

**THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS AND
ANITA DESAI'S CLEAR LIGHT OF DAY**

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Abstract

In these novels Clear Light of Day and The God of Small Things Anita Desai and Arundhati Roy portrays Indian women as marginalized facing challenges and burdens imposed by patriarchal society. They resemble colonial subjects whose lives are fractured. Among the female characters Bim, Tara, their mother and Aunt Mira, all are subordinated by a male-dominant culture which underestimates female subjectivity. The women in The God of Small Things are mostly confronted with marital and family problems. Estha and Rahel's mother, Ammu, marries Babu in a beautiful ceremony; however, her husband turns out to be an alcoholic and even urges her to sleep with his boss, Mr. Hollick, after which Ammu leaves him and returns with the twins, Estha and Rahel, to Ayemenem. Then she has a secret love affair with Velutha, an untouchable, and so she is banished from her home and dies in another place. Her situation could represent the typical problems an Indian woman who is dependent on her husband can face. These papers illustrate how these women manage their precarious situation and stand up to a society controlled by men. This study reflects on these women's lives to see how they find different ways to assert their existence. One way in which these female characters survive is by entering male dominated society and adopting their language and culture. As these women are unable to improve their circumstances, they struggle to establish their own identity using the oppressor's language and culture.

Key Words: Anita Desai; Arundhati Roy, subaltern, womanhood, Hybridity

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to analyze women's state in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*. In both novels, women struggle with the world they live in because of their womanhood. Anita Desai and Arundhati Roy are two significant contemporary Indian novelists who write in English. In their novels, both writers employ women characters whose position at home and in society. Desai's *Clear Light of Day* and Roy's *The God of Small Things* have been selected for a brief study in this paper. Discussing the context of the colonial process, that the subaltern cannot have a history of his/her own and cannot have a voice and that if the subaltern is a female, she cannot be heard at all because she exists in absolute silence.

The Position of Women in Clear Light of Day

The story *Clear Light of Day* a significant novel shortlisted for the Booker Prize centers on an Indian family in old Delhi. The youngest daughter memories and experiences. They have two brothers, Raja and Baba, the youngest member of the family, who is mentally handicapped. After their parents' death during their childhood, Bim had to look after Raja when Tara and her husband have returned to her home and family. As the story

develops, Tara and her elder sister, Bim, reflect on their family became ill with tuberculosis, and nursed him back to health. She also had to care for her aunt when she fell ill, all the while taking care of Baba. Now a history professor, Bim is a strong, independent unmarried woman who has to take on the family responsibility of looking after her handicapped brother, Baba, as well as their family home and business after their parents' death.

Bim's ebullient and vivacious nature which was suppressed at home due to the unusual atmosphere of their house. "To Bim, school and its teachers and lessons were a challenge to her natural intelligence and mental curiosity that she was glad to meet". School, as well as its teachers and lessons, was a terrifying prospect for Tara. The story moves back in time from the characters' adulthood to their adolescence and then to their childhood. When they were children, Tara's wish to become a mother was often ridiculed by Bim and Raja, another brother now living in Hyderabad, as these two wanted to be a heroine and a hero respectively. In the final part, apart from family decisions such as whether or not to attend Raja's daughter's wedding, the significant climactic point is when Bim explodes at Baba and then decides that familial love can cover all wrongs.

[A]nd in their shade she saw how she loved him, loved Raja and Tara and all of them who had lived in this house with her... They were really all parts of her, inseparable, so many aspects of her as she was of them, so that the anger or the disappointment she felt at herself. Whatever hurt they felt, she felt. Whatever diminished them diminished her... Although it was shadowy and dark, Bim could see as well as by the clear light of day that she felt only love and yearning for them all, and if there were hurts, these gashes and wounds in her side that bled, then it was only because her love was imperfect and did not encompass them thoroughly enough, and because it had flaws and inadequacies and did not extend to all equally.

(Desai 165)

One may comment that the women in the novel keep their traditional position alive despite all their various reactions to the patriarchal system, such as having jobs of their own, getting married and leaving the country, or even staying unmarried in order to gain their own economic power (unlike those who get married in order to assert their existence within society as wives rather than as individuals with their own identity), and so forth. A discussion between Tara and Bim taken from much earlier times is quite relevant here:

'What else could there be?' countered Tara. 'I mean,' she fumbled 'for them.'

'What else?' asked Bim 'Can't you think? I can think of hundreds of things to do instead.

I won't marry,' she added, very firmly.

Tara glanced at her sideways with a slightly sceptical smile.

'I won't,' repeated Bim, adding 'I shall never leave Baba and Raja and Mira-masi,' ... 'I shall work-I shall do things,' she went on, 'I shall earn my own living-and look after Mira-masi and Baba and-and be independent.

