



INTRODUCTORY STUDY ON HUMAN CONCERNS IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S "THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS"

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Abstract: The literates are highly sensitive human beings. Historical and sociological events influence the whole course action of their life. Everything that happens all-around has perfect imprint on their attitude and the process of thinking. They are the typical product of that particular age in which they are born and brought up. Today there are a large number of educated Indians who use the English language as a medium of the creative exploration and expression of their experience of life. Their writing has now developed into substantial literature in its own right and it is this substantial body of literature which is referred to as Indo-Anglian literature. The term 'Indo-Anglian' is used to denote original literary creation in the English language by Indians. It clearly establishes Indo-Anglian writing as a separate genre. This way of writing has been enriched by such internationally recognised figures as Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu, Tagore, Jawahar Lal, Aurobindo Ghosh and Mahatma Gandhi. Today a number of eminent Indians such as R.K. Naryan, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao continue to write in English, and Indo-Anglian literature continues to grow and flourish and attain higher and higher peaks of excellence. Every writer is the representative of his time as he gives an outlet to the fears, emotions, beliefs, customs, weaknesses, vices, morality, hopes, aspirations, fads, frivolities and enterprises of that particular era in which he lives and writes. A writer is the mouthpiece of the contemporary age. Every writer is influenced by the main events and great personalities of his time. And Arundhati Roy is one of them.

[Sakshi Antil. **INTRODUCTORY STUDY ON HUMAN CONCERNS IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S "THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS.** *J Am Sci* 2022;18(9):18-23]. ISSN 1545-1003 (print); ISSN 2375-7264 (online). <http://www.jofamericanscience.org> 03.doi:10.7537/marsjas180922.03.

Keywords: HUMAN CONCERNS, ARUNDHATI ROY'S, THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

Introduction:

Suzanne Arundhati Roy was born on the 24th November 1961, in Kerala. Her mother was a Christian from Kerala. Her father was a Hindu from Bengal. It was an unsuccessful marriage. The writer spent her childhood years in Ayemenem with her mother. The influence of her life is clear in her writings both thematically and structurally. Her mother Mary Roy (later a well known social activist) ran an informal school named Corpus Christi where the writer developed her literary and intellectual abilities unconstrained by the rules of formal education.

The writer is a charming, humorous, strong willed, independent, energetic, creative person with a great sense of fun, a down to earth 'girl next door', a towering intellect with a poetic fluency with words delivered in a soft modulated voice. She is a dog lover. Roy is 40 years old and describes her two favourite pastimes, as 'writing and running.' Roy did not attend school until she was ten. "I was my mother's 'guinea pig' she explains, "she started her own school and I was her first student". The writer left home when she was sixteen and enrolled at the Delhi School of

Architecture. This training, like her elementary education, proved instrumental in shaping her as a writer. In Salon Interview, she likes the creation of a piece of literature of that of plan for a building.

In building, there are design motifs that occur again and again that repeat patterns, curves. These motifs help us feel comfortable in a physical space. And the same works in writing, I have found. For me, the way words, punctuation and paragraphs fall on the page is important as well the graphic design of the language.¹

Roy started her career through films. The film director Pradeep Krishan offered her a small role in Massey Saab. Then she wrote two screen plays (Electric Moon and In Which Annie Gives it Those Ones) neither of which brought her great success or fulfilment. The writer published a criticism of Shaker Kapur's celebrated film 'Bandit Queen', about Phoolan Devi.

The late 90's have definitely boosted the spirit of the Indians, especially the Indian women, who have jolted out of not so deep slumber gradually

when Kalpana Chawla was flown into the sky from some American space station. Diana Haeden was crowned the Miss World honour. And finally, Arundhati Roy was best owned the most discussed honour, the Booker. It is noticeable that all three achievers are women and their achievements are spotted by the capitalist west.

