

**ARUNDHATI ROY'S "GOD OF SMALL THINGS" AND FUTILITY OF  
WOMEN'S REBELLION IN PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY**

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**Abstract:** The role of women and stereotypes associated with women have changed to a great extent after the emergence of Feminist Movement. This change is vividly captured in English fictions. English fictions produced twenty years ago would have portrayed women in such a way that fulfil the expectation of the patriarchal society- passive and dutiful woman, obedient wife who endures the torture of husband, good mother, asexual etc. In addition women were made to conform to the rules set up by the society- by male. After the emergence of Feminism, women started to question their stereotypical roles in society. As a result of this, women started to break away from all the stereotypes associated with them and asserted their individuality. Some named this assertion as rebellion and rebellious women were labelled as "bad woman". Compared to the western context, the situation of the so called "bad woman" in Asia was even worse because having labelled as "bad woman" she was ostracised from the society as she was considered as a threat to patriarchy. Thus the novel, "God of Small Things" written by an Indian author, Arundhati Roy portrays the rebellion of women against the male dominated society and vulnerability of women. Thus this paper explores whether the rebellion of women against patriarchy is successful.

Key words: stereotypical roles, futility, vulnerability, patriarchy, rebellion.

**Introduction**

In the past, society made women to behave in a way society wanted them to be. Though society comprised of both men and women, men were deemed superior and women were always considered inferior. Men were typically the law makers and these laws ensure the continuous subjugation of women. Women were expected to be passive and endure everything. In short women were denied of all their rights and made to believe that it is natural for a woman to be submissive. Any woman who questioned the prevalent

expectations of the society was severely criticised and labelled as “bad woman”. Thus women tolerated everything for fear of being criticised. On the other hand men took advantage of this attitude of women to ill treat them and used them as puppets.

Moreover women were made to believe that the only roles they were capable of playing were ‘daughter’, ‘wife’ and ‘mother’. These roles were highly glorified in the society. They were confined to private sphere as their only space. After the emergence of Feminist movement in 1848, women gradually began to question their subjugation and stereotypical roles. However it has to be admitted that this realization was confined only to women in the west. Women in the Asian continent, especially those belonging to countries like India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka are still being dominated by men even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Thus Roy’s novel which is set in India vividly depicts the plight of women, their resistance against it and how much are they successful in their resistance.

Arundhati Roy’s debut novel “God of small Things” is noted for its diverse thematic concerns and multiple dimensions embedded in one major narrative. This novel can be analysed in feminist angle as “It presents the constant struggle of women against their incessant exploitation, torture and struggle which they undergo because of the male dominated conservative society” (Chauhan 11). According to Chauhan the novel does not confine itself to the portrayal of the plight of single woman rather it spans across time to three generation: Mammachi, Ammu and Rahel to show the continuity of the suffering of women (12). Further this novel also captures the progress made by women which challenges the patriarchy by resisting male dominance that paves the way for the reassertion of female individuality. Some women in the novel are portrayed as passive: Mammachi, Baby Kochchemma and Kochchu Maria, whereas some women are viewed as rebels: Margaret Kochchemma, Ammu and Rahel. However, though women rebel against the system to liberate themselves whether their rebellion is successful is a question the text seems to ask.

### **Research Objectives**

This study highlights how Arundhati Roy’s fiction “God of Small Things” depicts the rebellion of women against patriarchy and to what extent are they successful in their rebellion.

### **Research Question**

The study addresses the main research question “how is woman’s rebellion and its futility portrayed in Roy’s novel *God of Small Things*”.

### **Methodology**

The secondary data is used for the research. The secondary data is collected from Arundhati Roy’s novel *God of Small Things*, books, journals and research articles related to the research topic. The analysis is comparative; it compares the work of Arundhati Roy with ‘Second sex’, a feminist theory proposed by Simone de Beauvoir and some key ideas from Betty Friedan’s “Feminine Mystique”. It also uses the descriptive analysis to show how the futility of woman’s rebellion is captured in this novel.

