



Plasticity and Marginalization in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*: A Liquid

Modern Reading

Dr. Yasir Arafat

Assistant Professor of English, NUML Islamabad, Pakistan

Yasirarafat1980@gmail.com

Maryam Nadeem Awan

Research Scholar, Department of English, NUML Islamabad, Pakistan

Abstract

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is set in the post-partition India which deals with the cultural and societal change and fluidity in the Indian society caused under the influence of westernized culture and societal values, while predominantly dealing with the stereotypical, discriminatory and unfair treatment of certain gender and cast. The study attempts to look into how people tend to be seduced by some specific cultural values and discard some others even when they are moving towards being modernized, and in this case, under a group of colonizers' agenda of teaching the uncivilized the civilized ways of life. The study is conducted in the light of two postulates of Zygmunt Bauman's theorisation of *Liquid Modernity*. The first is the tendency of a constant change within a society and how the idea of modernity was the cause of decline in societal norms while the individuals are seduced by the ways of the West. The second is how Bauman terms the society to be plastic, meaning that it is something that can constantly be reshaped regardless of where and in what state it is. The paper also highlights the ways in which the plastic society challenges the traditional power structures in which women and lower castes are marginalized and suppressed by patriarchal hierarchy and caste system, emphasising the positive as well as negative impacts of the liquid modern society, positing manifestation of liquid modernity in which there is no certainty or fixedness. The findings show that the characters in the selected novel are strongly influenced by the modern Western values and their native culture is significantly altered by that of the English, both in positive and negative ways, and there are no fixed cultural values.

Keywords: Marginalization, Liquid Modernity, Zygmunt Bauman, Stereotypes, Westernized, Plastic



Introduction

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is a story based on the lives of twins brother and sister who are destroyed by the set notions and values of society that decide that who should be loved and who should not be. The "small things" mentioned in the topic are the cast discrimination and gender stereotypes as observed in India before and after partition.

The story is set in Ayemenem, which is a state in Kerela, India. The story shifts between 1969 and 1993. Ammu, in an attempt to escape her abusive father, goes to live with a distant aunt in Calcutta, where she gets married to a man who she later on finds out to be an alcoholic. After giving birth to twins, Rahel and Estha, returns to live with her parents and brother. The antagonist of the novel here is Baby Kochamma, who is the sister of Pappachi. She fell in love with an Irish priest and converted to Catholicism but could not get close to him, so she remained unmarried all her life.

Ammu's brother had given divorce to his wife but on hearing of her second husband's death, invites her and their daughter to spend Christmas with them. Baby Kochamma encounters a group of communist protestors who make her end up hating them. Estha is molested by a person working on a snack counter and that changes the perspective of the entire narrative.

Baby Kochamma thinks that she has seen Velutha among the protestors, who is among the untouchables and works in their factory. This makes her build self-proclaimed enmity towards him. Meanwhile Ammu is attracted towards him and both Rahel and Estha love him too. The children love him during the day while the mother loved him during the night. When Ammu and Velutha's relationship is discovered, Ammu is locked up and Velutha is banished.

In an accident Sophie, Rahel and Estha's cousin, drowns and Baby Kochamma tries to pin it on Velutha. The twins do not second her statement at the police station. This makes Baby Kochamma tell her brother that they were the reason his daughter died and he kicks Ammu and Estha out of the house. Estha is forced to live with his father and his mother died alone.

In the end, when the twins are 31, they reunite and are of the view that no one has the capability of understanding them except their selves so they decide to mate while the novel is ended with a nostalgic recount of the love of Ammu and Velutha, which makes the theme come back in a circle, that "there is no set rule as to who should be loved and how much should one love another person".



The novel is a representation of a mix of different times, with multiple stories, ambiances and images from the past, which have been carefully mixed with the present, where they refer to the present that was almost 20 years ago, in addition to the future experiences. This blend of multiple time periods indicate the presence of non-linear narration that is a characteristic of postmodernism, which could also be defined as time play. This time play was used in order to make the complex amalgamation of past and present to be easily comprehensible.

In the late 1900's Zygmunt Bauman was considered to be the key theorist of postmodernity. In his book *Liquid Modernity*, he talks about a society which is largely in need to be domesticated, civilized and rationalized. This was required for a society to be controlled, uniformed and understood. The radical change that was required has the tendency to transform the traditions and the traditional foundation that a society stood on. According to Bauman "change is the only permanence and uncertainty is the only certainty" (Bauman 82). He used the term liquid modernity to refer to the constant change that he observed in the relationships and identities. Instead of referring to the change as a transition to postmodernity, he has labelled the social life as a liquid form of the modernity that separates the modern and the pre modern era. When we talk about the liquid modernity, we refer to the change in the human tendency to be referred as pilgrims in the past and tourists in the present modern world. This shows the fluidity that is referred to as the liquid modernity. (Social Theory Rewired)

Problem Statement

Modern society is marked by a constant change in its values and orders. Societal norms are fluid and rapidly being influenced. This fluidity has both positive and negative aspects. The novel indicates the "small things" that bring some certain and specific changes in a person's life. The incidents in the novel change the perspective of the entire narrative and the incidents happen to shape the lives of characters and influence their decisions. The research focuses on the seductive tendencies of modernity and how modernity brings about changes in some aspects of a person's life while it may leave the rest untouched.