The '97 Booker story is preceded by a few important bits: Prior to the publication of *The God of Small Things*. Roy's face appeared in newspaper and glossy magazines with uncommon regularity and simultaneously the rumours were heard about the mammoth amount of royalty she had received. Today, as the official figures state, the novel has already been translated into twenty-seven languages and is being sold well in more than thirty countries. The sale figure has touched all time high (350,000 copies)² abroad ever before the announcement of the Booker. Indians also responded well in spite of its very high price.

THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

The God of Small Things has been described as 'remarkable' for its quality of innocence and originality. It is a playful book, full of poetry and wisdom. Arundhati Roy herself says, "It is not a book about India. It is a book about human nature."³ Roy grew up in Kerala, the Marxist Indian state in which *The God of Small Things* is set. The novel is a story of Indian boy and girl twins Estha and Rahel and their family's tragedies: the story's fulcrum is the death of their 9-year-old half British cousin, Sophie Mol, visiting them on holiday.

She is one of the few Indian English writers actively interested in contemporary social political issues which is amply evidenced in a number of articles, interviews and books she wrote on various topics in recent years. Ms. Roy has authored such thought-provoking works as '*Confronting Empire*', '*The Algebra of Infinite Justice*', an internationally acclaimed essay calling upon the world not to use violence against innocent people in Afghanistan, and '*War in Peace*', another powerful essay. Her books like *The Threats of Nuclear Weapons*, *The Promotion of Equal Rights*, *The Narmada Dam Project*, *The War on Terrorism* and *The Cost of Living* have created great stir and put her on a storm of controversies that has only increased her nature as an intellectual. She seems to regard social problems as closely touching the writer's sensibility and believes that a genuine writer does not remain aloof. This perception of the writer's interaction with her environment in the contemporary social issues, and coming from governmental or private agencies. In recent years it has been seen that women writers have been involved in protest movements in some form or the other on certain social questions, Githa Hariharan being another noted author. Writer's direct concern with

his/her society is a healthy feature and quite useful for his/her creative domain. In the past playwrights and prose writers have been shaping the course of events in England and America as the careers of Sir Walter Raleigh, Lanacre, Milton, Philip Sidney, Shelley, John Burke, Thackeray, Dickens and other writers indicate. In India Mulk Raj Andrad, Yashpal, Nagarjun and Khwaja Ahmed Abbas were among the active social workers. To some extent both Khushwant Singh and Kamala Das have been in the center of some kinds of political and social issues.

Today our society is experiencing tremendous transformation, affecting its complexion and ideas. Over the last four to five decades radical changes have been in almost all walks of life, challenging the basic assumptions and beliefs and bringing under merciless scrutiny age-old faiths and theories. The disturbance is very much perceptible in literary world with writers registering their perturbed responses in their works. This period can be called an era of anxiety, an age of interrogation in Indian English Literature.

Arundhati Roy is one of the foremost novelists of this tradition, showing exceptional awareness of the social cries and sensitivity of the problems. The dilemma of the modern Indian English springs from the elitist background, most of them belonging to the upper middle class equipped with an outlook and education that does not normally lead to the heart of those experiences that are associated with the struggle for survival in a basically exploitative society. A majority of Indian English novels appearing over the past two decades have shown an open concern with contemporary critical issues.

Arundhati Roy is a feminist writer. Feminism is a theory of women's point of view. It is the theory of Judy Grahn's "Common Woman."⁴ Consciousness raising is its quintessential expression.⁵ Feminism is the first theory of emergence from those whose interest it affirms. Feminist method is consciousness raising: The collective critical reconstitution of the meaning of women's social experience, as women live through it. "A feminist is a woman who negotiates herself into a position where she has choices."⁶

A feminist writer always writes her feelings and thoughts in her writing. According to Jon Simmons on his "*Arundhati Roy web*," "from within", the ability to follow her inner voice rather than having a set of restrictive rules ingrained in her, has been an integral part of her accomplishments as an adult writer. The writer comments:

