

Combating the Patriarchy and Colonialism: A postcolonial Critique of Arundhati Roy's 'The God of Small Things'

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Abstract

The God Of Small Things is a scathing indictment of the nexus of the patriarchy and colonialism. The backdrop of the novel is a highly stratified Christian society of Kerala. Roy exposes various modes of oppression that the patriarchy and colonialism wield in order to perpetuate their domination. The author depicts current social turmoil and problems, as well as a clash between the fractional modernization of Indian masses and its traditional mentalities. Moreover the impacts of globalization over the masses and the geography of India are described vividly. The novel reminisces about tragic history of colonial past. The perpetuation of historical laws through the patriarchal social structure is a remarkable postcolonial aspect of the novel. From the postcolonial point of view, the novel castigates anglophilia prevalent in upper strata of society and posits that implementation of exotic culture of Whites in India, has created the question of identity and belongingness. Apart from anglophilia, the paper sheds the light on the role of language in the colonization of masses in the post-colonial era.

The term "postcolonial" is attributed to all cultures that have been impinged by the colonial aggression since their colonization to the present day. The postcolonial literature deals with the "experiences of exclusion, denigration, and resistance under systems of colonial control".(Boehmer, p.340) The postcolonial theorists Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffins highlight the hybridization of colonial languages and cultures in order to show the imperialist impositions to subjugate the indigenous traditions. John McLeod underscores the colonial discourse affecting "modes of representation" (McLeod p.32) as language plays a vital role in presenting colonial domination over a postcolonial society.

"Language carries with it a set of assumptions about the 'proper order of things' that is taught as 'truth' or 'reality'. It is by no means safe to assume that colonialism conveniently stops when a colony formally achieves its independence. The hoisting of a newly independent colony's flag might promise a crucial moment when governmental power shifts to those in the newly independent nation, yet it is crucial

to realize that colonial values do not simply evaporate on the first day of independence.” (McLeod,p.32)

The cultural and linguistic hegemony of the imperialists is always subverted by the postcolonial writers. The decolonization of the language (English) is an essential feature of postcolonial writings as colonial domination perpetuates itself through coloniser’s language. The abovementioned theorists in their influential collection of essays *The Empire Writes Back*, highlight the postcolonial aspect of English as the postcolonial writers are “expressing their own sense of identity by refashioning English in order to enable it to accommodate their experiences” (McLeod p.25-26) The postcolonial writings overturn the colonial standardization of English by influencing it with a vernacular tongue and hence hybridize standard colonial English.

The God of Small Things is a postcolonial novel as the author Arundhati Roy has cognizantly entailed history and indigenous redefinition of identities with her own point of view. The author depicts current social turmoil and problems, as well as a clash between the fractional modernization of Indian masses and its traditional mentalities. Moreover the impacts of globalization over the masses and the geography of India are described vividly. The novel reminisces about tragic history of colonial past. The perpetuation of historical laws through the patriarchal social structure is a remarkable postcolonial aspect of the novel. From the postcolonial point of view, the novel castigates anglophilia prevalent in upper strata of society and posits that implementation of exotic culture of Whites in India, has created the question of identity and belongingness. The novel is remarkable not only for highlighting the perpetuation of untouchability and women’s marginalization but also for “anticolonial resistance” (Joana, p.77) Arundhati Roy dismantles the British cultural hegemony, an age old colonial device for intellectual colonization.

Caricatures depicted in the novels are Roy’s caustic comment upon the Anglophilia. Roy presents “self –discovery of India as a modernizing society, regardless of western models”. (Joana, p.77) The plot of the novel is framed keeping in view the transitional phase of society that is the era of 1960s/70s. The four generations of Ipe family present the ethos of the particular age. Great grandparents, Reverend E. John Ipe and his wife are the oldest generation, but they have little importance in the plot of the novel. The three generations of the family are significant as the action revolves round them. The important actions occur in 1969, the time Ipe family is perpetuating the residues of British colonizers in its mundane course of life. This is the time two mavericks, Rahel and Estha are in their childhood. The arrival of two whites Margaret Kocahmma and Sophie Mol becomes the cataclysm in the lives of the twins. Roy has caustically described the minute details of the Anglophile family to impress the two white guests. Both of them are reckoned as epitomes of British civilization. Roy astringently describes the ‘pride’ and ‘elation’ of the Anglophile family who comes to welcome white relatives; having the British relatives give the opportunity to this family to emulate the ‘superior’ and ‘progressive’ community. (Joana, p.77)

