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Breaking Boundaries: Marriage, Family and Female Agency in Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things

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Abstract

The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy is an important Indian English novel, which departs from conventional Indian English novels in its examination of the impact of social spaces, institutions and structures on the configuration of individual identities. It largely takes place in Kerala, moving between the 1960s and the 1990s, and traces the complex web of intersecting locations of family, caste, gender, sexuality, political ideology, and social hierarchy by following the experiences of the Ipe family, among others. This paper investigates the family and marriage as an important locus for the exercise of patriarchy, specifically its variations in relation to the figures of Mammachi, Pappacher, Ammu, and the Ipe family as a whole. It is argued that Roy constructs patriarchy not as gendered violence within the institution of marriage, but as a social system that is reproduced through the relations of kinship, economic dependence, gendered morality, caste inequality and control over women's sexuality.The paper concludes that Roy's novel moves beyond portraying women solely as victims and instead reveals the complex ways in which women negotiate, resist and are constrained by patriarchal structures.

Keywords: Arundhati Roy; The God of Small Things; Indian Women's Writing; patriarchy; marriage; family; female agency; caste; gender.

I. INTRODUCTION

Indian English Literature Indian Women's Writing has created a strong space for writers to probe into the fraught nexus of individual experiences and social processes and social formations. Gender issues, social issues (marriage, family) and issues of sexuality and caste and their influence over women and the agency of women have been thoroughly explored in Indian Women's Writing. Indian women writers have also contested the prevailing models of women as passive icons within domesticity. The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy. The God of Small Things is an important novel in this tradition. Roy's first novel was published in 1997 and received the Booker prize the same year. The novel is predominantly set in Kerala and revolves around twins Estha and Rahel, their family and the experiences that shape their lives. Though the novel is narrated in the voice of Estha and Rahel's memories and experiences, women in the novel are the central figures of criticism of social power. Mammachi, Ammu, Baby Kochamma and other women are unequally positioned in the family and have various responses to patriarchal rule. The novel also draws links between gender discrimination, social respectability, caste and sexuality. Thus the novel's critique becomes wider than the binary opposition of men and women. Roy exposes the interplay of family, caste, marriage and social morality in the constriction of women's lives. This paper intends to analyze how marriage and family acts as the framework for patriarchy and also how Roy depicts the 'resisting' forms of women.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To study the portrayal of woman, motherhood and female sexuality in the novel
- To explore the influence of patriarchy on the lives and choices of women
- To study the two women, Mammachi and Ammu
- To analyze the constraints on the lives of women in terms of family honour, caste and social values
- To study the space afforded to women for their forms of resistance and reclaiming of agency
- To analyze the forms of oppression and objectification of women
- To interpret the novel as a work from feminist perspective
- To bring out the ways in which women can challenge patriarchal power and resist dominance.

Methodology

The present research work employs qualitative textual-analysis research design. The text chosen for the analysis is the novel of Arundhati Roy The God of Small Things. The data is analyzed using feminist criticism of literature and intersectionality. It specifically considers the marriage, house hold relations, hierarchy of the family, gender, femininity, motherhood, caste, financial independence, social honourability and resistance of women.

Theoretical Framework

Feminist Literary Theory

Feminist criticism analyzes representations of women in literature and explores how literature depicts women's role in a patriarchy. It is preoccupied with gender roles and the relations between men and women, family, sexuality and social institutions. Feminist criticism can be applied in The God of Small Things, for example, in analyzing how Pappachi has power over Mammachi, Ammu's limited choices, the dependence of women, double standards of women, jurisdiction over female sexuality, motherhood and the women's inevitable response.

Intersectionality

Gender alone is not enough to make sense of Roy's novel as gender is inseparable from caste and class. The significance of the relationship between Ammu and Velutha arises from the fact that their relationship transgresses the male-dominated system as well as caste boundary. Therefore, the paper adopts an intersectionality perspective that views gender, caste, class and sexuality as overlapping and mutually constitutive axes of power.