(Desai 140)

Although Bim seems to have taken on the traditional role of a male within the family as the economically dominant person and the protector of the other members of the family, her mind is still busy with how to look after the others at home, or in other words, how to sacrifice herself and her own life. Bim is depicted as the advisor, the protector and the decision-maker, the life-giver, representing family unity. Thus, we suggest that Clear Light of Day involves "the conflict between independence and solitude on the one hand and attachment and the need to connect on the other".

There is another example of hybridity in the family when Tara and Bim, both members of a marginalized group, read books with confidence. By their actions, they are opposed to the conventions of Indian society at that time. What is also significant is the kind of books they were reading which reminds us again of women's inferiority in the novel. This is indicative of traditionally cultural influences in which girls are expected to read romantic novels "Gone with the Wind" and "Lorna Doone", while as a man Raja is supposed to read adventurous books such as "Robin Hood" and "Beau Geste."

We can also see hybridity in Aunt Mira, another woman who undergoes too much hardship. However, she struggles to survive and tries to overcome the problems like a man. While she endured varying degrees of victimization, she still has sufficient courage and strength to care for this family when the parents, Bim and Tara's parents abandon their duties. She is the only one in the family children can rely on. She experiences a difficult life. She had been twelve years old when she married and was a virgin when she was widowed-her young student husband, having left to study in England immediately after her wedding, caught a cold in the rain one winter night, and died. She was left stranded with his family and they blamed her bitterly for his death....She should be made to pay for her guilt.

Now no one could approach, no threat, no menace" Therefore, she can be another example of hybrid character in a sense that despite the fact that she is a woman, is as strong as a man. Stick-like; she whipped her sari about her, jammed a few long steel pins into the little knot of hair on her head, and was dressed in an instant, ready to fly. She neither commanded nor chastised, and was certainly never obeyed. She was not soft or scented or sensual. She was bony and angular, wrinkled and desiccated-like a stick, or an ancient tree to which they adhered. Bim, Aunt Mira, and to some extent Tara are women who try to gain their own identities by adopting what men are expected to do and to be. Their identities are influenced by the society which is established by men. They embrace those conventions accepted by this society. As a result, it can be seen that Anita Desai's female characters are equipped with hybridity which allows them to survive and assert their existence.

The idea of being a life-giver or a nurturer is reaffirmed in the personality of MiraMasi, the woman who took care of the children after their mother's death. She later becomes an alcoholic, and when she loses her independence and needs care like a little child, Bim is there to take over the role of the mother. So we may also suggest that the role of woman as the life-giver and the mother of the whole family do not disappear at all but instead, it switches from time to time among these female characters in the novel.

When it comes to Tara, although she seems to be a more independent woman, a conversation between her and Bakul is significant in revealing the double displacement. After a small unlucky event, Bakul says:

And you won't let me help you. I thought I had taught you a different life, a different way of living. Taught you to execute your will. Be strong. Face challenges. Be decisive. But no, the day you enter your old home, you are as weak-willed and helpless and defeatist as ever.

(Desai 16)

Bakul's words can be analyzed in two ways: Firstly, he claims to be the person who gave Tara a new and better life. This puts him into the position of the dominant male who directs the female subject. This means she is not considered to have an identity without her husband's. Secondly, Bakul's attitude towards Tara reveals the colonial power that still exists in some way even in people's everyday conversations and directs their minds and lives by emphasizing the idea that the West in general terms is more like a proper life and a way of existence, unlike Tara's life back in India, a country which is often described as decaying, unchanging, unmoving and so forth. So Tara's voice is doubly silenced: both by her husband and by the colonial power that is still perpetuated in various ways.

It is, therefore, possible to suggest that the women in Desai's novel maintain their subaltern position. Even if these women were to choose not to surrender and were instead to try to break the conventions and confront their situation as female subjects under the patriarchal and colonial power, their voice would not be heard and they would, at some point, be silenced by the system.

The Position of Women in the God of Small Things

As for *The God of Small Things*, "small things" refers to overlooked events, "small" people and other creatures which, in fact, deserve more attention than "big things." Even from the title, one may comment that small, silent or hidden things should be heard, should be given their voice. The novel contains stories of death, broken marriages, unreasonable hate, revenge, sexuality and violence. When an overall analysis of the novel is conducted, it is not only the story of a family that comes to the fore, but it is also the story of suffering in a wider perspective, which does not seem to have an end. That is to say, the characters in the novel have their unfulfilled desires and are punished and silenced by the system in various ways.

The women in *The God of Small Things* are mostly confronted with marital and family problems. Estha and Rahel's mother, Ammu, marries Babu in a beautiful ceremony; however, her husband turns out to be an alcoholic and even urges her to sleep with his boss, Mr. Hollick, after which Ammu leaves him and returns with the twins, Estha and Rahel, to Ayemenem. Then she has a secret love affair with Velutha, an untouchable, and so she is banished from her home and dies in another place. Her situation could represent the typical problems an Indian woman who is dependent on her husband can face. Her relationship with Velutha is particularly significant in that their affair is considered to be both a sin, as it is extra-marital, and a crime, as it is between the members of two different classes in the caste system. In fact, the untouchables are not even regarded as a part of the caste system. In this respect, we can regard the untouchables as subaltern subjects as well, people whose voice is lost both in the social class system and also under the colonial rule. The narrator also refers in the novel to Velutha as "the God of Small Things":

If he touched her, he couldn't talk to her, if he loved her he couldn't leave, if he spoke he couldn't listen, if he fought he couldn't win.

