

Challenging Socio-Cultural Milieu in 'The God of Small Things' by Arundhati Roy

Mohit Kumar

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Shri Jagdishprasad Jhabarmal Tibrewala University, Jhunjhunu (Rajasthan)

Abstract

The paper projects the societal and cultural environment reflected in the first novel by Arundhati Roy 'The God of Small Things'. She has visualized pragmatic characters and artistically portrayed the life in Ayemenem (a district in Kerala). She exhibits a culture full of failing relationships, broken marriages, taboos, incest and caste differences so authentically that it is hard to believe whether it is a fiction or reality. The issues of untouchables, suffering of women after marriage and incestuous love are highlighted. The novel presents the zeitgeist and hence can be grouped under 'art for life sake' type of literature.

Keywords: *Socio-cultural milieu, patriarchal culture, caste, rebel, incest*

Introduction

The God of Small Things can be called a realistic novel in terms that it aptly depicts the social values and cultural milieu of the time in which it is written. Before going into the thick of the things, it is important to understand the words 'Society' and 'Culture' in the truest sense. Society is a group of people living in communion having same customs and sharing common value system. Society works in a systematic way. Culture is the social legacy of a particular community. Culture is formed by the governing thought patterns of a group of people that basically depends upon the regional and historical circumstances of the society. Culture grows by itself. It includes values, customs, religious rites, institutions, relationships, taboos, etc. Culture is as important to a society as blood to life.

Depiction of Indian Culture

Roy has illustrated the Indian cultural beliefs and acuteness in Indian Society. The culture of India is primarily sacred and religious. The cultural heritage of India is destroyed many a time, but people of India have regained everything which is positive in the tradition. But some vicious and malicious aspects of society have always subjugated the intellectual milieu such as caste differentiation, mistreatment of women, exploitation of poor and incest. To appreciate the novel, we need to understand the life of Syrian Christians in Kerala, their tradition, ceremonies and employment. The comparison between the life style of different strata of society is made in the novel. The house of the lower class Parvan like Valutha is portrayed as gloomy, monotonous and colorless more or less like a slum house with low roofs, shaky walls and muddy floors. The history House inhabited by middle class is shown as in good state with a garden, furniture and drawing room. But the house of upper class like Pillai has colorful walls, dining table, folding chairs, printed curtains, etc. the comparison shows that the poor are distressed and are totally at the mercy of the rich. The rich people like Comrade Pillai

are shrewd and swindler. They live a life of double standards saying something and doing the other. Pillai uses the power of poor people politically but refuses to help Valutha who is trapped in a fake police case.

Roy has also depicted the life and culture of Kathakali dancers of Kerala in her novel. Kathakali Man has shown leading a hard life, not being able to earn a good livelihood for the family. He is even disdained by his children. The dilemma of the Kathakali dancers is presented very minutely by Roy. Their rich classical form of dance is “slashed to twenty minute cameos.” The dance which is cultivated in the confines of Indian temples is shown as losing vitality and the dancers have shifted their source of income to tourism.

Protest against the Predominant Culture

The socio-cultural milieu of the Indian Society is represented by plight and position of women. The male dominated patriarchal culture which form the basis of ancient Indian history is presented in the novel where female characters are nothing but the official and sexual assets of male characters they are married to. The woman is dominated by father before marriage, by husband after marriage and by her sons later on. Her own existence, her own identity and her individuality is sacrificed by her at every phase of her life. Gender gradation in society forms the root of pains inflicted upon women. She is cornered, neglected and consigned to a substandard position in society. Even the wealth and property of the parents is transferred to the males born in the family and females are given no share. That is why she was given money, clothes and ornaments at the time of her marriage which later on got converted into a custom called Dowry. The daughters are treated as wealth of strangers because they are given away to others as ‘Kanyadaan’. So right from the childhood, both male and female children are treated differently. She is treated as inferior to her brothers and her husband later on. Mammachi, in the novel, applies different sex norms for her son and daughter. She ignores her son’s flirtations with the women workers of the factory. But she rejects her daughter Ammu’s love for a single man Valutha. Ammu is reprimanded, locked in the room and banished from the house later on but Mammachi does not mind what her son Chacko had done. So her mentality and individuality of woman is shaped by the family and society. She is born as a human but made a woman. Although female infanticide was forbidden by law in 1877, yet the woman remained unwelcomed and undesirable. (Amitab Roy, 49). She was even devoid of good education and nourishment. Many of them were married in the childhood, giving birth to children at an early age. Hence they suffered with a lot of mental and physical trauma and deadly diseases. To the worst, if a woman gave birth to a female child or could not conceive a child, she was treated not less than a criminal sometimes even deserted by her husband. Without being aware of the facts related to male and female potency, she was tagged as barren. In some areas of traditional India, if the husband died, the wife was offered on the funeral pyre of the husband. She was forced to wear colorless clothes. Even her head was shaved to categorize her as a widow. In 1829, immolation of a widow was stopped legally and in 1856 the Widow Remarriage Act was passed and legally practiced. (Amitaby Roy, 51)

