

East West Conceptual Similarities in Women Subordination: A Comparison of Jane Eyre and The God of Small Things

Abstract

Gender discrimination is not an exclusive practice of any one country or community. The codes of social inferiorization of women did not vary much either in the West or in the East. As a means of proving this hypothesis two novels are selected - one from the West and the other from the East. Jane Eyre was a Western Conception while God of Small Things depict the plight of women in India. The agents which are responsible for women subordination are similar in both the novels.

Keywords: Similarities, equality, novel, generation, male aggression, female assertiveness, gender equality

Introduction

Women are considered as second citizens and it is ingrained in the male psyche that they are social superiors, born to rule over their women. Various agents conditioned women to learn subservience to patriarchal domination. Prior to the advent of feminism, the condition of women was deplorably sad. Women are mostly silenced, displaced, interiorized, marginalized, discriminated and enslaved to become object of male possession. Devalored as beings incapable of wisdom, they are kept as child bearers with a womb to nurture the seed of man.

She is a women - a woe (to) man since it is she who with her lack of wisdom and thoughtless action was induced by desire or passion and yielded readily to the temptation of the serpent. She is evil by nature who seduced Adam to taste the forbidden fruit and thereby caused humanity to lose heaven. She is the weak sex because she needs the protection of a male and she herself is full of weakness (the lack of strength). She is unstable, disloyal, and swayed by tempestuous passions. She is unfit for adventurous explorations and so is supposed to be a mute companion without personal opinions, decisions or desires. She is the native savage who should submit to the male colonizer for her own improvement. She has no inherent virtue and so is in the heart of darkness which should await the enlightenment rendered through male teaching, conditioning, cultivation, pruning and attempts of civilizations.

A women is a second sex because she was a product of an after thought. Adam the first man was made in the image of God into whom was breathed the breath of the Creator. He was to be the crown and glory of creation, the wonder of the angels and the ruler of all the rest of the creations. Eve on the other hand was created as a helpmate for man, made from the mere rib of man (**Genesis 2:22**). She is thereby subservient to man who is her master.

She is the fair sex because she ought to be beautiful in order to please a man. She is also to be fair i.e. to be virtuous. While a man has freedom to wander and to indulge in physical gratification of his biological needs, a woman must be virtuous and guard her wandering passions so as to be loyal to her master. She has to be the epitome of virtue and beauty so that her man and master may boast of his wonderful possession. She is given the hearth while man is a master of the fields. The useful education of women included good manners and useful occupations like, sewing, knitting, embroidery, housekeeping talents, singing, painting, and prayers. She is to be ornate and not to be a bread winner. This resulted in her economic dependence on the male supporters like, father, brother, husband, uncle or sons.

Though suppressed in this age long tradition, the awakening of women, the spreading of the awareness and finally a sound revolt to fight for equality grew from mild protests to tumultuous revolutions. The birth of feminism, its growth and the formation of feminist theory are the consequences of the demands made to obliterate gender inequality.

Mohammad Wakeel
Research Scholar
Deptt. of English,
Sai Nath University
Ranchi - Jharkhand

The central women characters in Jane Eyre and God of Small things are shown to be individuals who suffered the consequences of gender discrimination. Jane Eyre confirms the moral claims made on women by the Victorian England. The "women would be a perfect lady, an angel in the house, contentedly submissive to man, but strong in her inner purity and religiosity, queen in her own realm of the home".

The East and West agents of women suppression are similar too. Religion is the most potent weapon that silenced women as well as created methods of punishment to chastise those who rebel. Social and Political rules established codes of conduct and expected women to adhere to the laws of the society. Families, elders, neighbours, schools, books, moral codes and the rest of the agents acted like watch dogs to control or condemn women who strayed away from the beaten path.

In the 19th century, women were considered to be appendages to men. Marriage and Family life were the goals to women. Women depended upon men physically, financially and spiritually. There are three parts in Jane Eyre where as we find it. The first part is about the oppression laid by the four main men characters on Jane. The second part is about three main women characters and their images in this novel. The last part is to point out some limitations of the author when illustrating feminism.

The novel was written in the early 19th century when men played a dominant role in society. Women were considered to be inferior to men. All that women were supposed to do was follow the instructions of men and be the subsidiary addition to men's life. Four men in Jane's life had laid oppression on her in different degrees. Jane survives the oppression and leads herself constantly to her own desirable life.

