

A COMPARATIVE FEMINIST SCRUTINY OF ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS* AND KHALED HOSSEINI'S *A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS*

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Abstract

This article presents a comparative feminist analysis of Roys' *The God of Small Things* (2007) and Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007). The main aim of this study is to investigate the way in which female characters in both novels experience and resist patriarchal oppression in their respective cultural contexts. The study is qualitative in nature and is based on an interpretive paradigm. The researcher explored a feminist approach to examine the representation of female characters in *The God of Small Things* (1997) and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007). The data for this study consists of the two novels selected for their powerful portrayals of female characters and their experiences in patriarchal societies. The findings of the study reveal that in Roys' *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), female characters experience male-dominancy and patriarchal subjugation through different ways that are shaped by their political, social, and cultural environments. Despite the strong restrictions imposed on these women, they resist this patriarchal oppression and challenge the oppressive norms imposed on them.

Keywords: Comparative feminist analysis, qualitative, interpretive paradigm, patriarchal oppression, resistance.

The question of women's representation in literature has been central to feminist criticism, articulated most compellingly by Gilbert & Gubar. That literary texts demonstrate and even manufacture the culturally dominant attitudes towards women at a given time. Postcolonial feminist writings of the last few decades have been responding more and with still a greater force to, for example, women in non-Western cultures. Critical works in this respect are those that concentrate on the fragile tale of females living in male-regulated areas (Bhatt, 2001; Hosseini, 2007). Two novels that have played an important part in this field are Roys's *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007). Scholars have praised both novels for their powerful portrayal of female characters and their experiences in a male-dominated society.

Arundhati Roys's *The God of Small Things* (1997), set in India, explores a complex web of relationships within a family and the ways societal norms shape women's lives. Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), set in Afghanistan, talks about the brutal reality of life under the rule of the Taliban and the suffering of women amidst this horrible reign. Even though the cultural milieus are different, in both novels we see that women face hardships because they live in male-dominated societies where women have to do traditionally feminine behaviour. Patriarchal oppression has doomed both, specifically the female characters Ammu and Mariam, to lead lives beyond their limits within padded rooms of societal confines. This study aims to conduct a comparative analysis of the female characters in both novels by examining the ways in which they experienced and resisted patriarchal oppression.

The paper compares Female characters in Roys' *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Sun* (2007). Even as feminist and postcolonial literary theories have made profound contributions, the experiences of women in patriarchal cultures remain relatively underrepresented or poorly understood within literature. In particular, we need a closer examination of the ways in which these women resist and negotiate patriarchal oppression, as well as how culture-specific social structures mould their experiences. This study seeks to bridge that gap through a comparative examination of the female characters in Roy's *The God of Small (1997) Things* and Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) with respect to how they either succumbed or fought against patriarchal marginalization within their own cultural sphere.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) are powerful narratives centered on women confined in oppressive patriarchy. This patriarchal system, which oppressed women, is mainly created and supported by religious, cultural and political institutions. And these institutions encourage males to oppress and marginalize women. Although it seems very difficult for women to escape from the clutches of patriarchal oppressions, the female characters in these two novels demonstrate both acts of resistance and resilience and create an image of agency.

This section compares the situations of female characters in both novels under the male-dominated societies and the ways they resist this dominance and try to gain autonomy. The contexts of these two novels, where female characters face patriarchal oppression, play a significant role in portraying women's marginalization and shaping their methods of resistance. Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), set in the small village of Kerala, Ayemenem, not only shows patriarchal oppressions in terms of colonial legacies and caste system but also through the lens of complex family dynamic within a Syrian Christian, Ipe Family. The layers of female oppression are evident from these lines; "Ayemenem was a place where the ordinary and the extraordinary coexisted, where the Small and Big God blurred into one another. But in its essence, it was a place where the most ordinary things became extraordinary, and the most extraordinary things became ordinary. A woman could be a man's wife and still be a spinster. Like the fact that a woman could have a child and still be a virgin" (45).

