

GENDERED INHERITANCE AND ITS CHALLENGES AS PORTRAYED IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S "THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS".

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Abstracts:

Patriarchal societies the world over prefer sons to carry on the family business. Inheritance belongs to sons by virtue of their gender. The protagonist Ammukutty – a divorcee of a non-endogamous marriage is portrayed by Arundhati Roy to show how she challenges a predominantly patriarchal Syrian Christian culture of Kerala. This is a Research Essay, discusses the patriarchy, male gender favoritism by rejecting the daughter importance in the Authoress portrayed families.

Keywords: Domestic, Violence, Arundati, Family, Inheritance

The Preamble of Universal Declaration of Human Rights¹ upholds the family values in the Article 16(3) as "family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection of society and the State." Followed by its further claim for gender equality by Article 17(1) which states everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others and Article 17(2) further states that no one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property. Article 22 states everyone has the right to social security and is entitled to realization.....of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality. Article 25 (1) says that everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health & well being of himself and his family

including food, clothing, housing & medical care and necessary social services and right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control. Article 25(2) further states that Motherhood & Childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock shall enjoy the same social protection.

Many of the Philosophical texts have captured/foreseen this before the legal laws with certain depth of vision and this has been reflected in their text. Though Human Rights also have been guaranteed, the plight of women especially in Oriental countries like India and here in this paper specifically the condition of women of the Syrian Christian community of Kerala is highlighted to show that these human rights have been violated consistently through the generations in spite of cent per cent literacy and highly educated professionally qualified women in this community. A greater clarity and specific laws keeping in mind the socio-

¹ The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is generally agreed to be the foundation of International Human Rights Law.¹ Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 10 December, 1948 was the result of the experience of the Second World War.¹



cultural background will go a long way in ensuring that Human Rights is not only guaranteed but also practised in the true sense of the Declaration of Human Rights as formulated and as in the spirit of its founding fathers.

Arundhati Roy, who is a trained architect, has worked as a production designer and written screenplays for two films. She is a political activist who voiced her support strongly in the Narmada Bachao Andolan led by Medha Patkar. She lives in New Delhi.

This is her first book and it won her the 1997 Booker Prize – it is believed to be partly autobiographical. This novel is a truthful portrayal of the plight of women in society and their marathon struggle for seeking a sense of identity in a male dominated conservative framework. The central character of the novel, Ammukutty, yearns for pleasure and happiness and for a life that is free from the shackles of constraints. As a child, she was beaten by her father; her escapist marriage landed her from the frying pan to the fire literally who had to live with a drunkard husband willing to give her away to his boss to clear his debts. The rejection she faced from her own family and the discriminatory treatment by the family members towards her and her children drove her to love the man by night her children loved by the day. The subsequent class conflict and violence left her family scattered and she died an obscure death. The subsequent rebellious lifestyle of the twins – Rahel and Estha depict a contrast to Ammukutty's life. Arundhati Roy flings a harsh irony on man's domination over woman in this novel.

The protagonist Ammukutty of the Booker Prize winning novel *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy dares to defy the existing norms of endogamy of the Syrian Christian community that she belonged to by marrying outside the community and religion. Endogamy (marrying within the community) is strictly followed by the Syrian Christian Community of Kerala. Any

deviation from the norm is heavily frowned upon and those defying it are ostracised. After an abusive and violent marriage that produced a set of twins Rahel and Estha, Ammu walks out of her marriage and returns to her ancestral home (Taravat) in Ayemenem, a small town in Kottayam District of Kerala. She is treated as an outcaste by her mother and brother Chacko, an Oxford educated jobless womaniser who returns back to India once his British wife deserts him. "... An Oxford avatar of the old zamindar mentality – a landlord forcing his attentions on women who depended on him for their livelihood (pg. 65) Taravat is the symbol of one's ancestry and high social standing. Marriages alliances are made based on the Taravat one belongs to. This community is highly patriarchal in nature. All inheritance in terms of property is distributed amongst the male siblings and the youngest son inherits the Taravat since he is responsible to take care of his parents in their old age. The Syrian Christian community of Kerala is a mercantile community that deals with trading of spices and are land owners. Chacko though a silent partner in his mother's business still bosses over all the women in the house and is autocratic. He blatantly tells Ammu that "what's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine." (pg. 57). The patriarchal nature of the Syrian Christian community is reflected here. Also the manner in which boys are preferred over girls in all aspects of life right from birth to education to marriage and finally inheritance from parents reflects the hegemonic masculinity prevalent in this community. "Though Ammu did as much work in the factory as Chacko, whenever he was dealing with food inspectors or sanitary engineers, he always referred to it as *my* factory, *my* pineapples, *my* pickles. Legally, this was the case because Ammu, as a daughter, had no claim to the property" (pg. 57). Chacko by virtue of his sex and gender i.e. physiological and psychological conditioning gains preference over Ammu in matters of education – he is Oxford educated whereas Ammu has local school education, Chacko is allowed to marry a British lady but Ammu's