The first male character to oppress Jane was her cousin John Reed, who in part made little Jane live in shadow and fears when she was only a young girl. The boy hit Jane whenever he felt like only because Jane was an orphan. Poor little Jane could do nothing but bear the hurts both physically and spiritually. At last, Jane's feelings of hatred and indignity went out of control. For the first time, Jane stood up and fought back when John hit her again. Her cry of "Wicked Boy" at John declares her determination to fight against this unfair world. This quarrel and fight led to her life in Lowood in which she felt much happier.

Mr. Brocklehurst represents those who had firm belief in women-inferiority theory. He demanded the girls in Lowood to wear ugly or even broken clothes, eat far-from-enough harsh food and lead a hard life. In his opinion, girls should lead a simple life in order to cultivate the virtue of subordination and dependence. He once insulted Jane in front of Jane's teachers and classmates. He claimed Jane to be a wicked girl only because Mrs. Reed, Jane's Aunt, told him so. Though depressed and heart-broken, Jane finally showed with her own deeds to her teachers and classmates that she was not a wicked girl as Mr. Brocklehurst claimed.

Even Edward Rochester, Jane's lover, wanted to lay some oppression or control upon Jane. Before

their marriage, he wanted to use the necklace to circle up the thoughts and feelings of Jane. He wanted the ring to restrict Jane's actions. Further, he wanted the beautiful wedding dress to change Jane's appearance a little bit. Though at first, out of the love for Mr. Rochester, Jane intended to give in, but in the end she refused all of them. She just wanted to act what Jane was like and preserve her own unique characteristics.

St. John held absolute faith in the social convention that a woman's value was realized only when she devoted her life to a man. He took it for granted that it was the privilege and honour of Jane to go to India with him and help his work as his wife. He thought Jane would agree with him at last because it was what a good woman should be like. Jane firmly declined this idea because she wanted a marriage based on true love and mutual understandings.

The heroin of the novel Jane Eyre has undoubtedly succeeded in building up the image of a woman who has the courage to fight against the unfair reality and pursue equality in life. She calls for women to struggle for and be the masters of their own lives. During the whole story, Jane serves as a positive character. By the development of Jane's thoughts and feelings, the author conveys the spirits of feminism. Miss Blanch Ingram serves as a contrast character against Jane. She represents the typical girls from noble families in that time. All she wanted was to find a rich man to depend on and get married with him. In her opinion, a woman's duty was to make her appearance attractive and beautiful in order to win the heart of a rich man. Marriage should be based on social ranks and money only and husbands and children are the whole world for a woman. Her rude behavior and contempt upon "ordinary" people have fully illustrated her lack of cultivation and education. The image of Miss Blanch Ingram also symbolized the women victims of the social conventions. They lost their soul or even lost control of their bodies and they didn't have the slightest idea of the value of a woman's life. They lived and were quite willing to live as the belongings of men. The mad woman living on the 3rd floor arouses readers' suspicion and speed up the development of the plot. In addition, she helped to turn on a new page of Jane's life (Rosemarie Putnam Tong, 1998). Because of the terrible fire set by the mad woman, Thorn field was reduced to ashes and Mr. Rochester became blind and lost one arm. Everything in the past had become history and a new chapter in Jane's life had opened. In Ferndean Manor, a quiet and peaceful place, Jane and her beloved Mr. Rochester began to lead a new life in which Jane was no longer inferior to him and Jane's stature has changed because she was rich, thanks to the heritage from her dead uncle.

It's beyond any doubt that Charlotte Bronte has brought about the idea of feminism in this novel but she failed to demonstrate the concept perfectly. The spirits of feminism are supposed to advocate equality between men and women. The reason why the author failed is that she demonstrated deconstructed concept of "equality" only partially.

In the relationship between Jane and Mr. Rochester, Jane was a relatively stronger character. At the first time they met, Jane helped the injured Mr. Rochester and at the end of the novel, Jane helped Mr. Rochester to deal with his daily life because of his blindness and disability. Furthermore, Jane was rich while Mr. Rochester turned poor, old and ugly. The author seems to arrange their marriage in this kind of condition on purpose. In Jane's preparation for her marriage when she was still a governess in Thornfield, she refused all the jewelry or beautiful dresses Mr. Rochester had prepared for her. She didn't want to be changed into another woman. The very reason for this kind of feelings and her refusal of the offer is due to her strong sense of inferiority. She was poor and her social status was low at that time. The author didn't arrange Jane's marriage in the condition. Instead, Jane got married with Mr. Rochester when she was rich and Mr. Rochester was poor due to the big fire. Only in this circumstances, Jane was willing enough to marry Mr. Rochester because "I love you better now, when I can really be useful to you, than I did in your state of proud independence, when you disdained every part but that of the giver and protector" (Charlotte Bronte, 1975:451). Jane's marriage was in fact based on a kind of incompleteness and inequality at least in terms of the couple's physical conditions and social status. Charlotte subtly conveys the idea that feminism can be realized only in an incomplete marriage. The readers would be a little distressed when intelligent, kind-hearted and independent Jane gained her happiness in this way. The concept of feminism the author conveys to some extent goes to extremes.