Marriage as a Patriarchal Institution

Marriage is not viewed in The God of Small Things merely as a love affair but as a social institution which is tied to a set of expectations related to gender, respectability and authority. One of the obvious examples in the book of this is the Marriage of Mammachi and Pappachi. Mammachi is clever, inventive, hard-working and driven business woman. She makes progress with her pickle-making enterprise and demonstrates a lot of financial competence. However, her progress does not necessarily mean her gender equality as her husband's (Pappach's) patriarchal and authoritative powers are still the ruling power. The latter's oppression on Mammachi displays the power of a male over a female in the local household and intimidates and terrifies his wife through violence. Roy advocates that productivity does not necessarily lead to the freedom of women.

Mammachi and Pappachi -Marriage and Domestic Patriarchy

Mammachi's marriage is central to understanding Roy's representation of patriarchal oppression. Pappach's professional frustrations and personal insecurity contribute to his self-assertive behaviour. Mammachi's achievements may not necessarily be acknowledged by him. Nonetheless, her independence would be a source of stress. Her prosperous entrepreneurial career is monumental as it refutes the falsely believed postulation that women should stay economically dependent on men. Yet, Mammachi's economic boom is juxtaposed by her domestic fragility. She is economically competent but intra-domestically fragile. Roy thus expounds that the social hierarchy of patriarchy is realized through, marriage, the use of force, social expectations, the family honours, the gender hierarchy and the family system.

The Family and the Reproduction of Patriarchy

This family in the novel is not merely a domestic space. It is a rather training forum in which some of the social values are rehearsed and refracted through the actions of the characters. The Ipe family was modeled by social standing, caste consciousness, gender expectancy, family honour, religious and cultural identity and economic standing. Women are expected to conform to particular behavioral standards whereas men have a wider array of personal and social 'choices'. In this way, the family is a clinical miniature of the actual society. Roy thus shows that patriarchy is not merely held in place by mean alone. It is also reproduced through family customs and traditions, social and cultural sanctions and the progressive elision of women's agency. Baby Kochamma exemplifies this as her attitudes towards Ammu reveal how women are able to internalize and re-actualize patriarchal thoughts and belief systems. Instead of creating some sort of inter-gender solidarity, she is involved in judging and controlling another woman. This suggests that patriarchy is systemic rather than merely human behaviour.

Ammu - Marriage, Freedom and Female Agency

Ammu is one of the most lucid examples that the woman is able to extract herself from the grasp of the general patriarchal paradigm. She takes 'marriage' as an escape route from her family's oppression. Yet marriage proves to be no respite for the pursuit of liberty. In fact, her marriage might be christened an engine of transfer rather than liberation. Ammu ultimately separates from her husband and returns to her parental residence with her twins, Estha and Rahel. But the return doesn't spell complete freedom for her. As a divorced woman, her individuality is challenged by her domestic realm and her choice is typically condemned when compared with the choices made by men. Her account explicates the gendered double standard where men's personal decisions are discussed when those of women are denoted.

Ammu - Sexual Politics of Women

Ammu's affair with Velutha becomes one of the most important instances in the novel through which the woman is shown to be entirely independent from the hierarchy of patriarchy. Her desire for Velutha defines the 'the sexual codes' that mark women in this patriarchal community. Moreover, the societality dictates the social expectations owing to caste affiliation to a lower caste person, with whom Ammu is involved. Her individual desire becomes a subversive act in the community of patriarchy and caste. Roy shows that the women's sexuality is kept in a check by the forces of social institutions. Ammu is condemned not only for loving someone but also for transgressing the demarcation of the normative man-woman relationship. It is thus asked, "who has the right to determine whom a woman loves? How is a woman's desire to be satisfied? What is properly a woman's conduct?"

The "Love Laws" and the Reification of Social Demarcation

The novel's conception of the "Love Laws" is imperative in understanding the novel's picture of the hegemony of social control and its application to patriarchy. The Laws symbolize the tacit social rules which regulate human relations, establishing who is to love whom, how to act, and which relationships would be praised and which demarcations must be maintained. Both Ammu and Velutha's relationship break the inscribed Laws, demonstrating that the love relationship is also a political expression in the novel. It signaled the connection of caste and sexuality and outlined the relationship between power and sexuality. Roy exposes that even private love relations could be politicized if they threaten the established order of subordination and exploitation.