### ***God of Small Things***

Arundhati Roy is an Indian author who won the Man Booker Prize for fiction in 1997 for her best-selling novel “God of Small Things”. This novel is semi-autobiographical and she narrated her childhood experiences in Ayemenem. However this novel comprises of many serious issues ranging from politics, racism, love, feminism to post colonialism. Roy does not intend to produce an ordinary story with the linear plot that the readers are familiar with. But the novel itself challenges the conception of how a novel should be written. The vulnerable role of women in an orthodox patriarchal society is vividly described by portraying women across three generations to assert the continuity of female subordination.

This novel also captures the progress made by women which challenges the patriarchy by resisting male dominance that paves the way for the reassertion of female individuality. This novel is unique as it spans across three generations: Mammachi represents first generation women, Ammu and Rahel represent second and third generation women respectively. However it is to be noted that Roy takes a middle stance in portraying women because in this novel not all women characters rebel; Some women in the novel are portrayed as passive: Mammachi, Baby Kochchemma and Kochchu Maria, whereas some women are viewed as rebels: Margaret Kochchemma, Ammu and Rahel. However,

though women rebel against the system whether their rebellion is successful is a question the text seems to ask.

***First generation women and their rebellion***

Women are often confined to the domestic setup (private sphere) and she is rarely seen in the public sphere. Thus initial suppression of women starts from her home and domestic violence is seen as an inevitable part of it. It is at home a woman is subjected to male domination where she is exploited and deprived of her fundamental rights. Mammachi is the victim of domestic violence, “every night he beat her with the brass flower vase” (Roy, 47). Yet Mammachi never resists rather she passively tolerates the beatings. The arrival of her son, Chacko put an end to this violence and he rescued her. This shows the inability of women to resist violence and her dependence on men. However it is to be noted that after Pappachi, Mammachi was not free rather she was controlled by Chacko. Mammachi is portrayed as a skilful woman: she is good at playing violin. She is running her own pickle factory. Thus she is financially in a stable position. Yet she passively tolerates the beatings of her husband without pondering about divorce. This could be because divorce is not sanctioned in the male conservative society in India. This shows that not only does economic dependence tie women to men but also there should be an undefined dominant force that makes women inferior to men, it may be due to the way in which women were socialized throughout history under a patriarchal system.

Simone de Beauvoir, a seminal feminist created intellectual awareness about this undefined dominant force that makes women inferior. She traced the roots of female subordination in the history. She says that throughout the history women were being oppressed by man and they set standards that a woman should meet because “humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself, she is not considered autonomous being”( Beauvoir 26). As a result of this definition of women the “society codified by men decrees that woman is inferior” (Beauvoir, 849). Then Men began to contrast her with them in every way, thus she became the “other”. So a woman is everything that a man is not. So “female humans” occupy a subordinate position in the society through biology, psychoanalysis and historical mechanism. Men and women are anatomically different, due to this anatomical difference women are essentially different

from men. Beauvoir denies this “women’s essence” saying that her body is not enough to define her” (Beauvoir, 848). In addition history from ancient time celebrated the male figure through myths and the myth, “Eternal feminine” worshipped femaleness and maternity. Because of this myth a female child is conditioned to become a wife and mother since her birth. Beauvoir takes every stage in a woman’s life from childhood to motherhood and portrays “how a woman is shaped by thousands of external forces in the upbringing” (Beauvoir, 848). Through this portrayal she argues that “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Beauvoir, 14).

In addition men always want women to be in subaltern position this is why Pappachi “greatly resented the attention that his wife was suddenly getting” (Roy, 47). Pappachchi Starts beating his wife more violently only after seeing her rapid growth in business, because men fear that the progress of women will be a threat to male superiority and for men to be in a superior position, women should always be in an inferior position Thus it is evident that the response of first generation women to domestic violence and exploitation is noted by absolute passivity. In other words they did not show any kind of resistance towards male domination. Thus it can be concluded that first generation women did not rebel against patriarchy.