marriage to a Hindu Bengali man is unacceptable. Chacko's daughter Sophie Mol gets preferential treatment whereas Ammu's children are labelled as hybrids. Even Chacko's divorced wife Margaret gets preferential treatment over his sister Ammu. "There would be boiled water for Margaret and Sophie Mol, tap water for everybody else." (pg. 46) Even after Chacko comes back from Oxford he is accorded high respect in the ancestral home and in the society whereas Ammu is shunned by the society and in her own ancestral home. The very women who have experienced suppression, domestic violence and ill treatment turn into perpetrators of these crimes once they become old. This process of emphasized femininity was practised by the community then and is prevalent even now and hence these reiterate the patriarchal mode of governance. A number of such case studies in research findings show how disparity with siblings ends up in the sisters giving in. Though the Indian Supreme Court's ruling on Christian inheritance was made on 24 February, 1986 stating that a daughter has rights to equal share with male siblings, the daughter is unwilling to get into legal squabbles with siblings fearing the jeopardizing of their future relationship with siblings. Hence there continues to be an unequal distribution of father's property amongst siblings in this community. Mary Roy and et al successfully repealed the Travancore Act and brought relief to the present daughters of the Syrian Christian community. But the Act has not brought relief in terms of prestations which has over time become pathological prestations and the demand for dowry in the name of *stridhanam* (woman's wealth) still continues.

The research findings to analyse the social and cultural behaviour of the Syrian Christian community of Kerala has used Cultural Materialism as a theoretical approach. Jonathan Dollimore and Allen Sinfield made current and defined Cultural Materialism as designating a critical method which has four characteristics – Historical context i.e. what was happening at the time

the text was written, Theoretical Method i.e. incorporating older methods of theory like structuralism, post-structuralism etc, Political commitment i.e. incorporating non-conservative and non-Christian frameworks such as Feminist and Marxist theory and Textual Analysis i.e. building on theoretical analysis of mainly canonical texts that have become "prominent cultural icons"¹ This approach of Cultural Materialism is important to understand the nature of gender conflicts which is centred to the core identity of materialism that this community practises.

Some of the major assumptions of Cultural Materialism are that all subjects live and work within the culture constructed by ideology, through discourses. The ideological constructions in which the authors live and have internalized, inevitably become a part of their work, and therefore their works are always political and always vehicle of power. Since literature plays an active role in the creation and consolidation of power, a literary text does not merely reflect the culture in which it is produced, but also actively contributes to the constitution of that culture. Cultural materialism tries to bring to light how ideology and thus existing social order tries to maintain itself through literature without losing its grip..... Cultural Materialists follow Foucault in their interest in the insane, the criminal, the exploited and all those who over the course of history have been marginalized. More than that, Cultural Materialists follow Raymond Williams in his adaptation of Gramsci's view of hegemony. For Williams, the dominant culture is never the only player in the cultural field, although it is the most powerful. There are always residual and emergent strains within a culture that offer alternatives to hegemony. In other words, the dominant culture is always under pressure from alternative views and beliefs. So analyses of the literary texts by the Cultural Materialists bring to light how these texts while being the instruments of the dominant socio cultural order, also demonstrate how the apparent coherence of that order is threatened from the inside, by



inner contradictions and by tensions that it seeks to hide. Focusing on the cracks in the ideological façade that texts offer, Cultural Materialists offer readings of dissidence that allow us to hear the socially marginalized and expose the cultural machinery that is responsible for their marginalization and exclusion.ⁱⁱ

According to Dr. Pips of TRS (The Student Room website) *Patriarchy is defined as the dominance of men in social or cultural systems.*²

Socio biologists sees patriarchy arises more as a result of inherent biology than social conditioning. In 1973, Goldberg published *The Inevitability of Patriarchy*, which advanced a biological interpretation of male dominance. *Patriarchy* is a social structure in which men are considered to have a monopoly on power and women are expected to submit. Patriarchy developed in the society during the Vedic period (ca. 1750-500 BCE). Patriarchy is very evident in all aspects of the Syrian Christian culture – whether at home, workplace, religious institutions and in the society.

