

A Journey from Discrimination to Self-Discovery in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

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Abstract

*Arundhati Roy, the winner of the prestigious Booker Prize, is a significant literary voice in the field of Indian writing in English who attacks upon the social evils like casteism, gender discrimination and child abuse in her debut novel **The God of Small Things** (1997). Whereas Manju Kapur, one of the significant female voices in Indian writing in English, a winner of the 1999 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for her first book **Difficult Daughters** (1998) exposes the victimization of women due to male tyranny. Both Arundhati Roy and Manju Kapur similarly depict the attempt of female characters for their survival in male dominated society. The present paper does a comparative study of Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* and show that how both the writers are similar in their attempt to portray gender discrimination and self-discovery of female characters. Their novels successfully showcase women empowerment where the females stand against all obstacles on their own.*

Key Words: Discrimination, Sexism, Victimization, Self-awareness, Self discovery, women empowerment.

The journey of feminist movement unfolds the truth of women subjugation. It talks about the social reality of gender discrimination that how women are humiliated, exploited and marginalized on the account of their gender. Simon De Beauvoir writes in her famous book *The Second Sex*, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." (18) Here, she talks about women's secondary status in the society and the gender bias. The present paper throws light upon the victimization of women on the account of male chauvinism. The women portrayed in both the novels are victims of male dominated society. However, they stand against the societal norms which suppress their existence. Arundhati Roy's female protagonist Ammu in *The God of Small Things* (1997) is treated as a subhuman and second sex. Her humiliation takes terrible forms when she returns to Ayemenam as divorcee. Rahel and Estha, as children of a divorcee woman have no place in the orthodox society. They

are suppressed and suffered at home and in the society for no fault of them. Like Velutha they too lead a life of the marginalized. Ammu is compelled to have an easy taste of chauvinistic brutality and hypocrisy through her father. Ammu's father Pappachi is of the opinion that "a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl" (38). On the other hand, her elder brother Chacko goes to Oxford for education. When money is not enough, Ammu's mother Mammachi secretly pawns her jewelry to send him abroad. On the contrary, Ammu's education is denied. This indicates how woman is neglected and sub-humanized in the male dominated society on the account of gender. Patriarchy made women as marginalized. Her eighteenth birthday comes and goes away unnoticed. Since her father has no suitable dowry no marriage proposals come for Ammu. This indicates that the life of women in India is made vulnerable due to the patriarchy as well as the social customs like dowry.

Ammu wants to go away from the Ayemenam, so as to escape from the brutality of the male domination. Her plan becomes successful when her father agrees to let her spend the summer with a distant aunt who lives in Calcutta, where she meets her future husband, Baba. She decides to marry him with the hope that marriage will improve her position in society. Her attempt to create her own identity is spoiled. Baba, her husband is not only an alcoholic but a liar. Meanwhile, Ammu gives birth to twins, Rahel and Estha. Her condition becomes more critical when Baba does nothing but lay in bed. Baba in the novel is portrayed as a man who uses his wife for his own selfish purpose. He considers her as a means of fulfillment. His boss at the office, Mr. Hollick wants to enjoy sex with Ammu. Baba does not hesitate to order her to do so. And therefore Ammu takes divorce from Baba, and returns to Ayemenam, but her humiliation has no end. After her return to Ayemenam, no one consoles her but treats her badly. Every one humiliates her calling her a divorcee. Ammu's mother Mammachi is also a victim of male chauvinism. Her father Pappachi does not care about her. He is jealous of the fact that she is seventeen years younger than him. Even her good attempt to start a pickle factory is criticized by him. He is of the view that her job is not suitable to the ranking of an Ex. Government official. He does not help her in her business. On the contrary he takes pleasure in beating her. As the novelist writes, "Every night he beat her with a brass flower vase. What was new was only the frequency with which they took place" (47). Besides Ammu and Mammachi, Margaret Kochamma also is marginalized on the account of gender. She is portrayed as a woman who wants to assert her own identity, but after marriage with Chacko her life becomes meaningless. Thus, the women like Ammu, Mammachi and Margaret Kochamma are portrayed as the victims of male chauvinism. It indicates how women are oppressed, humiliated and made to live a marginal existence due to the domestic violence, which is the result of patriarchy. As Rujuta Deshmukh writes, "Domestic violence prevails all over the world but its gravity is much in South Asian countries. Domestic Violence is very much rooted in India. Its age-old system of patriarchy and the patriarchal structures are responsible for that" (Deshmukh 2007). Thus, Roy highlights man's attitude towards women in our social hierarchy. Women have been seen as means of wish fulfillment.