Significance of the Study

The research will give us a different perspective as to how the decisions of a person can be influenced by the changes their views are undergoing, this will be able to give us an insight from two perspectives, the first one would be the glorification of the western ways and how their



seductive tendencies could cloud a person's judgement, while the second one being plasticity of the behavioural patterns that keep on changing when a person is exposed to new perceptions.

Research Objective

1. To discuss the ways in which there is a decline in the societal norms as the characters were influenced by the seductive tendencies of modernity as shown in the novel *The God of Small Things*?
2. To discuss the ways in which marginalization still practiced in the society is shown to have been challenged by the liquid modernity, given the fact that Bauman considered all social structures, values and practices to be plastic.

Research Questions

1. What are the ways in which seductive tendencies of modernity bring about a significant decline in the societal norms that have been observed in a society for a considerable period of time?
2. What are the ways in which the liquid modern society challenges the gender and caste based marginalization still practiced in the society while the society keeps on moving fluidly towards modernity?

Delimitation of the Study

This research is delimited to Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things*. From theoretical perspective research is delimited to two postulates of Zygmunt Bauman's concept of liquid modernity. The first one being the tendency of a constant change with in a society and how the idea of modernity was the cause of decline in societal norms while the individuals are seduced by the ways of the west. The second postulate picked from Bauman's *Liquid Modernity* is how he terms the society to be plastic, meaning that it is something that can constantly be reshaped regardless of where and in what state it is. (Little, Understanding Society)

Literature Review

Daniel Little writes about Zygmunt Bauman's idea of Liquid Modernity with emphasis on the changes that come about in the society and the fact that this change tends to take place more frequently in the modern world. Daniel Little is of the view that while there are multiple forms of modernity and modern life, there are some things that link them all together. The uniting factors being fragility, temporariness, vulnerability and the inclination to constant



change. He further states that being modern is directly proportional to agreeing to be modernized and that too obsessively. Modernity is not the name of letting someone or something be. (Little, Varieties of Social Explanation kl 81)

He further states that new structures keep on replacing the old ones and as soon as they are replaced, they are considered to be outdated and old fashioned while the new structures are considered to the modern way of going by things only till something new comes along. So there is no permanence in anything that may be happening anywhere.

Some time ago, to be modern meant to be at a point where it could be said that a particular thing or person has achieved the status of perfection. This has now changed so much that to be modern means to be “an infinity of improvement with no final state in sight and none desired.” (Little, Understanding Society Kl 82)

Jensen Sass states that when we talk about the changes in a culture, we do not only refer to the things like painting, sculpture and literature. It is used to refer to the things like the feelings, the thinking and the behavioural patterns that are associated with an individual. He further states that when we are talking about changes that a culture undergoes, we are not referring to the changes that happen with the course of time, being under uncontrolled fluid modernity. It is something that happens as per the fashion and the trends of those times. (Sass)

This is the point where Bauman talks about the society and its culture as an art and wonders if it can survive as he terms every single thing to be plastic, meaning that it can change at any given point in time, regardless of how new it may be. Bauman writes that the class bound social stereotypes that they are uncanny like the facts of nature and any individual spends all his life trying to fit in by behaving in a certain way. In the same way, the gender stereotypes are also observed. (Atkinson) Even while they are a social construct, the stereotypes are set and they are set on the basis of the general practices in a society. The plasticity is clearly seen here as some people tend to adapt to the modern ways of treating a certain gender while some would not do this. The same thing can be observed when talking about the caste system. In the terms that being born into a certain caste is not a choice or an achievement so being treated on the basis of the caste is also a practice that is plastic in the sense that with the fluidity of modernity, some people accept the cast, even if they are considered to be among the lower ones, they are accepted by the people, while others continue to think of them as the inferior ones.



Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The design of this study is qualitative because the novel has been discussed descriptively from the perspective of the researcher while taking help from the ideas of social theorist Zygmunt Bauman. The method used for this research article is textual analysis. A qualitative research explores the selected text on the basis of subjective ideas and theories. It is used to comprehend the reasons and opinions or to simply do an analysis of the selected text. It tries to find solutions for the certain problems and helps to develop ideas for the research.

The theory used as lens for this paper is liquid modernity produced by Zygmunt Bauman, taken from his book *Liquid Modernity*. He is considered to be one of the leading intellectuals whose works touch the sociological themes like modernity and the fluidity that tends to govern all the changes and the transitions of humans from old to new. He talks about a society which is largely in need to be domesticated, civilized and rationalized. This was required for a society to be controlled, uniformed and understood. The radical change that was required has the tendency to transform the traditions and the traditional foundation that a society stood on. He used the term liquid modernity to refer to the constant change that he observed in the relationships and identities.