### ***Second generation women and their rebellion.***

The main reason for the suffering of women is partly because they are deprived of education. Education gives financial security as it gives hope for employment. Women are dependent on men partly because men are the breadwinners of the family, so automatically men have the upper hand in the family. If women are given education and earn a living, then they no longer have to be dependent on men. This independence will eradicate female subjugation. Beauvoir views that it is only through working, a woman can liberate herself by abolishing male superiority. But an independent woman is a threat to patriarchy because patriarchy will survive only as long as female subjugation is intact. In order to ensure female subjugation, men purposely deprive women of education. There is inequality between men and women in terms of education. Chacko is sent to Oxford for his higher studies whereas Ammu is made to stay at home after she finished schooling,

because “Pappachi insisted that a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl” (Roy, 38). These words of Pappachi vividly depict the patriarchal attitude of men.

Having been deprived of education the next step in Ammu’s life was marriage because “there was very little for a young girl to do in Ayemenem other than to wait for marriage proposal” (Roy, 38). According to a prominent feminist, Simone De Beauvoir “marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society” (20). Thus the institution of marriage is deemed as a threat to women by feminist because it reasserts and legitimizes the ideologies of patriarchy. However marriage was the only option left for Ammu as the doors for education was closed and also her house was not a comfortable place for her, ”All day dreamed of escaping from Ayemenem and the clutches of her ill-tempered father and bitter, long suffering mother”( Roy, 39). Ammu is a woman who craves for an independent life. Being a victim of domestic violence at her own home, she wants to leave home with the hope of a better life at her husband’s place. Pathetically her marriage life turned out to be a failure and all her expectation were shattered. Thus Ammu’s situation became even worse.

It is very evident that though Ammu wants to liberate herself from her restrictive home, she does think of going into another home expecting it to be different. The very fact that she clings onto the domestic setup is partly the reason for subjugation of women. Betty Friedan advocates that woman is subjugated and oppressed because she is made to occupy domestic sphere as her only space. “Women could identify with nothing beyond home”(Friedan,4). Thus home means the entire universe to women. In addition she articulates that “there was a strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we were trying to conform”( Friedan, 5). This image is suburban housewife. A woman does not have many roles to play in this society other than domestic roles such as wife and mother. In fact the “only ambition of women is wife and mother”( Friedan, 15). Though woman is a person with high potential her role as wife and mother and her confinement to the universe- home, prevented her from using her rights and potential. For Friedan this seems to be a big problem which has no name simply because women passively accept it as her position in the society. But Friedan gives it a name – feminine mystique. As a solution to this problem she says that “for women to have full identity and freedom, they must have economic independence”( Friedan, 370). Though

gaining economic independence will liberate women this alone is not sufficient. Rather it would be “necessary to change the rules of the game to restructure professions, marriage, the family, the home”. (Friedan, 364).

Though Ammu and Mammachi are victims of the institution of marriage, Ammu, unlike Mammachi resists male domination and eventually dares to divorce her husband despite the consequences of her decision. Divorce according to the male conservative society is not sanctioned and a divorced woman will be cornered from the society forever. “As for a divorced daughter – according to Baby Kochchemma- had no position anywhere at all” (Roy, 45). Though Ammu was passive to the flogging of her father, she reacted to the beatings of her husband by beating him back. Her courage to resist male dominance shows the gradual progress women make from absolute passivity to resistance to physical violence. Further Ammu’s rebellion on the one hand is successful because after she beats her husband “he apologized abjectly for the violence” (Roy, 42). It reveals the idea that male can dominate women only as long as they are passive and submissive to the violence of men, the moment women resist, the validity of male dominance is challenged. Also according to feminists, resistance on the part of women is inevitable to challenge patriarchy.