"When I write, I never re-write a sentence because for me my thought and my writing are one thing. It is like breathing. I don't re breathe a breath[...] Everything I have my

intellect, my experience, my feelings have been used. If someone doesn't like it, it is like saying they don't like my gall bladder. I cannot do anything about it".⁷

As a feminist writer who writes about her experience, the writer's writing also reflects the cultural texture of her childhood. The writer says about Kerala that "It was the only place in the world where religions coincide, there is Christianity, Hinduism, Marxism and Islam, and they all live together and rub each other down [...]. I was aware of the different cultures when I was growing up and I am still aware of them now. When you see all the competing beliefs against the same background you realize how they wear each other down."⁸

She says:

I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is. British author and critic Rebecca West remarks, "I only know that other people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat or prostitute".⁹

Indeed feminism and feminist literary criticism are often defined as a matter of what is absent rather than what is present. Unlike the other approaches we have examined, feminist literary criticism is often a political attack upon other modes of criticism and theory and its social orientation moves beyond traditional literary criticism. In its diversity, feminism is concerned with the marginalization of all women; that is, with their being relegated to a secondary position. Most feminists believe that our culture is a patriarchal culture: that is, one organized in favour of the interest of men. Feminist literary critics try to explain how power imbalance due to gender in a given culture are reflected in or challenged by literary texts.

Adrienne Rich, a contemporary American poet, describes feminism as "the place where in the most natural organic way subjectivity and politics have to come together."¹⁰ This critical stance allows feminism to protest the exclusion of women from the literary canon, to focus upon the personal (such as diary literature), to exhibit a powerful political orientation (as in the work of Marxist feminists) and to redefine literary theory itself (in its concerns with the psycho-sexual aspects of language). Feminist literary criticism is not as critic Toril Moi observes, "Just another interesting critical approach" like "a concern for sea-imagery or metaphors of war in medieval poetry."¹¹ In short, feminism represents one of the most important social, economic and aesthetic revolutions of modern times.

Feminist critics see the very act of speaking-of having a language as a focus for studying women writers, so often silenced in the past. Tillie Olsen demands to hear women's voices in her 1978 work *Silences*, a study of the impediments to creativity encountered by women, citing those "mute inglorious Miltons: those whose working hours are all struggle for existence, the barely educated, the illiterate, women. Their silence is the silence of the centuries as to how life was, is, for most of humanity." Silences result from "Circumstances of being born into the wrong class, race or sex, being denied education, becoming numbed by economic struggle, muzzled by censorship of distracted or impeded by the demands of nurturing." But women's use of silence can also be 'resistance to the dominant discourse."¹²

Feminists examine the experiences of women from all races and classes and cultures including, for example African, American, Latin, Asian, American, Indian, lesbian, handicapped, elderly and Third world subjects. Annette Kolodny aptly describes this richness as a "playful pluralism" for it exhibits liberal tolerance, interdisciplinary links and an insistence on connecting art to the diversities of life.¹³

Despite their diversity, feminist critics generally agree that their goals are to expose patriarchal premises and resulting prejudices, to promote discovery and reevaluation of literature by women, and to examine social culture and psychosexual contexts of literature and literary criticism. Feminist critics therefore study sexual, social and political issues once thought to be "outside" the study of literature.

Jardine herself offers a definition of feminism. "Feminism" she writes, is generally understood as a "movement from the point of view of, by, and for women."¹⁴ By locating feminist criticism within "very precise political struggles and practices," Jardine does try to provide some specificity to this general position. Jardine views feminism as a movement by women, which takes on different and very specific forms in different contexts. This definition has a bias of much Parisian feminism in the 1970's with the emphasis on *des femmes en mouvements*.

