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Patriarchy and Female Suffering in Arundhati Roy's Novel *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract

Patriarchy is a social system in which men hold the majority of power. They hold the leading positions in political leadership, moral authority, social privilege, and property ownership. Art is a mirror of life. It shows us worlds in which gender stereotypes are still alive and portrays women's experiences of life and grief. A significant element of postcolonial English literature is the attention to women's issues and the struggles of disadvantaged social groups in Third World countries. Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* is a work of protest literature that is conscious of social injustices perpetuated by current cultural practices. The famous novelist Arundhati Roy is excellent at expressing the awareness of her female characters, representing their difficulties, fears, conflicts, contradictions, and aspirations. The current study examines the portrayal of patriarchal power in the novel *The God of Small Things*.

Keywords: patriarchy, female consciousness, tradition, freedom.

Introduction

Patriarchy is a social structure in which males exercise principal power. These are men who occupy positions of leadership, moral authority, social privilege, and property ownership. Within the family, it is the fathers or father figures who have authority over women and children. Patriarchy has a long history of being embedded in the social, legal, political, religious and economic institutions of many civilisations. Most contemporary nations practise patriarchy, even if they do not formally express it in their constitutions and laws. Sylvia Walby describes 'patriarchy' as 'a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women' (*Theorising Patriarchy* 20). Gerda Lerner further solidifies Sylvia's view on patriarchy when she writes that "patriarchy is the manifestation and institutionalisation of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general" (*The Creation of Patriarchy* 239). Kamla Bhasin, a leading feminist author in India, writes that "patriarchy' literally means 'the rule of the father'. It is a system in which men control women's labour, sexuality, fertility and mobility" (*What is Patriarchy?* 3).



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Gender significantly influences human lives, as individuals are indoctrinated with a specific behavioural code that varies according to their sex from the moment of birth. In a patriarchal culture, men and women are coerced into conforming to gender norms, with males enjoying privileges while females endure a repressed and submissive existence; women experience life distinctly from men and suffer as a result (Millet, *Sexual Politics* 30). Art, as a reflection of life, portrays worlds where gender norms persist and encapsulates women's experiences of life and pain. The focus on women's issues and the plight of marginalised social groups in Third World countries is a notable feature of postcolonial literature in English (Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* 23). Both male and female writers have highlighted the struggles of women and marginalised classes in traditional, tradition-bound countries, where they face discrimination and are regarded as subordinate and tamed within a hierarchical social framework (*The Second Sex* 128).

The novel *The God of Small Things* is a typical example of protest literature, which is aware of the social injustices perpetrated by the existing cultural conventions. Arundhati Roy has successfully depicted the female characters' awareness to convey their struggles, anxieties, conflicts, inconsistencies, and aspirations. The characters of the novel are caught between patriarchy and tradition, on the one hand, and self-expression, individuality, and independence, on the other, leading to confusion as they search for avenues to personal fulfilment. The novelists depict their female characters through the prism of their ambitions, anxieties, goals and disappointments. The novel critiques gender oppression by examining the marital and intergender dynamics of its female characters.

The eminent post-colonial Indian novelist Arundhati Roy, winner of the Booker Prize for her debut novel, '*The God of Small Things*', published in 1997, skilfully depicts the predicament of Indian women against the backdrop of Ayemenem, a locality in the southern Indian state of Kerala, where a tangled web of relationships keeps the female characters in perpetual subjugation and curtails their personal freedom. In this novel, Roy celebrates the diversity of the female experience, avoiding moralism and adopting a pragmatic, realistic approach to depicting female characters, some of whom clearly embody a new culture that separates itself from tradition. This novel is a structural representation of patriarchal cultural iconography, showing male subjectification and female objectification. In this novel, Roy highlights the brutalities suffered by women and the lower castes in a male-chauvinistic and highly traditional society while protesting against the dehumanising taboos that obstruct personal aspirations, desires, and the demand for justice and dignity.