Anybody could see that Chacko was a proud and happy man to have had a wife like Margaret Kochamma. White. In a flowered, printed frock with legs underneath. And brown back-freckles on her back. And arm-freckles on her arms. (p.143)

Chacko, here epitomizes the gentleman, envisioned by Macaulay's Minute. Vilela Passos gives a very acute reason of search for belongingness. The individual tries to identify him/herself with the dominant culture or "dominant code of collective identity". (Joana, p.77) The urge to identify with the "dominant ideologies of the group" leads the individual to adopt the life style of the dominant ideology. With regard to Anglophilia, the colonized subjects try to identify and eventually assimilate themselves with the dominant culture of Britishers. Colonisers, in order to assert their superiority provoke the colonized subjects to emulate them by adopting or by aping their culture. Roy delineates the incoherence of British culture in India by presenting the Anglophile family. Though Chacko is a self conscious Anglophile, he does not slough the British mannerism. Margaret Kochamma and Sophie Mol are given superior status in a house where the patriarchal traditions are deeply entrenched. The status of Mammachi, Ammu, Baby Kochamma and Rahel are marginalized whereas Margaret and Sophie Mol are at advantage because of their white skin. Roy presents that patriarchy is also subservient to British colonialism. The Ipe family spends money to emulate or to ape the colonizers. Chacko's Oxford education and Pappachi's Plymouth are the efforts of the family to identify themselves with their white masters. Even the children are instilled the same Anglophilia as they are forced to speak only in English as well as to opt the ways of Britishers. Comrade Pillai also is not spared of the Anglophilia as he speaks in English in order to cast off his inferior status. His young child Lenin is taught English poems in order to emulate the upper strata of society. Chacko's comment that "going to see The Sound of Music was an extended exercise in Anglophilia" (p.55) rightly depicts the family's endeavours to train the children in the manners of Britishers. Even the character of Captain Von Trapp, in The Sound of Music personifies racism and instills the feeling of inferiority in the twins. The narrator presents an analogy between the white and clean. The twins are not white hence they are not clean. The contrast, aroused by the questions of Captain Von Trapp, between the mannerism of the twins and Sophie Mol signifies their subaltern status.

Captain von Trapp had some questions of his own.

- (a) Are they clean white children?
No. (But Sophie Mol is.)
- (b). Do they blow spit bubbles?
Yes. (But Sophie Mol doesn't)
- (c) Do they shiver their legs? Like clerks?
Yes. (But Sophie Mol doesn't.) (p.106)

Sophie Mol's query about the twins' father symbolizes Sophie Mol's inadvertent effort to make the twins realize their fatherless and hence subaltern status in the house. During the childish conversation between the twins and Sophie Mol, Sophie Mol blatantly announces that she does not love the twins. Sophie Mol's

announcement is just an example of racism; however, she is unaware of it. Even the flasks of water, “Boiled water for Margaret Kochamma and Sophie Mol, tap water for everybody else” (p.46) are dichotomized according to the social and racial status.

The Anglophilia of the family becomes the heritage of Ipe family. Pappachi’s urge to be recognized as a noted Entomologist and to claim the membership of British community becomes self-inflicting as he wears woolen suits in the scorching heat of Ayemenem. Roy presents the incompatibility and incongruity of aping the west in Indian cultural as well as geographical context through the character of Pappachi. Pappachi is an obsessive imitator of western culture. Ammu describes him as “an incurable British C C P, which was short for cchicchi poach and in Hindi meant shit wiper.”(p.51). Through the character of Mr. Hollick, Roy slams British behavioural patterns. Mr. Hollick’s lust and its cruel execution lies in the fact that at the tea plantation many light skinned children are the corollaries of his dissoluteness. He is ready to put up with the alcoholism and dereliction of Ammu’s husband, if Ammu’s husband persuades her to sleep with Mr. Hollick. Notwithstanding the grimness of the situation, Pappachi does not acknowledge the reason of Ammu’s divorce as he cannot admit that “an Englishman, any Englishman would covet another man’s wife” (p.42). Chacko’s and Mr. Hollick’s sexual exploits with unnamed female workers consolidate Rana Kabbani’s views of “eastern female as a figure of licentiousness, and Western heterosexual male desire” presented in colonial discourse. (McLeod p.175) Roy holds colonialism responsible for inverting “gender roles in indigenous communities, whose established traditions, customs, and social systems were irreparably broken, sometimes to the detriment of women” (Ibid, p.177) as colonialism inverted the matriarchal system in ancient Kerala. The economic marginalization of Mammachi is attributed to the inversion of patriarchy practiced in ancient Kerala by the British. Notwithstanding Mammachi’s hard work in setting up the pickle factory, she is reduced to the status of “Sleeping partner.”

