

**MODE OF ASSERTION ADOPTED BY THE WOMAN PROTAGONIST IN
ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS***

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ABSTRACT

Arundhati Roy is a political activist, social reformer and creative writer. Her writings are marked with revolutionary spirit and reformatory zeal. Her debut novel, The God of Small Things which won the Booker Prize in 1997 reveals not only her revolutionary ideas and iconoclastic attitude but also her sense of justice. She champions the cause of the people who are treated like subalterns in the patriarchal, caste-ridden, and tradition-bound Indian society: Women, Dalits and also poor children who are voiceless and cannot resist and therefore are described “small things”. It is significant to study how Ammu, the woman protagonist of the novel, is treated like a small thing by oppressive forces like patriarchy, tradition and community and how she, without remaining mute, struggles hard to design her life according to her dreams and desires. She takes her own decisions in all the critical moments of her life independently and with courage. But she is tormented and tortured by her father, husband and brother in the different phases of her life. This paper proposes to analyse how Ammu suffers because of patriarchal oppression, how she fights the tyrannical forces working against her, how she subverts the traditional norms set for ideal womanhood and what modes of assertion she adopts for asserting her ‘self’ even in her traumatic conditions.

Arundhati Roy, the author of the Booker-prize winning novel *The God of Small Things*, is universally recognized and acclaimed as a revolutionary and iconoclast in her attitude and approach. Her revolutionary spirit and iconoclastic objectives are revealed in the novel, as she deals with the social injustice, oppression and discrimination meted out to women in the tradition-bound Indian society. She seems to have written the novel with a clear-cut objective of dismantling the old fabric of the male chauvinistic Indian society and rebuilding it in favour of the oppressed and exploited sections of the society, particularly women. In the novel *The God of Small Things*, she assails on the physical and emotional torture inflicted on the unfortunate and abandoned woman protagonist in her state of adversity and crisis.

Ammu is the woman protagonist of Arundhati Roy's taboo-breaking novel *The God of Small Things*. She puts up a brave fight against the age-old norms of the andro-centric society throughout her life. Though she meets with a tragic death at the end, she emerges as a stubborn and strong-willed woman, capable of asserting herself against all odds and ordeals. In all the roles that she assumes as a woman – the role of a daughter, wife, divorcee and mother, she reveals her feminist consciousness. She is not a passive and patient sufferer, ready to accept the ill-treatments and indignities meted out to her by her parents, husband, and by society at different stages of her life. She struggles to find some means of escape from her traumatic conditions. She is a heroic spirit which is not subdued by the powerful forces of tradition, casteism, religion, and community. She rises above the odds placed against her with courage and designs her life on her own terms.

As a child, Ammu suffers at the hands of her male chauvinistic father who makes a lot of discrimination between the male child and the female child. She is deprived of her right to pursue higher education because of her father's misconception that higher education depraves a woman. He thinks that it is an unnecessary expense. But he sends his son Chacko to Oxford University. In this regard, Ammu resembles Uma, the woman protagonist of Anita Desai's novel *Fasting Feasting* who is debarred from pursuing higher studies. Just like Chacko who is sent to London for prosecuting higher studies, Arun, the baby brother of Uma is sent to America to undergo his education. Anamika, another woman character in the same novel is also a victim of gender discrimination in the case of higher education. Arundhati Roy condemns this kind of gender discrimination as gross injustice. In spite of being deprived of collegiate education and handicapped by a lot of hardships, Ammu develops a courageous and independent spirit. She gains moral strength to face the vicissitudes of life and the discretion to make the right judgment of men and matter.

Ammu has great sympathy for her hapless mother who is constantly bullied and beaten by her sadistic father. However she is not attached to her mother who is a typical representative of patriarchal society, deeply entrenched in the traditional notions of male supremacy and female subservience. There is no strong bonding between the mother and daughter. So she grabs the first chance that comes to her to go to Calcutta so that she will be totally relieved from the domination of her ill-tempered father and the bitterness of her long-suffering mother.

