

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: The aim of this paper is to analyse 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. Their situation can be discussed briefly in terms of Gayatri Spivak's famous essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

Keywords: Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Gayatri Spivak, subaltern, 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 can be analysed in terms of Gayatri Spivak's famous essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988). 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, Spivak suggests 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:

It is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow.

(28)

Richard Lane points out that Spivak's basic intention is to resist the "essentialist positioning in Third World subjects" (247). Since the marginalized subject is denied due to his/her difference from the elite, Spivak stands against the "essentialist underpinnings" (Lane 247). For Spivak, in this respect, the key subject position is that of a female subaltern in relation to the practice of *sati*, which means *widow immolation*. That is, since the female is considered to have no identity apart from being her husband's possession, when the husband dies, she is supposed to die as well, and therefore, in India, she is burnt. In this practice of *sati*, there is, as Spivak suggests, *double displacement*, because the female is silenced under both the British colonial power and the power of masculinity within Indian patriarchal traditions (24-28).

For Ramesh Kumar Gupta, the "new woman" is today challenging the traditional notions of "Angel in the house": "The new woman is essentially a woman of awareness and consciousness of her low position in the family and society" (152). For Gupta, this has brought a kind of revolution in literary studies. But it can be discussed to what extent this new woman exists under the double displacement highlighted by Spivak.

Clear Light of Day, a significant novel shortlisted for the Booker Prize, is the story of the Indian Das family, the members of which are (since the partition of India in 1947) no longer all together. Bimla, or Bim, is an unmarried history teacher who has never left her home and family in Old Delhi. She is the person who has the responsibility of taking care of her autistic brother, Baba. Her younger sister, Tara, is married with children and comes back to visit her family in Old Delhi with her husband Bakul, India's ambassador to America. 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)

In “Tradition and Deviation”, Swain defends the idea that although Desai’s women protest the commonly accepted societal norms, they are ready to face their consequences, and her portrayal of women is as people who are not completely cut off from familial and societal ties but do stand against “monotony, injustice and humiliation” (15). For Swain, Desai’s women characters are not goddesses or robots but “self-actualising and self-realising individuals” (15). On the other hand, Bim’s giving herself up in the above-mentioned paragraph can be interpreted in terms of Spivak’s essay, because we can clearly see that even if at one point she reacts to her position within the family, she later accepts her sacrificial situation, or her *subaltern* position in Spivak’s terms, and associates it with an endless love that covers all the wrongs within the family.

Looking at the examples, 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 (which is often described as unchanging, static or decaying rather than improving over time), 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, as Hena Ahmad suggests,

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” (91).

The idea of being a life-giver or a nurturer is reaffirmed in the personality of Mira-Masi, 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 (Desai 79-89). So we may also suggest that the role of woman as the life-giver and the mother of the whole family does 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* Spivak talks about. 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 analysed 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 authorisation. 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 emphasising 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.

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 (Kulkarni 173). 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" (27).

Another woman, Mammachi, the grandmother, also has an unhappy marriage with Pappachi. She is constantly beaten by her husband. Her playing the violin comes as a contrast

to all the violence performed upon her and may be a suggestion that music is her attempt to be heard, to be given a voice.

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 practised 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.

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, which is what Spivak also speaks about in her well-known article. 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” (171). Therefore, this dominant social cycle silences its subaltern subjects, and the female subaltern subjects are doubly silenced, doubly lost...

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