Roy herself presents the definition of anglophile in the novel as it refers to mimicry of British culture and way of life at the cost of forgetting one’s “ancestors and history”. (Joana, p.77) The History House, presented in the novel symbolizes the condition of Anglophiles in Indian cultural context. Chacko ironically admits the condition of whole family and the dilemma of belongingness:

Chacko told the twins that though he hated to admit it, they were all Anglophiles. They were a family of Anglophiles. Pointed in the wrong direction, trapped outside their own history, and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swept away. (p.52)

Roy implies that Anglophilia is an extended exercise of British racism. Indian subjects participate in the British hegemony by loathing everything that does not belong to their white masters, but in the pursuit of being recognized as a member of the British fraternity, the Anglophiles lack the white skin and hence are denied the British status. The frustration of not being acknowledged as ‘British’ leads the individual to “self hatred”.(Joana, p.79) This frustration is at the root of unbelongingness and cultural displacement of the Anglophiles. This frustration leads

to the divide in the personality of the individual. The ripped personality hangs him/her between the two cultures. Characters of Chacko, Pappachi, Baby Kochamma well represent the predicament of the Anglophiles. Chacko is a self aware Anglophile, he is aware of the dilemma of belongingness but the obsession that he receives from his father is deeply entrenched in him that he cannot cast off his colonized state of mind. He does not search his cultural roots in the Indian context. Instead he tries to belong to his British family despite the fact that he is a divorcee. Margaret Kochamma has discarded him for a white man named Joe and his daughter Sophie Mol does not acknowledge him as her father and gives him the meaningless status of "just my real dad". Chacko's views regarding his own Indian history and nation are hypocritical as he is not sincere enough to appreciate his historical roots.

Roy has presented Ammu as the feminist voice of protest against Anglophilia. Ammu's plight out of her inferior status invokes her to protest against the prejudices, codes and rules that are hostile to women. Ammu's behaviour is rebellious in order to undermine the authority of the dominant ideology. Ammu's insolence with Margaret Kochamma is an expression of her anger against Anglophilia and her subordinate status. Margaret Kochamma's surprise at Kochu Maria's way of kissing Sophie Mol is an example of the colonizers misunderstanding and disrespect for native culture and traditions. Ammu's comment "Must we behave like some godforsaken tribe that's just been discovered"(p.180) is a scathing criticism of the Anglophiliac attitude of the family in receiving the two white guests. Ammu's acts overtly defy the dominant ideological norms. She always tries to undermine the patriarchy and its colonized outlook. She is a maverick as she marries outside her community and later discards her drunkard husband. She rebels against the age old behavioural patterns of caste, class and gender. Roy presents sexism, casteism, and racism at the root of all human miseries in the world of The God of small Things.

The plight of Ammu and her twins is not only part of patriarchal suppression but it is a dreadful consequence of Anglophiliac attitude of the family. Ammu and her twins have to suffer for the 'offence' of drowning Sophie Mol, a white child. Ammu's separation from her twins is a consequence of the family's upheaval and frustration at Sophie Mol's death. The family's apathy towards Rahel's education and Ammu's deteriorated condition on the verge of death is sordid example of Anglophilia. The loss of Sophie Mol remains afresh in the memory of the family whereas Ammu and her twins have been lost in oblivion. The Anglophilia remains in the form of Sophie Mol's memory:

The loss of Sophie Mol stepped softly around the Ayemenem house like a quiet thing in socks. It hid in books and food. In Mammachi's violin case [...] the loss of Sophie Mol grew robust and alive. It was always there. Like a fruit in season. Every season, as permanent as a Government job. It ushered Rahel through childhood (from school to school) into womanhood. (pp. 15-16)

Roy sheds light on the emerging fascination of Indian masses for America; a new form of Anglophilia. Roy has presented a sordid reality of America in the form of

Rahel's marriage with Larry McCaslin. Rahel's husband is unable to understand her emotions. Offended by her eyes, he becomes indifferent to Rahel. Her reminiscences of job as a night clerk in a bullet proof cabin at a gas station, of drunks vomiting into the money tray, of "pimps propositioned her with more lucrative job offers" of one or two men being shot, stabbed, "ejected from a moving car with a knife in his back" (p.20) are converse to the image of America created in the mind of man who is talking to Comrade Pillai: "Oower, oower, oower. In Amayrica now, isn't it.' It wasn't a question. It was sheer admiration." (p.129)

