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Self-Alienation to Self-Adjustment: Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

Dr. Parneet Jaggi

Dr.B.R.Ambedkar Government College,
Sri Ganganagar(Raj)

The dominant idiom of Indian writing today is firmly entrenched in pain, anxiety of displacement, nostalgia, yearning to belong to roots, and so on. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* are two such novels that explore the tragedy of man on several levels using different perspectives. Both the novels are about averted culture-clash tragedies, homogeneity vs. heterogeneity, and about Indian sensibilities.

This paper attempts to examine the fictional projections of Indian girls, to see how they emerge in ideological terms. Their journeys from self-alienation to self-adjustment, their childhood struggles against the hypocrisies and monstrosities of the grown-up world, eventually demolishing the unjust male constructed citadels of power that hinder their progress- are the highlighted issues. The point of comparison between the two novels focused on here is the journey of Rahel in *The God of Small Things* and Sai in *The Inheritance* from a lonely childhood to a tragic adulthood passing through a struggle with the complex forces of patriarchal society. Both the novels portray the imaginativeness, inventiveness, independence, rebelliousness, wide-eyed wonder and innocence associated with these young girls.

Alienation from the adult world is an important underlying theme in both novels. *The God of Small Things* is the story of the fraternal twins, Estha and Rahel and their unhappy, fractured family. Both the children experience a sense of alienation from their family. As children of "a divorced daughter from an intercommunity love marriage," (Roy 45) they had no rights in their grandparents' rigid, caste-conscious, orthodox, patriarchal, Syrian-Christian family in the rural town of Ayemenem in Kerala. The story of the novel is narrated mainly as it unfolds before the twins' eyes. Through flashbacks and foreshadowing, it shifts from childhood to adulthood, down to the two dark, central intertwined events of the story. These events- the drowning of their cousin-Sophie Mol and a secret love affair between their mother Ammu and Velutha, an untouchable – separate the twins and bring death to both their mother and her lover. The truth and terror of these events haunt the rest of their life, from which they achieve redemption only as adults.

Desai in *The Inheritance* emphasizes the ideas of transmissions and inheritance. Loss can be transmitted from person to person or society to society. It is not an excuse but a complicated moral picture. Her seventeen year old protagonist Sai Mistry partakes of the sigh of love and fatalism as well as the mist and mystery that dominate the atmosphere of Kanchenjunga. Waiting for her Maths tutor Gyan, Sai contemplates the giant squid's solitude and melancholy. "Could fulfilment ever be as deeply as loss?" She decides that love resides in the lack, not the contentment, hence the inheritance of loss for Sai, who has been orphaned in many ways.

The pertinent question emerging from the characterization of women in Roy's novel is whether we want to change and give more space to positive values like individual freedom and human dignity. Iconoclastic fervour is seen in the character of Ammu and Rahel. Several

reactions in the behaviour of Rahel are noticeable when she is a young girl studying in a Convent. First of all, she subverts the value system of society by elevating what is considered low and detestable. She decorates a knob of dung with flowers. Her colliding against the other girls in the Convent is an expression of rebellion against the suppression of sexuality in conventional convent education. The burning of the false hair bun of her Housemistress is protest against vanity and artificiality in human relations.

Roy, in a sense attempts to pave way for a society in which small things will flourish and autocratic traditions will give way to a just and free world. She uses gender and sexuality to interrogate traditional discourses. Female sexuality is not explored with such depth in *The Inheritance*; , but the psychoanalysis of Sai gives a clear picture of her suppressed emotions as a young female, who yearns to live a happy, settled life.

English culture is a pervasive influence in the upbringing of children in both novels. Rahel is brought up on a diet of English movies, songs and literature- Kipling, Shakespeare. When their half-English cousin Sophie Mol and her English mother arrive on a visit to Ayemenem, the twins are prepared well to measure up to their English relatives. Roy portrays the influence of English culture on her characters with sardonic humour, taking pot shots at India's colonial fascination for the English language. "See how nicely he speaks English," a passenger in a train says of Estha to her children. (Roy 325)

Similarly Jemubhai Patel in *The Inheritance* right from his early days in London kept up with English standards to avenge his complexes and embarrassments. Desai writes, "He envied the English. He loathed Indians. He worked at being English with the passion of hatred and for what he would become; he would be despised by absolutely everyone, English and Indians, both."(Desai 119) The conflict of English values is discernible in the personality of Sai as well. Her restlessness, her search for stability, her yearning to belong to a family is the outcome of the suppressed atmosphere she has to live in at Cho Oyu. Jemubhai observes at a point in the novel that Sai like him is an "estranged Indian living in India."Desai writes,

Sai thought of how it had been unclear to her what exactly she
Longed for in the early days at Cho Oyu, that only the longing
itself found its echo in her aching soul. The longing was gone
now, she thought, and the ache seemed to have found its
substance.(Desai 223)

In the character of Sai, we encounter a different female at different stages in the subtle, complex and traumatic process of becoming a woman. In each stage, the exhilarating sense of possibility clashes with the debilitating sense of loss. She feels lonely, alienated and yearns to be part of a family full of love, warmth and activity. In a restaurant, "Sai felt suddenly bereft and jealous of these children... why couldn't be part of that family? Rent a room in someone else's life?"(Desai 213)

In *The God of Small Things*, Roy makes it clear that in a patriarchal set up; men's needs are understood and gratified while women's needs are considered a stigma and a taboo. She also denounces the domesticising stereotype, which restricts women's potential. She shows how women conform, consciously or unconsciously, to male views of women and reinforce male views of reality. In the persona of Mammachi and Baby Kochamma, Roy shows how women interiorize social repressiveness and reinforce patriarchal ideology which determines what is socially acceptable for men and women. In the portraits of Mammachi and

Baby Kochamma, Roy has used the microcosm of the home to comment bitterly on male and female tyranny. She also goes to the roots of the malady of women perpetrating tyranny over women. The picture that comes out of the story conveys the fact that these victimiser women are in reality victims of and prey to patriarchal values. Ammu, who has transgressed the love laws, and does not conform to the societal norms, is an assault to the patriarchal standards imposed on women. Through this character, Roy manages to deconstruct the stereotyped images of Indian women.