Data Analysis

The novel is set in the times before and after partition. That was the time when the colonizers were trying to teach the Indians new Western ways of life. They were trying to bring them to the point where they were westernized to the extent that they forgot their own roots and lost their identity. This was easier for the colonizers because they were dominant and they had brought with them the new fashion, new language and new ways of life and those who were colonized were being trained into thinking that they knew nothing, they were wrong in everything that they did. So, with this, it was really easier to make the Indians think that they are uncivilized and should be civilized. Patriarchal dominance and the caste system have been an inseparable part of the Indian culture and these ideas have been shown to be still in practice in the selected novel. However, under the influence of the liquid modernity, on one hand Indian cultural values have been shown to be declining while on the other hand power structures maintained by these values have also been shown to be challenged as the characters of Rahel and



Estha break the “love laws that determine who should be loved, and how, and how much” (Roy 16).

Decline in Societal Norms

With the colonized trained into believing that they were outdated and not fashionable, it was easier to seduce them with the bright and shiny ways of the west. In the novel, the characters are Indians, who are rich in culture. They have a set of norms that they have to follow. Under the influence of the colonizers, the characters are seen doing things which would not have happened if they were not exposed to the modern ways of the West.

Baby Kochamma had fallen for an Irish priest, converted her religion and stayed unmarried just for her unrequited love. She considered her relationship with him, one sided love, to be the only thing of value in her life. After coming back from the convent, she found pleasure in making life hell for those around her. She had turned into a sadist and did not even care if she had to abuse the dead or the living which ended up severing family ties.

Chacko is the maternal uncle of the twins in the novel, he married a white female, who he had a child with. He later on divorced her because they did not seem to be compatible with each other. After the death of Margaret’s husband Chacko calls her back and she comes to live with her ex-husband that is strongly against the Indian values. It also shows that values and norms are very flexible for men and upper classes because in case of Ammu and Valutha the deviation from the norms entails deadly consequences for them.

Estha and Rahel, the main characters in the story, are fraternal twins. After being unable to find love or meaning in anything that they had in their lives, ended up accepting each other as the only ones who understood the other. They committed incest in the end. Their committing incest is actually a rejection of and challenge to the societal norms and standards that caused the tragic sufferings of their mother Ammu and Velutha. Here we see a positive influence of liquid modernity that some characters are able to challenge the structures of oppression.

All these examples show that the Indians deviated from the norms that were a part of their society since ages but after being introduced to the modernized ways of life, they were able to see newer possibilities, specifically the ones which were not previously possible, even in their wildest imaginations.

Marginalization



The second issue at hand was marginalization on the basis of cast and gender. Ammu fell in love with Velutha, an untouchable. He was considered to be of the dishonourable and lower cast on the basis of the family that he was born in and his skin colour. He was brutally punished for his affair with Ammu, who was an upper class divorced woman who had two children. If this act had been done by some upper class person then it would not have been that much serious.

After Velutha's banishment, Ammu was kicked out of her own home and was forced to let go off her own daughter as well. In contrast to this, when Chacko divorced his wife and went back to her after the death of her husband and was able to live peacefully, with his family, within his own home.

This shows that there was difference in the treatment of the males and the females. A male committing an unspeakable act was acceptable but for Ammu being a women having physical relations with someone is something unforgettable and severely punishable. This shows that with the society moving towards modernity in a fluid, unfixed way, there was marginalization and unfairness in the treatment on the basis of the gender and caste. However, in the liquid society we see that these notions are strongly challenged by the characters of Estha and Rahel who reject every social standard or structure by committing incest and in a way take revenge of their mother's sufferings and Velutha's murder.

Findings

Reading the text from the perspective of the liquid modernity confirms that any society has the capability to undergo changes, and there is no limit as to when they would reach the level of perfection. The society depicted in the selected novel is also going through constant change under the influence of Western culture. This liquidity, flux and plasticity of the Indian society is working in two ways. On one hand it is depriving Indians of their old cultural values, leaving a nostalgic impact on minds of conservative Indians. On other hand this cultural and societal liquidity is posing a challenge to the patriarchal and caste based structures of oppression. Change, in this case, is fluid and nothing is permanent except the tendency of things to change. Change takes place whenever there is a change in the fashion and whatever is presented in a new and refined way is said to be the flexible fluid level which always has room for improvement.

Alongwith this, there is a human tendency to not accept change whenever they do not think something is worth accepting. The colonizers othered the Indians, and just for the sake of



being superior to someone, they othered the people who they, themselves, had termed as uncivilized. On the other hand the othered and oppressed Indians would oppress and other the lower classes and women in their society while protesting against colonial oppression simultaneously. Both these concepts are clearly penned down in the novel *The God of Small Things*. The novel clearly states the issues that were prevalent in the post-colonial Indian society. It also shows that how some changes were accepted by the Indians some others were resisted by them.

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