Roy comments on the economic colonization prevalent in India, waged by America and its allies, and unfold the hidden reality of economic progress of India at the cost of its culture and environment. World Bank loans only give rise to the use of pesticides that obliterate environment of the poor nations like India. Roy's presentation of dismal aspects of economic growth is based on reality as the 'progress' of India jeopardizes its culture and environment. Culture is at stake, as the Indian heritage is modernized and presented for the cheap entertainment of the exotic tourists. Roy's disapproval of making new dams is also expressed in the novel, a major issue of Roy's political writings. One of the major forms of Americanization, substitute of anglophilia is presented as industrialization. Expansion of multinational companies have effected environment. Roy's description of 'God's Own Country' presents the sordid reality of modernization and urbanization at the cost of environment and culture. Roy's eco-feminist approach is conspicuous as she slams the Indian subjects for their blind imitation of western industrialization and tourism. Meenachal, a feminine figure, is symbolic of the plight of women in twenty first century. The government, a patriarchal functionary is held responsible for the exploitation of Meenachal. Roy sarcastically slams government's policies and its inhuman approach towards the exploitation of natural resources. It is a colonial strategy to exploit the natural resources of the colonized nations leaving behind the hazardous impacts for the colonized subjects. Roy has clearly drawn a line between the capitalist class and the marginalized class through the presentation of 'God's Own Country'. The people from the lower strata of society are compelled to bathe in the toxic water of the river whereas the hotel has a swimming pool for the tourists. The slum beside the hotel exposes the reality of modernization in Kerala.

Meenachal, the life line of the Ayemenem people, has become no more than a swollen drain. The narrator's comment that the river "had the power to evoke fear. To change lives" (p.124) hints at the strong social status of women and the matriarchy in ancient Kerala that has been eliminated by the advent of British to Kerala.

Roy points out that burgeoning progress of India with the government's apathy towards the ecology has taken a heavy toll in the form of acute environmental problems. Moreover the tourism industry is booming at the cost of cultural assassination:

In the evenings (for that Regional Flavour) the tourists were treated to truncated Kathakali performances ('Small attention spans', the Hotel people explained

to the dancers). So ancient stories were collapsed and amputated. Six hour classics were slashed to twenty-minute cameos. (p.127)

The God of Small Things presents postcolonial aspects of language by highlighting unconventional patterns of capitals, fragmented sentences, the unconventional and playful construction of sounds and words. These unconventional patterns underscore how the colonial impositions of language work in a colonized society that is not at ease with the colonial standardized English. The author's innovation of the language shows her intention to undermine the colonial dominance over English. The language spoken by the characters shows that how colonial language and through which colonial culture has been superimposed over the indigenous traditions. The *English* spoken by Rahel and Estha presents the hybrid language of the persistently colonized subjects in a postcolonial society. The postcolonial writings refashion, explore, and modify the English language. *The God of Small Things* modifies the colonial language by subverting grammatical patterns. Roy's omniscient narrator and nonlinear plot confuses the readers to figure out who the narrator is and what is happening in the novel. This confusion is deliberately created by Roy to make the readers feel the colonized psyche in a postcolonial era. The story is told by an intrusive narrator but with the perception of Rahel. This modification of language "seem like interruptions to the flow of a narrative with words in their proper places"(Torres,p.197) In comparison to the native speakers of English, these colonized subjects are linguistically dislocated as they are trying to imbibe the rules of language that are alien to their native tongues. Rahel and Estha's childhood experience with English present the colonial domination over the language. Baby Kochamma's pressure on the twins to use the correct English is akin to the compliance of the colonized to the 'proper order of things' set by the colonisers.

As a postcolonial feminist Arundhati Roy presents the convergence of feminism with that of post-colonialism as "feminism and post-colonialism share the mutual goal of challenging form of oppression."(McLeod, p.174) Roy shows 'double-colonisation' of women (Peterson and Rutherford p. 174) through the collusion of patriarchy and colonialism. Mammachi, and Baby Kochamma's marginalization and their collaboration with the patriarchy are glaring examples of collusion of colonialism with the patriarchy. Pappachi "a monstrous suspicious bully, with a streak of vicious cunning" (p.180) is an emblem of colonized, misogynistic male psyche. To sum up, Roy's feminist approach encompasses postcolonial aspects as well as third world feminism as it deals with the colonial domination in different walks of life in this postcolonial era.

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