Women in Ayemenem like Ammu and Mammachi are marginalized and held to strict expectations. Pappachi beats Mammachi, and Ammu is a divorced woman who knows that a society under male dominance "had no place for a woman like her, who had defied social norms by marrying a man of her choice and, worse still, had left him" (44). Hence, she is marginalized in her family, which reflects patriarchal oppression. Similarly, Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Sun* (2007) tells the story of oppressed women in Afghan society at a time when wars, political instability and chaos were spread everywhere in Afghanistan under the cruel reign of the name of Taliban. Mariam and Laila are the two most oppressed characters in this novel. Their oppression can be guessed from this quotation where Mariam's mother Nana tells her, "Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always. You remember that, Mariam." (4)

Both Mairam and Liala live in such a society, which is a patriarchal

society where their lives are not only controlled by male dominance but also by the policies and faulty laws of the state. Under the regime of the Taliban in Afghanistan, such laws were passed which subjugated women and marginalized them. As Hosseini says, “The Taliban had outlawed everything: kite- flying, music, dancing, singing, women's laughter, women's voices... Women were not allowed to leave their homes unless accompanied by a male relative, could not work, could not go to school... The Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice had become the most feared agency in Kabul” (215). The stories of both these two novels show that it is through social expectations, family traditions and religions that patriarchal oppression is perpetuated. When once social structures, traditions and customs perpetuate this patriarchal oppression, then female characters are the ones who suffer only.

In Roys’ *The God of Small Things* (1997), the life of Ammu is categorized by continuous neglect and undermining of her female agency not only by her father, Pappachi but also by her aunt, Baby Kochamma, who never acknowledges her as their family member. The writer portrays this situation in these words: “Pappachi's contempt for Ammu was a cold, calcified thing, like a tumour that had grown inside him over the years” (175) and “Baby Kochamma's eyes were always narrowed, as though she was perpetually suspicious of an invasion of her space, her person, her very soul” (34). They ignore her and do not consider her an adult female after her divorce, which shows that “Ammu was the one who had been wronged, but it was she who had to pay the price.” (137)

It is not only gender that shapes Ammu’s experience, but her experience is also shaped by the caste system, as indicated by her relationship with Velutha. When her relationship with Velutha is discovered, she becomes the central point of social punishment for crossing both gender and caste boundaries. As in the novel, the writer says, “The Love Laws. That lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much. Her life had been a litany of lessons that said: Don’t do this, don't do that. Don’t love this person, don't love that person. Don't be this, don't be that. She had been told who to love and how much to love. And when to love. And how to love” (33). The love law refers to the caste system that shapes Ammu’s experience here. After the death of her father, when her brother, Chacko, is given the authority and command to control the family business, her wishes and needs are dismissed, and she is marginalized. This situation is highlighted through these lines: “With Pappachi's death, Chacko became the new patriarch. Ammu's wishes, her needs, her desires, her dreams - everything was subservient to the new imperative:

Chacko's Whims" (175).

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), the same gender oppression is portrayed through the character of Mariam in a different context. Mariam is an illegitimate child; from the very beginning, her existence as an oppressed female is reflected in the novel when she is raised with the belief that her status is that of harami (bastard). Her mother says to her, "You are an illegitimate child," Nana said, her voice low and gravelly. "A harami. Your mother was a servant, a Hajari. She was not married to your father. You are a bastard" (7). Her mother, Nana, instill in her the idea that women have to suffer in silence when she tells her that "a woman has to suffer a lot in her life". Mariam's life turns to constant abuse when she marries Rasheed, who tries to exercise his patriarchal authority over her. He forces her to chew on pebbles when she fails to cook according to his satisfaction thus, she endures physical violence at his hand "her molars break, each tooth like a shard of glass is crushed underfoot" reflects the physical violence that Mariam undergoes through. Laila faces the same paternal violence when the systemic violence of patriarchal norms of Afghan society compels and forces her to marry Rasheed. The way Rasheed treats Laila highlights the violence of patriarchy that crushes women's aspirations. "Rasheed's hand shot out, and he slapped her, hard, across the face. You will do as I say, or I will take everything from you. I will take your children, I will take your freedom. You will do as I say or suffer the consequences." (143)