Ammu and Mammachi are marginalized on account of gender. They are the victims of domestic violence and patriarchy. They have no any fault of their own, the only thing that they are 'women'. To quote Rujuta Deshmukh:

According to available statistics from around the globe one out of every three women experiences violence in an intimate relationship in her life. This is an average based on available national surveys across industrialized and developing countries (World Health Organization, 1997). The data reveals a shocking 71.5 percent increase in cases of torture and dowry deaths during the period from 1991 to 1995 reflect increased reporting of violence. (Deshmukh 2007)

Chacko who represents male domination does not care about his sister, Ammu. On the contrary, he asserts himself and is ready to humiliate her. He monopolized both his mother and the Paradise Pickle factory. The presence of Ammu in the house always disturbs him. He denies her share in the ancestral property saying: "What's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine" (57). It is indicative of the lower status of women in patriarchal set up of India. Being exploited and humiliated by parents, Ammu becomes a lonely figure at Ayemenam. Since she is neglected almost by all the members in the family, she enjoys midnight swim and spends her lonely hours on the bank of river. Naturally she gets attracted towards Velutha's physical feature. As Ashok Chacker rightly observes: "Ammu, a member of Syrian Christian family touchable (but a woman) cannot suppress her biological needs, her sexual appetite. Basically, she is a young widow who cannot go without someone irrespective of his caste and community for satisfying her sexual needs. She is bound to submit to the natural urge for sex and gets sexual satisfaction by Velutha, a member of the Untouchable community." (75) Both Ammu and Velutha the two unwanted and neglected individuals begin to love each other and enjoy short happy life. Since they have no plans, no future all they could do stick to the small things. As Roy narrates: "Even later, on the thirteen nights that followed this one, instinctively they stuck to the Small Things. The Big Things ever lurked inside. They knew that there was nowhere for them to go. They had nothing. No future. So they stuck to the small things" (338). Ammu and Velutha made love that night when they met for the first time and the next thirteen nights. She does not think of the social barriers. Velutha also is unaware about the future consequences. The physical union of both Ammu and Velutha is very symbolic here to note. Though it is natural it is a token of a revolt against the set norms and customs of the conservative Indian society.

Ammu, being a woman cannot suppress her biological needs. As G.D. Barche points out: "She [Ammu] has disobeyed the social laws of love but obeyed the instinctual laws 'Swadharma' by sharing the body with Velutha, an untouchable" (43) Velutha's father, Vellya Pappen informs Mammachi about the love affair between Ammu and Velutha. Suppression for ages made Vellya Pappen too weak to stand against the high castes. He does not want to rebel against high-caste Christians. Knowing about their love affair, Mammachi shouts at Vellya: "Drunk dog! Drunken Parvans liar!" (256). Mammachi's

anger is very oblivious. She calls Velutha at Ayemenam and humiliates him. As the novelist writes: "She had screamed, eventually. 'Out!' If I find you on my property tomorrow, I'll have castrated you like the pariah dog that you are! I'll have you killed!" ...Mammachi spat into Velutha's face. Thick spit. It splattered across his skin. His mouth and eyes. (284)