On the other hand Ammu’s rebellion is a failure because her situation becomes even worse after the divorce. She encountered insurmountable suffering partly because of the decision she takes to divorce her husband. After her divorce she is left penniless with her two children to be looked after, so she has no option other than going back to her unpleasant and restrictive home. When she returned home she was received with contempt. Mammachi and Baby Kochchemma were rude to Ammu and treated her like slave. Moreover other people at her home and outside also accused her for divorcing her husband and looked down upon her as if she had committed a crime. Chacko, her own brother, also became more violent in treating her and considered her as a burden. It is ironic to say that a woman who divorces her husband solely to liberate herself from male domination once again becomes a victim of male domination by another man, Chacko. Thus Ammu’s rebellion against patriarchy is entirely futile because her resistance deteriorates her situation more.

Another tool of patriarchy that ensures the subordination of women is the law of inheritance. According to this law the entire property owned by the father is inherited by male children. Since Pappachi has only one son, Chacko, all the properties are given to Chacko after Pappachi. Ammu has to endure much suffering because she does not have money to live in this “Male chauvinist society” (Roy, 57), Thus “Ammu as a daughter had no claim to the property”( Roy ,57). Chacko says “what is yours is mine and what is mine is also mine” (Roy,57). Not only does Chacko inherit wealth but also he claims ownership to the pickle factory though he has no part in the establishment and development of this factory. Chacko kicked Ammu out of the house saying “Ammu had no locusts stand I” (Roy,57). But had Ammu been given some property and legal rights she would have been well-off. She underwent much torture in her life by all the male figures: Pappachi, Chacko, and her husband. In addition she died a miserable death, “died in a grimy room in Bharat lodge (161) alone.

Margret Kochemma is another character who can be categorized into second generation women. She is a British who married Chacko when he was studying at Oxford University. Some days after the marriage, she fell in love with another man, Joe, but at this time she was pregnant with Sophie Mol. After being dissatisfied with Chacko, she divorced him. Some days later Joe was killed in an accident. Then Margaret Kochemma decided to go to Ayemenem and spent her holidays with Chacko and his family. She is also a rebellious woman because not only does she divorce her husband but also she falls in love with another man while being the wife of Chacko. Indeed this a serious crime according to Hindus. However it is very sarcastic to note that the family of Mammachi who ill-treated Ammu for being a divorcee, treated Margaret Kochemma with much respect when she was staying at Ayemenem. In this case both are divorced women, the only difference is that Margeret Kochemma is a white. In addition the rebellion of Margaret Kochemma is successful because the society does not condemn her for divorcing her husband. In fact she is respected in her society. Thus Roy gives a hint that not all the rebellious women are unsuccessful but what makes the rebellion difficult is the context. Women in Asia, particularly Indian women suffer under the clutches of men because women are extremely vulnerable. As a result their rebellion is futile. Yet this is not the case with Western women, at least comparatively.



***Third generation women and their rebellion.***

The position of Rahel, who represents the third generation women, is to a certain extent progressive. Rahel unlike Mammachi and Ammu had access to education, thus it gave her some power. According to Dr.Chauhan “Rahel becomes a free woman, who unlike her mother, is not restricted by mental restrictions of the Hindu tradition. That is why, on her return, she replies to an old man who asked her about her marital status “We are divorced” (Roy,130) without worrying about what the old man would think(12). However it cannot be denied that Rahel is the victim of the patriarchy because she has grown up as an unwanted child because she is the female child of a divorced mother. She has been ill treated by her mother’s family and controlled by Chacko. However Rahel who represents the third generation women, breaks away from many stereotypes associated with women by patriarchy. For example she has been kicked out of school for smoking, she hides behind the door and intentionally collide with senior girls. These behaviours completely go against the stereotypes about women. Moreover Rahel has had sex with her own brother, Estha- this sexual relationship is a serious crime as it is an incest. Thus Rahel is not only rebellious but also radical to a certain extent because she not only challenged patriarchy but also challenged religion and culture.