Deserted by father and separated from mother due to her death, Rahel is neglected by her maternal uncle, grandmother and grandaunt. The neglect accidentally results in a “release of the spirit.” At the tender age of seven, she witnesses and bears the pain of several tragedies. The revelation of the clandestine affair of her mother with Velutha gives her a sudden jerk. Ammu’s reply further shocks the two twins. The tragedy of Sophie Mol’s drowning further destroys their peace. Then the police arrest and kill Velutha, and Rahel has to go to the police station with Estha to recognize Velutha as a criminal. Knowing that Velutha is innocent, they have to succumb to the pressures of Baby Kochamma. But the worst happens when her mother is thrown out of the house and she soon dies. Mohit Kumar Ray comments, “Rahel understands her mother better than Ammu ever could her mother... her mother has always remained a living presence in her memory. Seen from the feminist perspective, the novel records a progress, albeit slow, in feminism, offer some rays of hope and seems to suggest a distinct possibility of redemption.”(60)

This assault further intensifies the pain and agony of Rahel, whose fractured childhood, her separation from her twin brother, and after re-uniting her incestuous relationship with Estha, entangle the lives of all in the family. The significant question here is about the kind of world, children specially young girls inherit from adults. Contrasting the idyllic innocence of the child’s world with the manipulative machinations of the adult world, both Roy and Desai force readers to rethink circumstances that are accepted and taken for granted. In making children the victims of situations created by adults, they force the readers to look at these situations afresh and to acknowledge their magnitude. This in turn brings about a realization of the ugliness of the existing world.

In the *God of Small Things*, the alienation and suffering of all female characters, lead us to a new land of agony. Mammachi is badly abused and beaten by her husband. Ammu is refused higher education by her father, later beaten and tortured by her alcoholic husband for prostitution, and finally meets a tragic death for her unacceptable bond with the untouchable velutha. Baby kochamma, an abandoned loves of a Christian Father, delights in the misfortunes of others due to her own misfortunes. Rahel, a child sufferer, bearing the pangs of agony and dejection throughout the childhood, living as an orphan all through her adolescence, finally leaves for the US when grows young. She gets married, divorced and finally returns to Ayemenem after working as a waitress in an Indian restaurant and as a night clerk in a gas station for several years. Rahel meets her brothers again at the age of 31. Both Rahel and Estha have been damaged by the past, resulting in deep, grave silences, not able to communicate normally with the surrounding world, always trying to convert their alienation to some kind of adjustment., either with themselves or people around or their lives.

In *the Inheritance*, the female agony is not so complex, but quite vivid. The Gorkha insurgence occupies the foreground, and stymies the fledgling romance between this sixteen year old orphan and her Nepalese tutor Gyan. In a male dominated society where everyone would listen to Gyan’s story and not to how true her love was for him, she dreads the humiliating remarks that would be endowed upon her individuality. She feels fearful that she

“would be remade behind her back into a lunatic female, the more Gyan would fatten with pride.”(Desai 262) She feels her love and life wasted for a male who is unable to admire his sensibilities. Her bright hopes to be caressed in a family, to occupy a cozy home with an admiring husband is again shattered to pieces. Her agony finds an excuse in the disappearance of the dog, Mutt.

Sai’s grandmother, Nime is another picture of a pathetic and victimised female enduring the pangs of a patriarchal society. Desai writes, “She had fallen out of life altogether. Weeks went by and she spoke to nobody, the servants thumped their own leftovers on the table for her to eat...”(Desai 172)

Rahel too is always full of hopes but almost all hopes of hers end in disaster. She hopes that the railway level crossing gate would not close and they would not be late for the show of ‘Sound of Music’. But the gate goes down before their eyes and they have to wait. The whole idea is to strike home the point that Rahel has all unrequired and unnecessary hopes and that it is simply because of this in corrigible optimism that she faces disappointment ultimately.

After a long period of separation, dejection and desolation, when Rahel remembers those days she feels;

“In those early amorphous years when memory had only just begun, when life was full of beginnings and no Ends, and Everything was forever, Esthappen and Rahel thought of themselves together as Me, and separately, individually, as We or Us.”(Roy 2)

Both Sai and Rahel are highly sentimental and intense characters, isolated by their families and circumstances at a very early age, resigning to the laws of nature stoically, but emerging as rebels as their characters grow. Both are victims to the tendency of the society to condition a girl-child to submit to the norms of the patriarchal set up. Amitabh Roy comments, “While Arundhati Roy does not present the lot of poor children in India, she does, indeed, highlight this general attitude of callousness, insensitivity and indifference.”(90)

Roy as a ‘desi’ writer and Desai as a diasporic writer, both have captured the multiple natures of the female spaces in a changing world. In both the works, the English linguistic mode of creativity is interspaced liberally with words from the source language, in Roy, Malayalam, to lend an air of authenticity as well as to capture the truly untranslatable native ethos and flavours. Both the writers have attained searing heights of popularity through their works, and are also Booker Prize winners.

Both the females, Sai and Rahel finally see themselves standing on a platform which is actually a gap between their dreams and the reality, between what was said and what was implied, between what they should have had and what they have.

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