Patriarchal Control and Female Suffering

India has traditionally been a male-dominated country. The patriarchal structure has repressed, limited and oppressed women in India. Women were confined within the four walls of the house with no independent identity. The genesis of women's education in post-independence India served as a catalyst for transformative changes, giving rise to a new woman with a distinct sense of identity and individuality. The patriarchal culture sees women in their



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societal roles of mothers, wives and daughters. But contemporary women challenge these traditional ideas and are conscious of their rights. In her novel *The God of Small Things*, Roy graphically portrays the needs, sufferings, and desires of women, as well as the double standards and false principles of men. The novel is set in Kerala and narrates the tragic tale of Ammu, a Syrian Christian divorcee who defies the “Love Laws” and has an illicit romance with Velutha, an untouchable, and suffers the injustices of societal norms. This work presents a realistic picture of the problems faced by the Indian women, their concerns and anxieties, aspirations and the humiliations they have to go through in a patriarchal culture. It also illustrates their effort to attain a sense of identity in a wholly malevolent culture where male peers regard women as property. Although she primarily concentrates on the plight of women, she also subtly critiques the social discrimination inflicted upon the lower castes, the exploitations perpetrated under the guise of class struggle, the arrogance of the upper castes, the piety of the clergy, and the foreign aspirations of Anglophiles.

Roy illustrates female subalternity across three consecutive generations of women. Mammachi and Baby Kochamma represent the first generation. Patriarchy serves as a predominant mechanism for exerting power and enforcing conformity within the family unit. Despite his demise, the absent patriarch Rev. Ipe's presence is evident as he flashed his assured ancestral smile at the threshold, while his wife, Aleyooty Ammachi, appeared sceptical; she says, “With her eyes she looked in the direction that her husband looked. With her heart she looked away” (*The God of Small Things* 30).

Mammachi's marriage to a man seventeen years her senior illustrates her uncritical submission to her parents' authority. Subsequently, the narrative presents multiple episodes that illustrate her uncritical acquiescence to the prevailing patriarchal framework. She tolerates her husband's brutality without complaint and consistently lives under male dominance. Mammachi, a promising musician, had to abandon her profession only at Pappachi's request. Domestic abuse becomes an integral aspect of her existence: “Every night he beat her with a brass flower vase” (ibid. 50).

Another individual who exerted control over Mammachi's life was her Oxford-educated son, Chacko, who, upon returning home following his divorce from Margaret, assumed control of Mammachi's pickle business, disregarding the contributions of Mammachi, the founder and developer of the enterprise.

Baby Kochamma exhibited greater defiance than her sister-in-law, as she dared to fall in love with Father Mulligan, an Irish monk, converting to Roman Catholicism against her father's desires and pursuing him from seminary to seminary. Baby Kochamma quickly recognises the futility of her endeavour and her inability to articulate her suppressed aspirations, constrained by her dread of conventional society, which compels her to lead a tumultuous existence and fosters her obstinacy. Her obstinacy has earned her a negative reputation, leading her father to believe she would struggle to secure a husband, so he sent her



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to America to pursue a course in ornamental gardening. The decision made by her father underscores society's conventional belief that marriage represents the paramount objective of a woman's existence, whereas education is considered appropriate solely for unmarried females. Her inability to transcend patriarchal constraints renders her suppressed, and her spiteful disposition towards Ammu and her children stems from her inherent "an ancient, age-old fear. The fear of being dispossessed" (ibid. 70). She epitomises patriarchal authority and establishes order within this patriarchal realm.

Ammu, the sad protagonist of the novel, endures humiliation, insult, and mistreatment initially from her father, subsequently from her husband, and later from her family members and society. The narrator presents a compassionate portrayal of her development from childhood to youth, through marriage, to a nurturing and affectionate mother, and ultimately to a rebellious wife who challenges the hypocritical moral standards of a patriarchal family. From childhood, Ammu endured numerous challenges and tribulations; despite her father's high level of education, he failed to provide love and devotion to his daughter and took pleasure in physically punishing her with an ivory-handled baton. Ammu was denied the opportunity to pursue higher education because her father deemed education for girls unnecessary, while her brother Chako was able to attend Oxford for advanced study. She is frustrated by the abrupt interruption of her education and the terrible environment at home, prompting her desire to leave Ayemenem and emancipate herself from "the clutches of her ill-tempered father and bitter, long-suffering mother" (ibid. 38). Ultimately, she encounters a young man during her summer vacation with a distant aunt in Assam and consents to marry him, believing that "anything, anyone at all, would be better than returning to Aynemenem" (ibid. 39). Her marriage culminates in failure as her intoxicated husband seeks to offer her to his employer, Mr Hollicks, to retain his position. Ammu demonstrates remarkable self-respect by refusing to compromise and exiting her marriage following his violent assault on her and the children. She returns to Aynemenem, from where she had sought to flee, now as an undesired individual accompanied by "two young children and no more dreams" (ibid. 42). Ammu and her offspring became a liability for her family, and legally, "Ammu as a daughter had no claim to property" (ibid. 57). Conversely, Ammu's brother Chako, a divorcee like her, retains the lawful claim to the family estate due to his male gender. As a divorcee, she has been marginalised by society and Baby Kochamma's perspective: "a married daughter had no position in her parents' home. As for a divorced daughter, she had no position anywhere at all (ibid. 45-46).