Furthermore Roy vividly portrays that women are viewed in terms of their sexuality and society considers them as objects as opposed to thinking feeling human beings. For instance .Mr.Hollick tries to favour Ammu’s husband targeting Ammu’s body, “Mr. Hollick suggests that Ammu be sent to his bungalow to be looked after (Roy, 41).Also in the police station the police man ”stared at Ammu’s breasts as he spoke and tapped her breasts with baton, gently tap tap”( Roy,5). Similarly Chacko under the guise of educating women on labour rights “flirt with them” (Roy, 65). Mammachi herself supported his conduct with women by building “a separate entrance to Chacko’s room so that the objects of his “Need” (Roy, 69) can use it. Here objects refer to women and need stands for his sexual desire. These incidents disclose that women are regarded as mere sexual objects in the patriarchal society. In addition the society favours men in all situations because society justifies anything that a man does. For instance Mammachi not only turned a blind eye towards Chacko’s illicit sexual relationship but also helps him do it by building a “separate entrance” so that he can do it more conveniently. The worst part of it is that Mammachi,

being a woman justifies her son's illicit sexual conduct. This clearly demonstrates the power of men and the fact that women also help patriarchy or in other words there is no sisterhood among women.

On the other hand any trivial mistake done by a woman is considered as a serious offence. Patriarchy considers women as sexual objects and they are expected to be asexual. For example when Chacko had illicit sexual relationship with several women Mammachi and others defend it saying "he can't help men's need" (Roy, 168). But when Ammu had sexual relationship with Velutha it was condemned by everyone and she was labelled as "vesheyas" (Roy, 5). But Roy through the portrayal of Ammu's frequent dream (which shows her sexual desire) and her attempt to initiate sexual relationship with Velutha prove that even women have sexual feelings and desires like men. Thus there is double standard in the society because society is male. If Ammu is to be condemned for her relationship with Velutha then Chacko should be condemned more as he has many illicit sexual conducts. But Chacko is defended. Thus it is evident that the society is entirely patriarchal. In a male dominated society women's rebellion cannot be successful.

### **Conclusion**

Thus first generation women were absolutely voiceless, they did not rebel in the least degree. So their position in the society is marked by absolute passivity. The second generation women tried to rebel against patriarchy, Ammu beating her husband back and the very decision she takes to divorce her husband bear testimony to the rebellion of second generation women. In other words Ammu rebels against patriarchy by resisting domestic violence and transgressing the set boundaries of the society (divorce and illicit sexual relationship with Velutha). But Ammu's rebellion has been futile because the rebellious Ammu, at the end is literally reduced to ashes and even she was denied of her burial rights by the church. "The whole of her crammed into a little clay pot, Receipt noQ498673" (163). Ammu a person is reduced to less-than-a-thing status perhaps because of her rebellion. Thus it shows the more rebellious a woman is the more she is subjected to suffering because fighting the system is difficult. Third generation women were more progressive as Rahel was given the privilege of education unlike other generation women. Through education she broke away from all the stereotypical roles assigned to women.

Therefore this novel emphasizes on the idea Beauvoir espouses, “Woman has always been man’s dependent, if not his slaves; the two sexes have never shared the world in equality” (Beauvoir, 20). Roy shows that subjugation of women is ensured by the institution of marriage, male domination, law of inheritance, unequal opportunities in education and by viewing the woman as sexual objects. Some women characters are absolutely submissive where as some are rebels. The major question that the novel seems to ask is whether their rebellion is successful, in other words whether women can fight against the patriarchal system. Yet it is to be noted that the resistance of all women against the patriarchy is not futile because Margaret Kochchemma, despite being divorced and her connection with Joe, she is not condemned but accepted in Ayemenem. This shows being an Indian woman is what makes the rebellion more difficult.

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