Who was he, the one-armed man? Who could he have been? The God of Loss? The God of Small Things? The God of Goose Bumps and Sudden Smiles? Of Sourmetal Smells-like steel bus-rails and the smell of the bus conductor's hands from holding them?

(Roy 217)

Even when Sophie Mol dies, Velutha is unfairly punished simply because he was there near the river, where he used to meet Ammu. In all these situations involving discrimination, Ammu as a woman is punished and totally silenced, as Velutha is. As Sunaina Singh also emphasizes, "In India a woman's life is governed by tradition and family customs. A good woman is one who is a good daughter, wife and mother. To be good means to be of a sacrificing, self-abnegating, meek and quiet nature"

In the middle of this highly oppressive system, the reader witnesses an innocent love between the non-identical twins Estha and Rahel. Their love goes beyond the boundaries of societal norms, the caste system, and even sexual identity in general terms. The narrator in the novel describes them as sharing a love even before the world existed (because of being twins):

In those early amorphous years when memory had only just begun, when life was full of beginnings and no Ends, and everything was For Ever, Esthappen and Rahel thought of themselves together as Me, and separately, individually, as We or Us. As though they were a rare breed of Siamese twins, physically separate, but with joint identities.

(Roy 2)

The important thing here might be that their relationship as twins, including their sexual relationship, is practiced in silence, even if there are other people who have the

same type of relationship. From time to time, they watch each other dressing or showering with a hidden desire, but their desire is silenced for years under heterosexual and patriarchal dominance. Thus, one may comment that Roy probably intends to give many possible reactions to the dominance of patriarchal power, but her attempts cannot give voice to the subaltern subjects of this novel and they still cannot exist within their own identities. If they attempt to do so, they are eventually punished.

The position of man and woman in society is influenced very much by the culture. In Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, there are three generations of women who each of them was born and raised under different circumstances. Starting from the oldest generation, there are Mamachi, then the generation of Ammu, and the youngest generation is Rahel. These women live in Hinduism rules that were influenced by the post-colonial effects.

Mamachi's family, although their religion is Christian Syria, since they live in India, they can avoid their life from being influenced by Hinduism. Mamachi lives under the control of men. She got married in puberty age with seventeen -year-old man who has nearly controlled every step of hers. In the beginning years of their marriage, when Mamachi had been a promising violinist player, she should leave her career because Papachi asked her to leave it.

This case is not the only one that shows us the domination of man as a husband on a woman as his wife. The other case is the fact that there were some domestic violence occurred in Mamachi's family. Papachi, in his life time often beat Mamachi with a brass flower vase. In addition, Papachi insulted Mamachi as she was never allowed to sit in his Plymouth, until after his death.

Ammu, the woman in the second generation in the novel is the one who mostly restricted by situation. Because her parents hold the traditional rules of India, she lives as the second. As the matter of fact, her parents give more affection to his brother for being a man than her as a woman. Moreover, after being single mother of two children, her position in society is worse.

Rahel, Ammu's daughter is the woman who has no place in both her family and society. Living in her grandparent's house, she does not enable to live like normal child. She lives as the witness of injustice on her mother's life. As Rahel is growing up unwanted, she never experiences the real Hindu tradition because no one regards her present, so that, Rahel becomes a free woman who unlike her mother, she is not restricted by the mental restriction of the Hindu tradition.

Beside the caste, gender is also an important consideration in arranging the position of men and women in Indian society. The gender rule in India is influenced very much by the teaching of Hindu that becomes the major religion. The rule makes the possibilities for man to dominate the woman. And for the people who break this rule, there will be some negative consequences from the society for his/ her like what has happened to Ammu.

Conclusion

To conclude, both Desai and Roy exploit common everyday Indian issues in their novels. Their stories involve sorrow, grief, problematic marital relationships, non-marital affairs, and violent punishments for breaking social rules (involving incest, the caste system and so forth). We also see personal challenges, courage to stand against the taboos, women seeking their identity as human beings, as individuals, but the dominant masculine voice is so oppressive that these women are silenced in various ways. It is, thus, ironic that even if some female characters in these two novels intend to move outside the boundaries of the patriarchal system, they eventually become lost in the system. As Bimaljit Saini also remarks, "despite the various forums focusing on the women's physical, financial and emotional exploitation together with their mental anguish, traces of oppression seem to have stayed". Therefore, this dominant social cycle silences its subaltern subjects, and the female subaltern subjects are doubly silenced, doubly lost.

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