. The background of the novel is racism, sexism and classicism which signifies the traumatic condition under which African Americans lived in White America. The restrictions upon the blacks affected their lives especially the women. They were always marginalised. The reason for the backwardness black people is because of the self hatred persuaded by white domination. Many of them considered themselves as inferior to the white women which ended in self hatred. They trust in their own unworthiness which is interpreted into ugliness. They considered themselves as unworthy for the society.

Throughout the novel, there are many incidents which show the feeling of separation and pain faced by Pecola Breedlove because of being black.

“If those eyes of her’s were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different. Her teeth were good and at least her nose was not big and flat like some of those was thought so cute.”(Morrison 62)

The novel shows several incidents which depicts the kind of world into which Pecola has been born. Pecola’s mother, who works as a house keeper in a white family, loves her employer’s children, ignoring her own daughter. No one expresses pity on her. Pecola is hurt not only because of her race but also because of her gender. Each night without fail she prayed for blue eyes. She has seen the hatred in the eyes of all white people. So she believed that the distaste must be for her blackness.

“A picture of little Mary Jane, for whom the candy is named. Smiling white face, blonde hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort. The eyes are petulant and mischievous”. (Morrison 66)

For the three girls to eat the candy was to eat Mary Jane. Throughout the novel, the author describes the mentally agonizing thoughts of these girls battling with the cultural standards of beauty that have been impaired upon them.

When we read the novels *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy and *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, a lot of similarities in the mental thoughts of the characters can be observed.



Just like racism which is a prominent factor in dividing people in Western history, the caste system, a deep-rooted factor which is a shame for Indian culture, affects the socio-economic and socio-cultural systems of Indian society. Untouchables are the most exploited and unwanted ones. Some scholars believe that the Aryans, a fair-skinned race which invaded India had controlled and subjugated the dark-skinned aborigines placing them at the lower strata of society. Both the Dalits and the African Americans are distinctive groups that occupy a similar position in their respective societies- the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy. In the famous essay, *Can the Subaltern speak?* By Gayathri Spivak, the writer suggests that the subaltern cannot have a history of his or her own and cannot have a voice if the subaltern is a female. She cannot be heard at all because she exists in absolute silence.

“The subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow.” (Spivak 28)

In *The God of Small Things*, small things referred in the title are the subaltern people who are considered as small worthless creatures by most of the upper caste people. In reality these small people are the big ones who can bring a change to the whole system created by the society. These are the voice that should be given their voice, the voice that should be heard against the unreasonable hate, revenge and violence. The characters in the novel have their unfulfilled desires and are punished and silenced by the system in various ways. The women in *The God of Small things* are mostly confronted with marital and family problems. Estha and Rahel’s mother Ammu married Babu; however Babu turns out to be an alcoholic and even urges her to sleep with his boss, Mr. Hollick. After this incident Ammu leaves him and returns with the twins Estha and Rahel. Although a divorced daughter is a disgrace to a traditional Indian society, a divorcee son is not. Chacko, Ammu’s brother, is also a divorced but he returned to take charge of the family pickle business. The patriarchal privilege disproportionately over the other in the lives of the brother and sister. Ammu then falls into a love affair with Velutha, an untouchable.

“Ammu travelled upwards through a dream in which a cheerful man with one arm held her close by the light of an oil lamp. He had no other arm with which to fight the shadows that flickered around him on the floor.” (Roy, 215)

Ammu defies patriarchal domination, class and caste prejudice in public and pays with her life. Roy’s protagonists suffer from lack of parental love, disturbed infancy, broken homes. They are dissatisfied with their existence. They often choose to go out of the mainstream of life. This alienation generally manifests in immoral ties and activities. Alienation from their selves leads to a frantic search for their identity in the milieu through self-discovery and self-identification. She is banished from home and society because of this secret relation and she dies in another place because of this abandonment. Her relationship with Velutha is



considered to be a sin, as it is extra-marital and a crime as it is between the members of two different classes in the caste system.

“If he held her, he couldn’t kiss her. If he kissed her, he couldn’t see her. If he saw her, he couldn’t feel her.” (Roy, 215)

A related inferiority complex is evident in the interactions between untouchables and touchable in Ayemenem. Vellya Paapen is an example of an Untouchable so grateful to the touchable class. He is willing to kill his son, Velutha, when he discovers that Velutha has broken the most important rule of class segregation that there be no inter-caste sexual relations. A love-affair between Ammu and Velutha results in his brutal beating by a group of policemen. The beating takes place in front of the twins. This results in his death.

“If they hurt Velutha more than they intended to, it was only because any kinship, any connection between themselves and him, any implication that if nothing else, at least biologically he was a fellow creature had been served long ago. They had no instrument to calibrate how much punishment he could take. No means of gauging how much or how permanently they had damaged him.” (Roy, 309)

In part, this reflects how many untouchables have internalized caste segregation. Nearly all of the relationships in the novel are somehow coloured by cultural and class tension. Roy’s women characters in the novel are exploited. They are torn between their individuality and social obligations. Ammu sacrifices her life in her quest for identity. Estha is described as occupying very little space in the world. Ammu dies alone and sad, beaten by the world. Shadows gathered like bats in the steep hollows near her collarbone. Rahel never quite fits in, especially in such rigid confines as boarding schools. Velutha is the smallest of the small, as Ammu points out, calling her Ammukutty, ‘Little Ammu’, though she was so much less little than he was.

“If he touched her, he couldn’t talk to her, if he loved her he couldn’t leave, if he spoke he couldn’t listen, if he fought he couldn’t win.” (Roy ,330)

Ammu, on the other hand, defies the notion of the male-oriented society. She emerges as a rebel, voicing her suppressed voice. The capitalist society always treated women figures as commodity. They have no right over their body. Before marriage, they are under parental guidance and after marriage, under husband’s care. That’s why; we see that Ammu is denied of her college education whereas Chacko goes to Oxford. Even Ammu has no right in her father’s property. Mammachi, Baby Kochamma all accepted the female role-model imposed on them by the society – docile, submissive, ungrudging, stoic resignation. In the novel,

JANE THERESA

8P a g e



Velutha becomes the central and essential character and a sort of divinity in the eyes of the twins. Velutha is the children's only father figure and a true friend. Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, the policemen, in their realms of power, see to it that Ammu, Velutha, Rahel and Estha who hold no power in the social hierarchies remain vulnerable and overruled. Ammu, Velutha and the Twins, who get together for mutual love and warmth and not for any material gains are crudely acted upon and destroyed. The children who are the small things in the novel go against the rule and make Velutha their God, The God of Small Things.

The caste and gender hierarchies in India are equally relevant to the race and class as seen in *The Bluest Eye*. In both the novels, the children become victims of the communal response of the oppressed. By employing child narrators, both Morrison and Arundhati Roy explore how children negotiate different binaries between the beauty concepts, between male and female privileges, between higher and lower economic classes' and between upper and lower caste. The painful stories of Ammu and Pecola shows the authors concern for the silences that illustrates self destruction.

WORKS CITED

1. Morrison, Toni. "The Bluest Eye", New York: Rinehart and Winston, 1970. Print
2. Roy, Arundhati. "The God of Small Things". London: Penguin Books, 1997. Print.
3. Spivak, Gayatri. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture. Eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. London: Macmillan, 1988. Print