This statement exposes society's prevailing perception of Ammu. Ammu gradually transforms into a rebel, engaging in smoking and midnight swims, as a response to the hypocrisy of the male-chauvinist society and the neglect and injustice she faces from her family. Ammu's constrained existence compels her to transgress societal standards and engage in an affair with Velutha, a low-caste Paravan who also faces marginalisation because of his social rank. Her mother, who enables her brother's unlawful liaison with factory women under the guise of "a man's needs", obstructs her relationship with Velutha, ultimately leading to a



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severe cost: Velutha's death, the separation of the twins, and her demise. When she seeks justice for Velutha's death from the police, Inspector Mathew harasses her, illustrating the functioning of patriarchy within the administrative framework and highlighting women's status in society. Ammu suffers a sad demise at the age of thirty-one in a squalid hotel room, devoid of assistance. Even death cannot terminate her humiliation; the church declined to inter Ammu. On multiple occasions, Chacko arranges for a van to convey her body to the electric crematorium, with only Rahel and Chacko present at her funeral. Ammu endured a sad existence marked by torment and abuse from the police, her family, and society. Despite being victims, women such as Mammachi and Baby Kochamma have internalised the prejudiced beliefs of the dominant patriarchal institutions, and alongside male chauvinists, they bear responsibility for Ammu's tragedy.

Rahel, Ammu's daughter and a member of the third generation, exhibits a temperament and attitude markedly distinct from those of the other women in her family, and she also challenges the injustices of patriarchal society. She epitomises the emancipated and unfettered woman who chooses to live according to her own desires, challenging all traditions, practices, and laws that are designed to subjugate women. Rahel has endured significant hardship due to the patriarchal society; from her infancy, she has been robbed of love and affection, initially by her father and then by her family in Ayemenem House. She had endured horrible experiences during her childhood, witnessing her mother's unbearable anguish and misery in the Ayemenem House, as well as observing her mother's body being reduced to ashes. She scarcely forgets the torment of Baby Kochamma's role in Velutha's demise. Following the disheartening demise of Ammu, her sole source of support, she becomes powerless and increasingly disregarded by her maternal uncle, grandmother, and grandaunt.

Following her mother's demise, she endures a solitary existence, with her relatives exhibiting indifference to her welfare. Consequently, due to these unfavourable conditions and profound neglect, she cultivates patience and evolves into a reckless, audacious, and self-sufficient individual. Subsequently, she married Larry McCaslin, a research scholar in architecture from Boston, and divorced him upon realising the futility of their union, despite his lack of masculine chauvinism. Her positivity enables her to pursue a confident life uniquely, yet she remains cognisant of the detrimental repercussions of defying conventional society, having witnessed her mother's tragedy. Conscious of these repercussions, she has engaged in actions deemed more perilous morally than those of her mother.

At thirty-one, she engages in an incestuous relationship with her brother, which society universally condemns. Roy depicts Rahel as a liberated Indian woman who rejects the patriarchal framework, signifying a triumph for women. Rahel Roy's depiction embodies optimism in the emancipation of women from patriarchal oppression. Through this story, Roy critiques the patriarchal culture that restricts female autonomy, thereby exacerbating her suffering by relegating her to a subordinate status.



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Conclusion

The novel, *The God of Small Things*, compellingly illustrates the marginalisation of women within a patriarchal society, emphasising their confinement to the domestic sphere, the denial of their social functions, and the neglect of their aspirations, as well as the suffering they face as a result. It demonstrates that women's suffering originates within their families, and in a patriarchal society, women are not regarded as equals; the social structures are designed to perpetuate women's victimisation. Although women in the novel endure oppression from a male-dominated society, they also exhibit greater chutzpah in challenging the patriarchal system and demonstrate togetherness that becomes their strength, while also illustrating the development of men. Ammu and Rahel dare to confront societal norms, but Ammu ultimately fails in her endeavours. Both novels depict the inequitable treatment inflicted on the lower strata of society.

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