Marriage is a parting of ways for a girl and her natal family; she moves to her husband's home and her visits back to her own home begin to decrease over time, especially when she lives a distance away. This is a patrilineal, patrilocal society. Inheritance passes down the male line and girls are considered transitory members of their natal home, 'guests' who go away after a while and therefore cannot be given a share in paternal landed property. Instead, the rights of girls are limited to receiving 'dowry', consisting of jewellery, clothes and items

that might be useful in their new homes. The stress on the male line combined with minimal rights accorded to daughters remains among most caste- based agrarian Christian communities, where land is the main inheritable property.

In Syrian Christian culture, the birth of a male child brings in lot of joy and celebration and is viewed in terms of the monetary benefits he would bring into the family in the future. The birth of a female child on the other hand brings in a lot of anxiety to the parents and the tendency to hoard for the daughter's future begins with her birth. This is evidently seen in the Ipe household where the birth of Chacko is celebrated and Ammukutty is always admonished to behave as she is a girl. This was not the case when the tradition of dowry was instituted in the first place. A dowry was given to the bride at the time of her marriage according to the inheritance that the bridegroom would receive from his father's property. But nowadays it has taken an ugly turn since the bride's party is required to pay for all the expenses related to the marriage and giving of dowry (whether in cash/kind) and also an equal share of her inheritance from her father's property. This has created gender conflicts in this community on a scale unparalleled before.

*Money's impersonal power replaces personal definition with competition and grounds relationships in predation. The result is a sense that human interaction is a function of commercial contracts and mistrust.*ⁱⁱⁱ

The Community encourages the increase of wants of the grooms family at the risk of the bride's family going bankrupt. Syrian Christians are described as materialistic and money minded people, who demand large dowries for their sons and hold rigidly conservative attitudes towards the behavior and expectations of women.^{iv}

The research findings dwell on the social and cultural norm of the Syrian Christian Community called *Stridhanam*. What is

² As such, rather than working to destabilize the historical notion of *patriarchy*, much literature assess the origins of *patriarchy*, or a social system in which the male gender role acts as the primary authority figure central to social organization, and where fathers hold authority over women, children, and property.



Stridhanam? *Stridhanam* (female wealth) is the sum of money that a Syrian Christian woman brings with her at the time of marriage. It is not seen as a gift but falls under the category of prestations. Symbolically, it must be seen as the severing of economic ties for a woman from her natal home and her incorporation into the conjugal household.

Stridhanam is generally a very large sum of money (often running into lakhs of rupees) given by the father of the bride to the groom's father. The woman no longer has a share in her father's property.....In the Orthodox/Jacobite Syrian Christian case, *stridhanam* ideally comes under the category of pre-dominant and money is used in order to contract marriages with desirable families. The 'spirit' of prestation however demands that there be no questions regarding its expenditure once money has changed hands. The woman has no control over her wealth and while there is often suppressed violence, in the majority of cases women tend to accept the entailed subjugation.^v Not only is the marriage looked at by the men as a barter system to form alliance with desirable families, but also that women have no say in the entire process because the head of the family makes all decisions regarding the girl's marriage. This obligation to provide *stridhanam* for a daughter at marriage is frequently a strain on her parents. The prestations have to continue, although varying in nature, even after the birth of her first child. A daughter was therefore seen as a burden. The staking of conjugal rights and privileges is the function of this payment. The old values attributed to the family name and individual character are being replaced by the idiom of which one can get for the amount one has in hand. So *stridhanam* now begins to look more like groom price than dowry. There is a conflict in the gender here because much as the girl is supposed to give *stridhanam*, why is the boy not interested in giving *purushadhanam* (men's wealth)? In order to enjoy conjugal rights and privileges why are only the men deprived of giving *purushadhanam*? Gender preference is very

evident when parents tend to view daughters as a burden and sons as profitable. The old values attributed to the family name and individual character are being replaced by the idiom of which one can get for the amount one has in hand. So *stridhanam* now begins to look more like groom price than dowry. So gender differences bring in cultural materialism into the picture.