All but a few societies make a ruthless cult of male honour and female virtue. Down the ages the halo of virtue has extracted an awesome range of self-denial in return, from the sacrifice of life, as in Sati, to the sacrifice of personality, expression and ambition, depending on the times and more crucially, the culture of the home, especially of its males.¹⁵

In *The Second Sex* Simone De Beauvoir asserts that a woman is not but made,¹⁶ while K.K Ruthven argues that a woman is "the product of sex-coding processes of acculturation."¹⁷ And according to Sally Mc Connell Ginet's definition, 'female' is a biological category, denoting sex, whereas woman/feminine is loaded with 'the cultural meaning attached to sexual identity.'¹⁸

It seems logical, then, that in life- writing women should carve out space between what Felicity Nussbaum calls 'cultural assignments of gender and the individual's translation of them into text.'¹⁹ Women's self-narratives, unlike those of men, are not the narratives of 'isolate self,' but are rather an individual's interpretation of the collective consciousness as by her through her life. In *Women's Consciousness, Man's world* a Sheila Rowbothan examines the role of cultural representation and social conditions in the formation of 'woman's consciousness.'

Basing her research on Simone De Beauvoir's premises she argues that a woman can never forget her gender as she is constantly aware of how she is being defined as woman, as a member of a 'subculture', and that her identity is being constructed in the shadow of the dominant male culture. As a result, women develop a dual consciousness, a dual self, a self-adhering to the cultural prescription of womanhood and also an inner self, which may be quite different.

Rowbothan writes:

*But always we were split in two, straddling silence, not sure where we would begin to find ourselves or one another. From this division, our material dislocation came the experience of one part of ourselves as strange, foreign and cut off from the other, which we encountered as tongue tied paralysis about our own identity. We were never all together in one place. We were always in transit, immigrants into alien territory. We felt uncomfortable, watched, and ill at ease. The manner in which we knew ourselves was at variance with ourselves as an historical being women.*²⁰

Elizabeth Fox Genovese in her 1991 book *Feminism Without Illusions; A Critique of Individualism*. After tracing Anglo American feminism's historical fraternization with individualism, she writes:

Feminism as an ideology developed in interaction with the development of individualism and cannot be

*understood apart from it. Feminist scholars have exposed the deceptions of individualism for women and have charted the ways in which women writers have wrestled with its demons. Today the principal debates within feminism directly reflect the ways in which women, beginning in the eighteenth century, have attempted to claim the full status of individual without losing their identities as women. Feminists have nonetheless been slow to grasp the extent to which our specific ideas of women's nature derive from the discourse of individualism. The ideas, for example, of women as the special custodians of the values of community or as natural nurtures paradoxically have their origin in the discourse of individualism and the attendant model of gender relations, roles and identities that it promotes.*²¹

'Feminism' is a specific kind of political discourse; a theoretical and political practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism. Feminism is something more than the effort to express women's experience; it is at once a relatively comprehensive analysis of power, relations between the sexes, and the effort to change or undo any power system that authorizes and condones male power over women²²

Rukmini Bhaya Nair:

*The paradoxical goal of feminist theory in the new millennium should be to recuperate from a very likely conservative set of theories and circumstances their radical potential.*²³

Roy began to take up a number of big political issues and published a number of books on political subjects. It would appear that Arundhati is beginning to carve out a position for herself as a campaigning political journalist, and that she is unlikely to have the time to dedicate herself to another fiction for a while.

The latest world historic event is the war against Iraq. In an interview with Der Spiegel at the end of March 2003 Arundhati commented on the war and her feelings about her position. In May 1998, to much international dismay but considerable nationalist domestic support, India carried out a series of nuclear tests, in response to similar tests by its neighbour Pakistan. In July 1998, Arundhati Roy published an article in India called "*The End of Imagination*," in opposition to the nuclear chick

engulfing her country. The article was her first published writing since *The God of Small Things*. In her usual passionate and personal style, Roy argues that the nuclear arms race is foolish, dangerous and pitiful:

The poorer the nation, the larger the numbers of illiterate people and the more morally bankrupt her leaders, the cruder and more dangerous the notion of what their national identity is or should be." The cost alone of nuclear weapons was obscene in a country where millions are impoverished. The accidental devastation which their development risked, would devastate rich, poor, Hindu and Muslim, Pakistani and Indian indiscriminately "If you are religious, then remember that this bomb is Man's challenge to God. It's worded quite simply: We have the power to destroy everything that you have created.