Despite the discriminatory attitude of her parents, Ammu grows up as an autonomous individual who can take decisions of her own with regard to her marriage. Lack of higher education is surely a handicap to her progress, yet she exercises her right to choose her life partner boldly, when a Hindu Bengali makes a proposal to marry her. Inter-community marriage is her first mode of assertion against the male hegemony of her father. She establishes her right to marry a man of her choice and live life as per her will. Ammu reveals her moral strength by choosing to marry a man who is neither a Syrian Christian nor a Keralite as she is. Her marriage is not based on love. She resorts to marriage as a strategy for escaping the tyranny of her father.

Pappachi's bestial treatment of Ammu has affected her psyche so much that she has taken marriage as the only possible mode of escape from her merciless and terrorizing father.

But it is quite unfortunate that this audacious step has thrown her from the devil to the deep sea. The man she marries turns out to be a full-blown alcoholic and liar. The twins born to them are not symbols of the love relationship between Ammu and her husband. She is very often beaten and bruised by her addicted husband in his intoxicated state. She understands his total selfishness and recklessness, when he asks her to go to his boss to satisfy his carnal desires in order to avoid an ouster from job which threatened to engulf him because of his dereliction of duty. He is ready to stake her sexuality in order to save his job. He beats her and her children brutally, when she refuses to yield to his order. Ammu cannot expect love and security from such a degenerate fellow. It is a great insult to her moral integrity and total disregard of her feminine self. She runs away from him along with her children for protecting her self-respect. Ammu shows herself as a model of female assertion as she does not allow her body to be abused and exploited. She reveals the feminist assertion of her strength in order to preserve her feminine values.

Like a rebel, Ammu tries to demolish the patriarchal power structures. To a woman, the pathway to construct her identity or to assert her 'self' in a gender-based society is not without hazards and hurdles. The ethical codes and moral standards, the yardsticks by which human beings are judged are stricter for a woman than for a man. Society expects feminine qualities like caring, rearing, and nurturing only from a woman and if she deviates from this traditional role of ideal womanhood, misfortune befalls her. Ammu is a quester and seeker who longs for a loving relationship and marries only for love but her dream gets shattered. As Jyoti Singh observes, her walking out of marriage lends her the charm of a heroine but her orthodox Christian community fails to appreciate her spirit and sense of self-respect.

Ammu who has walked out of her marriage is perceived by the society as aggressive and rebellious. In her parental house also, she is physically and emotionally tortured by her parents and her brother, Chacko. Ammu and her children are considered as an unwanted botheration and unnecessary burden. This is the condition of any divorcee who comes back to her parental house in the Indian society. Roy is very critical of the apathetic and biased attitude of the society towards a divorcee. Describing Kochamma's reaction to Ammu's break up from her husband, Roy says:

Kochamma subscribed wholeheartedly to the commonly held view that a married daughter had no position in her parent's home. As for a divorced daughter ... she had no position anywhere at all. And as for a divorced daughter from a love marriage, words could not describe Kochamma's outrage. (45)

Baby Kochamma hated Ammu because she saw her fighting with a fate which she had graciously accepted – the fate of being a forlorn, forsaken, man-less woman.

In the course of her wretched life as a divorcee with two children, Ammu is subjected to a lot of tensions and frustrations. She is vexed at the traditional idea of her mother and society about the role of a mother and divorcee which hinders her feminist desires. The rebel in her does not allow her to remain contented with motherhood and divorcehood. There is about her an "unsafe edge", "an air of unpredictability" and "an unmixable mix" "the infinite tenderness of motherhood and the reckless rage of a suicide bomber" (44). Ammu is aware of

her body and its needs. When she looks at her naked body in the mirror in her bathroom, she throbs with desire. Mirror symbolizes her self-realization and it reflects her longing self. The sexual desires which had been so long lying dormant because of the cruelty of her husband and the callousness of the society are roused up when she comes across Velutha whose love and care for her children impress her and whose strong physique sends signals of virility and manliness to her starving body. She has no qualms of conscience in developing a clandestine relationship with Velutha, the untouchable who satisfies her physical and emotional needs. She fulfills her desire to love and be loved. Velutha's love comes to her as armour to stave off her anguish which she could not share with anyone in Ayemenem Community. She secretly sets aside the codes of morality prescribed for ideal widowhood and motherhood and tries to find self-fulfillment.