The love relationship between a high-caste Ammu and Velutha, an untouchable has been seen as disgrace. They both are viciously condemned and punished for their conduct. Nothing was wrong in their behavior. But their relationship is considered as illicit. Ammu's basic need of having sexual pleasure is treated as a sinful act. She is marginalized because of having love affair with an untouchable. In Sophie Mol's funeral all neglect Ammu and her children. In their home they become untouchable. Roy successfully shows the drawbacks of Indian orthodox society, which outlived women by depicting the Ayemenam realistically. As C. Gopinthan Pillai rightly points out, "The problems of patriarchal domination and female subalternity and the clash between the two are rooted in the specific geocultural reality of Ayemenam" (88) Baby Kochamma also hates Ammu for her relationship with an untouchable. She shares her body with her. In loving Velutha as untouchable, she does not think of the social barriers. Ammu, being a woman cannot suppress her biological needs. So, here Ammu becomes a taboo breaker woman who breaks all the social restraints of the society. Her act is against the existed norms. Velutha is also seen as a rebel who breaks the social order. His act of having a love affair with a high caste and a mother of two children, Ammu is treated as punishable act. Ammu, being humiliated and exploited on the account of gender tries to find her place in a society. Being rejected by all corners of life, she sees a new hope and beginning in Velutha. Her affair with a Dalit outcaste Velutha stands for Ammu's self-discovery. Velutha also being humiliated and discriminated at the hands of high caste people sees a new life in Ammu irrespective of any consequences. His affair too indicates not only a revolt of the Dalit community against age old oppression as well as his quest for self identity in caste oriented Indian society.

Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* narrates a very passionate story of a young woman Virmati who falls in love with a married man, and her decision to live with him brings sorrow and sufferings to her. The novelist has given a very frank description of love, sex and marriage that looks completely unconventional. The objective is to bring the changing reality in the Indian society to the limelight. The story unfolds with the narrator, Ida, who is a difficult daughter and she explores the life of her mother, Virmati in the novel. Kapur uses three generations of daughters, who exhibit three sets of notions and different ideologies stand in different times. The novel showcases the conflict between tradition and modernity where the social institute like marriage has lost its sanctity and relevance. The relationship between Virmati and her husband fails on the ground of low moral values where woman is considered mere an object of wish fulfillment. Kapur is one of the new age women writers

who have challenged the traditional family values in her writings, especially from a woman's perspective. Vimmy Sinha in an article writes about Kapur, "She is yet another woman writer from India on whom the image of the suffering, but stoic women, who are eventually breaking traditional boundaries, has had a significant impact . . . She's written about the female revolt against deep rooted social values. (qtd. in Sinha 12)

Virmati asserts her will to be educated. Her desire to get education is the first sign of her self awareness. Anyhow she manages to leave home to study in Lahore. There in Lahore she falls in love with an Oxford returned teacher known as the Professor , a married man who had been once her parent's tenant. After a number of vicissitudes, Virmati finally chooses to marry him but unfortunately she finds herself trapped in a circle of sorrows and miseries. The professor refuses to leave his first wife, Ganga. Therefore, at her family she is humiliated, exploited and marginalized by Ganga, her husband's wife. The sufferings and untold miseries of Virmati are told by her daughter, Ida who narrates the story of *Difficult Daughters*. Virmati couldn't enjoy her married life with the Professor because she couldn't withstand the rancor of Ganga: "When Ganga saw her, she would turn her face away or what was worse, would stare intensely at her, her eyes moist, her lip trembling, her big red bindi flashing accusingly" (Kapur 219) She had to follow Ganga's instructions at home .She was not allowed to walk freely in the premises of the home. The whole day she had to be confined to the dark, sullen dressing room with occasional visits to the main house to do her daily chores which shows her marginal existence. Through Virmati's continuation of her studies at Lahore on Professor's insistence, she finds an opportunity to free from the shackles of marriage where she found nothing but sorrow. Virmati awakens to the mistake she has committed on the very first day of her marriage. But it is too late: "I should never have married you, she said slowly, „and it's too late now. I have never seen it so clearly. It is not fair" (212) She couldn't free herself from the pain and the sense of guilt throughout her life. It is this sense of guilt that doesn't allow her to open up her feelings to her daughter, Ida. It is only Ida, who takes an expedition to Amritsar and Lahore (now in Pakistan) to find answers to the perplexed life of her mother. She wants to give voice to her mother's voiceless past. Her activity is one of her feminist acts where she stands to expose humiliation and exploitation of her mother in particular and women in general. She wants to reveal the ugly reality of her mother's life and appeals for equality. Virmati though faced a series of disappointments did make an attempt to empower herself in the novel. Anwasha Roy Chaudhury and DrJoydeep Banerjee observe: "ManjuKapur has artfully drawn the character of Virmati as the incipient New Woman – one who is conscious, introspective, educated wants to carve out a life for herself, conveying her personal vision of womanhood only to be left alienated."(28)