This so called orthodox situation was confronted with the western culture. The contact with Christian missionaries and western education opened up new vistas of knowledge and ideas. Ideas of French, German and English authors influenced the Indian culture. Indian social-reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy also shaped and transformed the custom by raising their voice against social evils such as the immolation of widows and child marriage. Women reformers like Sarojini Naidu also spread awareness regarding vicious practices. The Hindu Succession Bill of 1955-56 was also passed to give

the daughters the equal right of inheritance in the property of the father. But the fact is that in many parts of India child marriages are still in vogue. Sex determination to kill the female fetus is still illegally going on. The wife still has no right in the property of her husband. Now days, middle class women have given the opportunity to get education and even do the jobs, but the income she earns is under the control of her husband. Her health is even more spoiled as she has to manage both the family and job. The condition of lower class women is even worse as they keep on working for longer hours. They are paid lesser wages for the same labor. Moreover the sexual harassment they undergo intensifies the problem. In villages in Kerala, many tribal women have become mothers without marriage. They are the victims of rape. The novel is an attempt by Roy to hit at the male prevalence present in the social environment of Indian culture. She has portrayed female characters which belong to three generations. The novel symbolizes the journey of womanhood in three generations where an improvement in the social status of women has been shown. All their celebrations and all their torments, all their victories and all their failures have been recorded in the novel aesthetically. Though the novel is full of trauma, terror and tyranny, yet it ends on a positive note.

In the first generation Mammachi is presented as a character whose approach towards her own son's wife, Margaret, is negative. The reason for her inhuman attitude is that she herself has got afflictions from her atrocious husband. She never protests against her husband and modestly accepts his thrashing. Still she does not mind her son Chacko's amorous advances to the female workers of factory. Even she arranges for a secret way to his room so that he can satisfy his needs without interruption. She turns into a pervert due to the ruthless experiences of life. She thinks of Margaret to be "Just another whore." Her attitude towards Ammu's love Valutha is very harsh and cruel. She also hates him because of his caste. She even spits on his face: Thick Spit. It splattered across his skin. His mouth and eyes" (284). She is the reason for harsh beating Valutha receives by the police resulting in his death.

The second generation character Ammu gets better exposure than Mammachi. She is a rebel as she runs away from her bully father but she chooses a wrong husband. Unlike Mammachi she does not meekly accepts the pain given by her husband and revolts against it by attacking him with a book. She is full of self esteem and returns to her parents with two children Estha and Rahel. She fosters all the etiquettes in her children. She refuses to use the surname after divorce and also enters into a love relationship with Valutha, the man who knows her since childhood. Valutha also loves her children. But their secret courtship is exposed. By presenting the affair of a high class woman and low class man, Roy has shown her dissent against the so called dogmas of society. She has also touched the issue of untouchables. The society is biased against the illegitimate relationship of Ammu as her brother's illicit relationship is accepted. She is tormented by the family and Valutha is trapped in a fake rape case. He is killed by the brutal beating of police. Ammu is separated from her children and dies alone. Thus Ammu is shown as fighting against rigid forces. She dies at an early age but even her body is not allowed to be cremated within the boundaries of church.

Rahel, the daughter of Ammu, is regarded as the female character belonging to the third generation. She witnesses a fate of separated parents, rejections by family and unfavorable conditions and hence goes even a step ahead of her mother. Where her grandmother is shown as submissive and her mother as rebel, she is grown up as bold and brave girl. She goes to Delhi to study Architecture but could not complete the course. She meets Larry, gets attracted towards him and forced into a marriage which is not an ideal sort of relationship. Shortly she realizes that her wedding lock is actually a lock, a useless tie. Larry could not understand her and she shatters the shackles of conjugal relationship. She does not feel

morally guilty or any embarrassment in saying “We are divorced.” She does not leave hope after being separated and starts doing job. She is independent and self-sufficient, yet she is full of conscientiousness for her twin brother Estha. When she comes to know that Estha has returned to Ayemenem, she leaves her job and comes to look after his brother who has turned out to be shocked because of the disturbing elements in their life. We can conclude by saying that she has demonstrated herself as an independent woman, truly feminist. She goes so far that she indulges in an incestuous relationship with Estha. By depicting Rahel-Estha relationship, Roy has hit hard at the cultural values.

Conclusion

At the bottom line, the novelist has shown a feminist progression in terms of challenging the socio-cultural milieu. The journey from conformity leading to emancipation via rebel is shown. Rahel is represented as a ‘transgressor’. She is blamed of breaking the social taboo of incest. So it can be said that ‘The God of Small Things’ is a taboo breaking, protest novel of present day Indian patriarchal society (Dhawan, 11).

References

1. Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*. India Ink, 1997.
2. Amitabh Roy, *The God of Small Things: A Novel of Social Commitment*. Atlantic Publishers, 2005.
3. R.K. Dhawan, *Arundhati Roy: The Novelist Extraordinary*. Prestige Books, 1999.