As a mother, Ammu is very kind and caring. She always tries her best to protect her children from the sadistic ill-treatment of her mother, great aunt and brother. But divorce makes her 'taut', 'tense' and 'reprimanding'. As misfortunes surround her and she has no one to care for her, she loses her 'self' and vents her bitterness on her children thus:

If it was not for you, I would not be here! None of this would have happened!
I wouldn't be there. I would have been free. I should have dumped you in an orphanage the day you were born! You're the millstones round my neck! (253)

She considers her children a burden and a barrier for realizing her 'self'. Ammu literally throws all her feminine values to the winds and frets and fumes. Jyoti Singh's observation regarding women's psychology is worth recording here:

Women have strong inclination to live in relationships, and the basic relationship is the man-woman relationship. Failure to find joy and happiness in their marriage reduces these women to loneliness and existential angst. Some forge parallel bonds with other males and indulge in extramarital relationships.... (123)

Ammu discovers a companion in Velutha, when she sees him marching with a red flag in a procession led by the Marxist Labour Union. It is this procession which brings Ammu and Velutha closer. She understands that "under his careful cloak of cheerfulness, he housed a living, breathing anger against the smug, ordered world that she so raged against" (70). She is longing to belong somewhere. She feels safe only with Velutha who exudes warmth and strength. Her longing for real love and freedom coupled with her resentment against the patriarchal society urged her to reject the norms and standards laid down by the social institutions like family and marriage, caste and community. "This is how", says the author, "love laws are broken", the laws that "lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much" (73). Her relationship with Velutha is not surely to satiate her carnal desires alone.

Ammu's clandestine relationship with Velutha is a rebellion triggered by her frustration that has come upon her because of her marital incompatibility. She has tried to seek fulfillment and get rid of her psychic conflict filled with despair and agony and live a more meaningful life based on a genuine relationship with Velutha. The consciousness of being isolated and uncared, her abhorrence of the apathetic world, and her own emotional and

psychological needs drive her to crave for a man's love and gratify it through Velutha whom she cannot marry as he is an untouchable. In their article on "Complicity and Resistance: Women in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*", Gaus and Mohammad comment on Ammu's rebellion thus:

Smothered by social injustice, Ammu rebels against the very social norms that constitute the Syrian Christian community in Kerala. The rebellion is an act of resistance against the very foundations of society. Her most significant act of becoming sexually involved with the 'untouchable' lower class Velutha cannot be taken at its face value as an act of sexual transgression only.... This is an act of resistance aimed at bringing about change in and around her. (4)

Ammu is branded 'Veshya', when she tries to acquit Velutha of charges of murder. She is treated as an outcast in her own family. Mammachi and Baby Kochamma prove to be self-appointed agents for enforcing the patriarchal ideology of the andro-centric society by inflicting untold misery on the hapless Ammu. She is condemned as immoral and sinful, whereas Chacko is encouraged to have his own incestuous flirtations with the factory women. They are very considerate of his 'man's needs'. Both Mammachi and Baby Kochamma exult over Chacko's affair with Margaret Kochamma but they outrageously condemn Ammu's relationship with Velutha.

Soon after the death of Velutha, she is driven out of her parental house. She is denied of her rights of inheritance. Chacko says unscrupulously that Ammu has no right to claim any share in their family property. He says: "What's yours is mine. What is mine is also mine" (87). His assertion of his right to the possession of not only the pickle factory but also their house is suggestive of the social injustice meted out to Ammu. Separated from her children, she is deprived of her right to bring them up. She gets psychologically and emotionally hurt, when Estha is sent back to his father. Only Rahel is allowed to live in Ayemenem. Ammu lives alone without anyone to support her. Helpless and homeless, she tries a number of jobs so that she can find sustenance for herself and for her children with whom she hopes to get united soon. But her hopes are belied, as she meets with a tragic death in the Bharat Lodge in Aleppy where she had gone to attend a job interview.