The Indian Supreme Court ruling on Christian inheritance which was made on 24 February, 1986 stated that a daughter has rights to equal shares with male siblings. Prior to this, the Travancore Act of 1916 stated that a legitimate equivalent to the daughter for the payment of her *stridhanam* was a sum of five thousand rupees as against the concomitant settlement of estate for the daughter. This resulted in unequal distribution of the father's property amongst the siblings. Mary Roy and *et al* successfully repealed the Travancore Act and brought relief to the present generation daughters of the Syrian Christian community. But the Act has not brought relief in terms of prestations which has over time become pathological prestations and this demand for *stridhanam* has left many women and their families in a piteous condition. The present generation uses *stridhanam* as a platform to exhibit their status quo and also wield it as a weapon in their marital home to consolidate their superiority in the marital home. These prestations have caused a sort of reversal of roles now with the daughter-in-laws having a greater say in the households compared to their counterparts earlier. They have a say in all the major decision making process of the family unlike the earlier tradition wherein the father-in-law was the sole and ultimate decision maker in all family and business matters. The daughter-in-law brings in an equal income and so this has changed the scenario in their relationship with her. So here also materialism comes in as the ruling factor in the maintaining of relationships.

With the expansion of the urban Christians middle class, educational qualifications,



earning power and jobs in the urban employment sector, and ownership of urban property have become essential requirements for both men and women in the marriage market. The financial burden has now shifted exclusively to the bride's family in contrast to the past when both families shared it equally by matching the bride's dowry with the groom's inheritance. Although the practice of dowry was made illegal in 1961 by legislation for all of India, the practice continues among Kerala Christians, and indeed in every part of India, as a compulsory part of marriage transactions.^{vi}

The dowry in arranged marriages is an indication of the relative status and standing of the families of the bride and groom. The offer of a dowry below expectations may be an assertion of superiority of the bride givers over the bride takers; it could equally convey the unequal treatment of a daughter by her natal family. The offer of a dowry above expectations, on the other hand, becomes a favourite subject of community gossip and insinuation that the large dowry is being used to "marry off" a girl who is dark, unattractive, or "sickly," or has some dubious attribute. Among Syrian Christians in particular, there are strict conventions regarding the appropriate dowries to be given and received by families of particular status groups and marriage circles. While many traditional families still adhere to these conventions and reject offers of exceedingly high dowries for their sons or the high dowry demands made by prospective suitors for their daughters, there are the "new rich" (puthupannakkarar), who offer large dowries to gain attractive alliances with traditional and well-known families. "Good" or "traditional families" who have seen their wealth dwindle and have only their reputation to recommend them might also attempt to get the maximum dowries for their sons, or negotiate lower dowries for their daughters.^{vii}

Here again, the prerogative is always of the groom's family – if they have large

inheritance for their sons they can accordingly demand dowry in proportion to it and if the "good" or "traditional families" have dwindled in their economic status with only their reputation to recommend them, then they might also attempt to get maximum dowries for their sons. There again one is accosted with gender conflict in this situation because if the bride is of "good" and "traditional family" with only family reputation as her recommendation, she cannot have the privilege of having a groom of equal status and is therefore forced to a compromise to marrying in a family of a lower economic status – this in spite of the bride being well educated and drawing a substantial income worthy of her marital home status and the inheritor of whatever property her parents will equally distribute eventually.

So the question is why the aspect of dowry is not incorporated by the advocates of Human Rights? Is it because it is a socially prevalent custom in almost all the communities of the world? Even Queen Elizabeth II was gifted Bombay (now Mumbai) as a part of her dowry when she married Prince Philip. Is there a fear of many member nations opposing this? Will it create a disparity in the social order and cause societal norms to be uprooted? Will family units be disturbed? Will it create a further divide in the existing East/West divide in looking at aspects of freedom, justice and liberty? The answers to these questions will determine whether gendered inheritance in the Syrian Christian community of Kerala and the challenges that come along with it will be addressed by the decision makers on Human Rights.

ⁱ <literarism.blogspot.in/2011/11/cultural-materialism.html>

ⁱⁱ Harris, Marvin. Cultural Materialism. The Struggle for a Science of Culture.

ⁱⁱⁱ <<http://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/ca/citd/holtorf/2.0html>>

^{iv} (Philips 2004:2)

^v (Vishwanathan 1999:111)

^{vi} (Philips 2003:439)

^{vii} (Vishwanathan 1999:266)