Caste in Relation to Patriarchy

Caste plays a compelling role in the novel in relation to patriarchy. Velutha is a talented carpenter and an Outcaste whereas Ammu is part of a Syrian christian order of high social value. The relationship between these two is thus a breach of a caste segment that is highly-valued by the community. The novel demonstrates that women's sexuality is not only a personal desire. It also serves as the conduit through which caste delineation is secured. Marriage is not merely a personal decision but a means of social domination. Velutha's relationship with Ammu thus constitutes a threat to both the caste and patriarchal system.

Motherhood In Relation to Patriarchy

Ammu is delineated by her role as a mother and her choices as a wife. She expects herself to be a model mother whereas she is also affected in her entire life by her marital decision. This justifies the tension between woman as a woman and woman as a mother. A woman cannot be free from her prerequisites as a mother. Thus, the novel alludes to the question of whether a woman can be proven as a

woman more than her motherhood. She was condemned so patently by the society because it did not believe in her entirety as a mother and woman.

Woman-Agency and Mammachi - Ammu

Mammachi and Ammu are illustrated as two women exercising diverse agency. Mammachi's decision against patriarchy takes shape into economic criteria as her pickle-cultivating activities and fiscal resources tell and show. Ammu's decision against patriarchy is more intense as she is trying to win back her personal life from her onerous matrimony and stanchly avoiding sexual gratification with social standards. Mammachi and Ammu's lives stand as metaphors for the curvilinear alleyways of resisting patriarchy: Mammachi exemplifies economic freedom while Ammu exemplifies emotional freedom. But there is no ideal freedom for women: the crossroads of yielding to and rebelling against patriarchy are bleak.

Women as Patriarchy-Constructors

A woman need not be only a joint-party to the keeping of patriarchy. Baby Kockama has seen this. Her defense of Ammu spotted how women too are able to inwardly and formally give patriarchy the impression of permanence. And she collaborated in rebuffing and disapproving another woman. This delineates the developmental demonstration that patriarchy is not solely systemic of a few men's actions. The social harmony of Family and 'Honour' Family honor has consequences in the republics of Amma. Amma's discrete choices are seen to threaten the honor of the family. Amma's instance with Velta explains why elite women are not alway praiseworthy: it ventures social hypotheticals with family honorable responsibilities and ropy the responsibilities of women.

The Importance of Roy's Tales-Style

Roy's limitation of patriarchy gains overall gravity owing to his style. The tale confuses the time. The story of these characters is so intermittently narrated that the reader's need to find how and why such trivial childhood topics are a systematic family. The story describes the characters' childhood behavior and the understanding grows on how these experiences are associated with the systemic control of power. The storytelling perspective also spicen up us to the folly of social rules, made by elders. Roy's pattern, a hodgepodge of memory, amnesia, repetition, childhood principles, and stany language is so deceptive that it better and better inducts us to comprehend or face patriarchy as an equivalent of humans' humanity.

MAJOR FINDINGS

The study finds that: -

1. Marriage is a social institution where patriarchal power is exercised.
2. Family can be a tool of reproduction of gender and caste hierarchies.

3. Mammachi shows that economic independence does not free a woman from domestic patriarchy.
4. Ammu's life shows the demeaning social expectations for a girl.
5. Women's sexuality is also subordinate as visualized by the family honour, social morality and caste system.
6. Caste and gender intersect in the life of Ammu and Velutha.
7. Women can also be patriarchal in the way they internalise and reproduce it as visible through Baby Kochamma.
8. Roy does not construct women as victims alone but shows their different ways of negotiation, resistance and agency.

II. CONCLUSION

The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy shows that marriage and family are important fields of negotiation of castes, gender and social hierarchies. Through Mammachi, Pappabhai and Ammu, Roy exposes the contradictions within patriarchy. Mammachi, though capable of being economically independent, is vulnerable to domestic control. Ammu is trying to escape from the trap of patriarchal rule but failed to do so because it is also exercised at the level of her parents. Her love affair with Velutha again subverts the upper-caste male norm of patriarchy, caste and morality. The novel moves beyond the victimization paradigm of women and presents women with choices of resistance and agency, even within the confines of patriarchy. Mammachi is an example of economic independence and Ammu's love affair is an example of individual resistance. Ultimately, Roy exposes the way marriage, family, caste and respectability regulate the lives of women and also depicts women's desire for freedom. Consequently, the book remains the significant piece of Indian Women's Writing, feminist criticism and Inter-disciplinary approach to Literature.

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