²⁴

As time marches on, it would appear that India is beginning to come to its senses. However, nuclear tests continue. In furtherance of the cause of world peace, Arundhati was due to speak at the Hague Appeal for peace / Civil Society Conference in the Netherlands in May 1999, alongside such dignitaries as the United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, South Africa's, First Lady Graca Machel, Northern Ireland peace-builder John Hume, Burma's Ang San Sui Kui and many others.

In January 1999 Arundhati attended a reception in her home state of Kerala organized by the Dalit Sahitya Akademi. There, she spoke out in support of the cause of the untouchables in India and made clear her solidarity with the Dalit Struggle for justice and equality. "I am here to enlist," she was quoted as saying.

She is very emotional in her personal life. A feminist writer has attachment with her native place. In Indian writing we have some writers who write about their experiences and their feelings in the writing. These writers wrote about the beauty of their native place. Arundhati Roy also writes about the rural beauty of the landscape where she spent her childhood.

I think the kind of landscape that you grew up in, it lives in you. I don't think its true of people who've grown up in cities so much, you may love building but I don't think you can love it. In

*the way that you love a tree or a river or the colour of the earth, it's a different kind of love. I am not a very well read person but I don't imagine that kind of great love for the earth can be replaced by the open landscape. It's a much cleverer person, who grows the city, savvy and much smarter in many ways. If you spent your very early childhood catching fish and just learning to the quiet, the landscape just seeps into you. Ever now I go back to Kerala and it makes me want to cry if something happens to that place.*²⁵

The writer worked for the Dalits of her society and she declared herself an advocate of their cause. She helped Dalit writers to tell their stories to the world. Roy has put her talents and status to use as an activist for several of the important issues facing India today.

In September 1998 her article "*The End of Imagination*" appeared in the Nation as a response to the testing of nuclear weapons in India. The article demonstrates both a fervent appreciation for the natural beauty of the country, and a respect for the fragility of life in a world containing bombs that could destroy everything in a matter of seconds. Roy calls for those who agree with her about the evils of nuclear warfare to join her in public denunciation of it.

Roy has been involved in protesting against the Narmada Dam Project. Her article "The Greater Common Good" in Frontline disparages a project that could force millions to abandon their homes in order to provide limited benefits to a limited number of people. She has demonstrated against construction of the dam both in the Narmada Valley, and globally in an effort to heighten awareness and obtain support for the cause. In January 2000 she was arrested during a protest in the valley and released two days later. The writer is always concerned about the environment and the effect of environment on the people. The writer's personal fame has drawn attention and donation to these controversies, with some criticism from all sides of the political spectrum.

She has recently taken to social activism and is working tirelessly for several causes, including those of the dalits, the displaced population due to Narmada Dam, victims of religious fundamentalism, and environmental protection. Expectedly, she has created a great deal of controversy about herself as well as immense admiration for her grit in grappling with formidable social problems single handed. The title of this novel authored by Ms. Arundhati Roy is

full of suggestiveness and symbolic significance. It lends a specific density to the novel and explains partly the central theme. Arundhati Roy herself says that "It is n't a book about India.....It is a book about human nature."

My dissertation is about Ms Roy's human concerns in the novel *The God of Small Things*. The aim of this dissertation is to pay very close attention towards the writing of Arundhati Roy, which catches our attention on social issues and injustice. Roy has strength and a passionate sense of justice. The writer is emotional and can understand the feelings of common people. Explaining human concerns in the novel she highlights her emotional sense that makes the present novel a unique creation in Indian writing in English.

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8/21/2022