Death does not end the humiliation that Ammu suffers. It is unfortunate that she is not even given a decent burial that every Christian deserves. Roy describes her tragic fate after death: "The Church refused to bury Ammu. On several counts. So Chacko hired a van to transport the body to the electric crematorium. He had her wrapped in a dirty bed sheet and laid out on a stretcher" (162). In a trice, she is reduced to ashes and a Receipt No. Q498673. Thus, as Mohit Kumar Ray puts it, Ammu is "humiliated and cornered by her father, ill-treated and betrayed by her husband, insulted by the police and rendered destitute by her brother" (54).

To sum up, Ammu is basically a dreamer and she has her own dreams about her future. She takes all possible efforts to realize her dreams. She runs away from her parents and marries a man who she thinks will give her love and security. But when her dreams are shattered, she does not get collapsed. She chooses to divorce her husband and goes undaunted in carving her own path of love and happiness. The path of love that she chooses to tread is a

deviation or diversion from the traditional ways of the patriarchal society. She is tortured physically and emotionally by her own family members for her secret and audacious love affair with the untouchable Velutha. She is upset but not unnerved. Even after her paramour dies, she puts up a brave fight to survive for the sake of her children. But she becomes a prey to the mighty forces of patriarchy, tradition, casteism, religion and community. Ammu symbolizes unyielding rebellious spirit and her fight is heroic to the end.

Ammu can be compared and contrasted with the women protagonists of the novels of other women writers. Like Lila, the woman protagonist of Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, she too subverts the patriarchal power structures and marries the man of her choice. Both of them suffer alone in adverse circumstances, when they are deserted by their life partners. Lila is fortunate to get married to her cousin, Asad whose principles she has always admired. But Ammu dies because of her love for Velutha who is an untouchable.

When compared with Maya, Monisha, Sita, and Nanda Kaul, the protagonists of Anita Desai's novels, Ammu does not suffer from problems of alienation and claustrophobia like them. She is not subjected to schizophrenic and neurotic experiences like them. She heroically bears the brunt of the patriarchal oppression and never contemplates about committing suicide. Taking Virmathi, the woman protagonist of Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*, into comparison, it can be said that Ammu is like her in being bold and uninhibited enough to develop illicit relationship with the man she likes. While Virmathi adapts, adjusts, and makes compromise with her husband and the patriarchal society, Ammu has little chances for adjustment or compromise in her tragic life. Shashi Deshpande's women protagonists, Saru and Jeya, also take care to save their relationship from disruption.

In spite of being victimized by the patriarchal society, Ammu has revealed her indomitable courage by trying to live independently on her own. Aijas Ahamad calls her "a woman of great grit" (Prasad, 2006, p.39). Ammu struggles throughout her life to bring a change in her position not only in her family but also in her society through her resistance. She represents all the marginalized women and has pointed out the need for fighting for their rights in order to improve their status in society. In spite of being a subaltern, she raises her voice against local and global inequalities. She shows to the other subalterns who are scared to raise their voice that they cannot be silenced or controlled for a long time. Ammu's voice will surely activate the small voices of meek women and make them audible enough to be heard. Only if they articulate their voices and fight against their marginalized state, they could attain the subject position. Ammu has proved herself to be a heroic, independent woman, capable of fighting for her rights. Through Ammu, Arundhati Roy suggests that true emancipation for women will occur only if they challenge the patriarchal norms through an articulation of their feelings and emotions without feigning the feminine virtues. Through a description of negative norms that mute women, she points out the importance of breaking the moral and psychic limitations that handicap feminine sexuality.

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