While showcasing Virmati's plight, Kapur presents parallel narratives of Swarnlata, Virmati's roommate at Lahore and Shakuntala, her cousin who is a lecturer. Both of them are also 'difficult daughters' but they manage their living without disturbing the social structures. During the difficult times of independence struggle, Swarnlata aspires to

rise above her personal concerns and connected herself to the larger issues of the nation having inspired by Mahatma Gandhi.

Kapur paints Virmati's character as a self-directed woman of the new generation who does not hesitate to leave her family back. She is a woman who takes a decision of marriage on her own responsibility which shows her consciousness. She alienates herself from her own home to live a life of freedom through education & transgresses the threshold. Her downfall occurs with her illicit relationship with an already married Prof. Harish who professes his love for her and seduces her through sending her Petrarchan sonnets & by referring to Machiavelli & the Greek tragedy. After all he gains complete hold over her mind. Virmati's decision to marry with Harish brings sorrows and sufferings to her. Virmati, a woman who faced a complete failure in marriage; a denial from her own maternal home at last stands for her own survival. She keeps Harish's request at bay and overcomes her dejection and emerges out as an independent female at least for some days. She takes the role of a headmistress of a girls's school at Nahan, the capital of Sirmour, the small Himalayan state run by an enlightened maharaja. She attains an ideal level of female autonomy. For the first and only time, she has her own place to live, gets a room of her own. She believes she needs a man, and she again makes the wrong choice. She returns to a relationship that had already brought her nothing but suffering. The repeated secret visits of the fatal Professor lose Virmati her employers' confidence and she is asked to quit her school, house and employment. From Nahan her journey to Shantiniketan, to get greater freedom again fails on the ground of hypocritical marital values in male dominated Indian society. Her story narrates the evil tendencies in Indian society where woman is treated as an object. She does not have her own space. She has to leave a life of dependent sometime on parents; sometime on husband and there is no any way for complete freedom. Roy's Ammu is similar here like Virmati who was humiliated and exploited by her own husband and family members on the account of gender. However, Kapur's Virmati's attempt is remarkable as well as different than that of Roy's Ammu. Though she is trapped into the marital conflict she tries to arise from the life situation at any cost. She joins as a headmistress of girls' school in Nahan. Here, she stands for her own rights as a female. She paves a new platform for other women to follow who live a marginal existence under the heavy burden of societal laws and customs. Roy's Ammu has tried to find her place in society. Even she has rebelled against the set norms. Being a Syrian Christian Divorcee and a mother of two children she dares to love Velutha, the outcaste. Though she is not successful in her attempt, she has already started her journey towards self-discovery. Kapur's Virmati is more self-aware and conscious than Roy's Ammu. Finding herself unable to settle in marriage she paves a new platform for herself becoming a headmistress.

Thus, the females like Ammu from *The God of Small Things* and Virmati from *The Difficult Daughters* are humiliated and marginalized on the account of gender. At the same time being rebels, they walk on the path of self-discovery irrespective of any consequences.

Roy's Velutha too tries to identify his own identity being Dalits in caste oriented society. In both the novels the victims raise their voice against humiliation and set new examples for those marginalized people who are humiliated and exploited by the mainstream forces.

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