In both novels, the female characters do not surrender themselves to patriarchal oppressions. They challenge these patriarchal oppressions that try to control them and engage in acts of resistance and resilience against their oppressions. Ammu's relationship with Velutha in *A God of Small Things* (1997) shows this act of rebellion and resistance against oppression. Her societal norms strictly forbid Ammu's to engage in inter-caste relationship but when she chooses to love Velutha, a man of the lowest caste, she thereby asserts her autonomy. Her act of resistance is shown in these lines: "Ammu's eyes held Velutha's. Held them and held them. Until Velutha looked away, his face contorted in a mixture of anguish and anger. Ammu's gaze was a declaration of war. A declaration of the fact that she had crossed the threshold. That she had stepped off the edge. That she had broken the Love Laws." (173)

Her love for Velutha is a clear sign of resistance and rebellion, as Roys says, "Ammu's love for Velutha was a provocative thing. It was a small act of defiance, a small act of resistance" (228). In *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), Mariam finally starts rebelling against patriarchal oppression when she kills the

man who wronged her. Hosseini, in this regard, writes, “Mariam’s hands were shaking, her heart racing, as she raised the shovel and brought it down on Rasheed’s skull... She had crossed a line, and there was no going back” he further says “She felt a strange, perverse sense of liberation. She was free. Free to go. Free to stay. Free to kill” (314-315). Mariam acts as a symbol of personal triumph and an end to the patriarchal violence and oppression. Similarly, the character Laila also resists patriarchal oppression by sending her children to school. Under the strict rule of the Taliban and her cruel husband, Rasheed, Laila makes plans to escape. “Laila knew that she had to get her children out of Afghanistan. She knew that she had to get them away from Rasheed, away from the Taliban, away from the war” (261). Laila escaping to Pakistan and returning to Kabul again shows her autonomy and love for her country.

The findings of the study reveal that in Roys’ *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Hosseini’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), female characters experience male-dominancy and patriarchal subjugation through different ways that are shaped by their political, social, and cultural environments. Despite the strong restrictions imposed on these women, they resist this patriarchal oppression and challenge the oppressive norms imposed on them.

Ammu’s struggles in *The God of Small Things* (1997) show male-dominated intersect caste and family dynamics in Kerala, India’s Christian orthodox Syrian community. The ways she is marginalized as a divorced woman and tortured because of her love affairs with Velutha, an untouchable, reveal the rigid social structure that governs her life. Ammu’s resistance is entirely personal. She chooses love over societal norms, which shows her refusal to abide by the patriarchal dominations and caste-based hierarchies that control and dictate her destiny. Even though her revolt is ultimately crushed, it represents her brief assertion of independence and a powerful act of resistance to a world that tries to govern and control her body. In the same way, Mariam and Laila’s experiences of patriarchy in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) are shown and intensified in terms of religious extremism under the reign of the Taliban, a time of political instability in Afghanistan. Both these two female characters face violence in the forms of personal atrocities committed by Rasheed and through their subjugation in the name of the so-called law. But both these characters find ways to resist against this oppression and subjugation. Mariam resists this subjugation by killing Rasheed, and Laila resists this subjugation by sending her children to school and educating them. Although the act of Mariam is tragic, it represents her reclaiming her autonomy and liberty. Laila’s rebellion demonstrates her refusal to be defeated by

patriarchy. Although the cultural contexts of both novels are different, both novels display significant similarities in terms of the resistance of female characters against patriarchy and societal norms.

Ammu in *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Mariam and Laila in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) resist the force that tries to control them through love, resilience and survival. The stories of the female characters in these two novels show that whatever the circumstances are, women can resist patriarchy and other forces that try to dominate and marginalize them. This resistance can take any form, such as committing crime, love and residence. Hence, female characters in these two novels act as symbols of oppressive systems that try to marginalized women and the possible of breaking and overcoming these systems. Through the portrayal of these feminist characters, the authors of both novels highlight the power of women against oppressions.

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