The novel Jane Eyre successfully constituted an intelligent, kind-hearted and independent woman image. It arouses people's awareness of feminism. The four men characters' oppression upon the heroine Jane reveals the low social status of women in that period of time. The three women images in the novel represent different thoughts or ideas among women in that age. The novel serves as a pioneer in the cause of women's liberation though it fails to convey the concept of "feminism" to the fullest extent because it fails due to its failure to balance the equality between men and women.

Arundhati Roy's 'The God of Small Things', hence becomes significant in this context. In a novel which eliminates sentimentality and remains realistic in all its essential features, there exists the essential prerequisites of the flowering of humour. Arundhati Roy twines to this mode with the case of an experienced practitioner and exploits its malleability to register the protest against patriarchal systems of oppression and exploitation. The focus in Arundhati Roy's novel is on the irrationalities and injustices of domestic and social life. She attacks the double standard that one sex is to be sheltered, and judged and kept from power-while the other, regardless of its behaviour, runs the world. Arundhati's assaults, on the lopsided values of a male dominated society, are characterised by their humour seasoned with irony and sarcasm which tend to avoid extremities of aggression and hospitality. Most of the male

characters in this family chronicle exhibit chauvinistic tendencies which vary in degrees.

Male aggression obviously gets suggested in a laughter evoking scene which depicts the loyalty of Aleyooty Ammachi, Rahel's great-grandmother: (In the photograph) "She looked in the direction that her husband looked (while) with her heart she looked away (30)". Instances such as these become rare as the narrative moves further and records the sadistic traits of Pappachy and Chacko, the grand father and uncle of Rahel. Cast in the mould of the typical Western feminist stereotype of 1970s, these characters project male chauvinism prevalent in our part of the world in its extreme form. Pappachy, the "Imperial Entomologist", is "Charming and urban with visitors donated money to orphanages and leprosy clinics worked hard on his public profile as a sophisticated, generous, moral man. But along with his wife and children he turned into a monstrous, suspicious bully, with a streak of vicious cunning". In "the photograph that lent an underlying chill to the warm room in which it hung". "He was making an effort to be civil to the photographer while plotting to murder his wife. He had a little fleshy knob on the centre of his upper lip that dropped down over his lower lip in a sort of effeminate pout He wore Khaki Jodhpurs though he had never ridden a horse in his life"(51). This description blends the chilling aspects of Pappachi's personality with carefully chosen incongruities and absurdities so as to create a caricature of remarkable subtle impact.

Arundhati Roy uses a slightly different register to draw the caricature of the absurd and griggish Chacko, 'the Rhodes Scholar' with "his Oxford Moods". Petted by a doting mother, this "prime ministerial material" comes to Ayemenem "with his Balliol Oar and his Pickle Baron Dreams". His managerial 'skills' destroy a profitable business enterprise and reduce the family's resources to shambles. Chacko's intellectual superiority and masculine vanity are cast with great measure of exaggeration. "Chacko's room was stacked from floor to ceiling with books. He had read them all and quoted long passages from them for no apparent reason. or at least none that anyone else could fathom". The narrator repeatedly emphasizes the ludicrousness of Chacko's idealism. In a scene which reminds one of an absurd play, Chacko speaks at length about "The War of Dreams" to the confused twins and attempts to give them "a scene of historical perspective" which he himself lacks. His self-proclaimed Marxist learnings in addition to being another extension of his impractical idealism, are also ruses to flirt with and exploit the pretty women who worked in the factory. The narrative which guides the reader through the absurdity, ludicrousness and exaggerated idealism of Chacko now swings on to fix him sarcastically on the pedestal of a male aggressor: "An Oxford avatar of the old-Zamindar mentality - a landlord forcing his attention on women who depended on him for their livelihood".

Ultimately it is this image of a "Male Chauvinist Pig" which gets concretized when Chacko proudly informs his divorced, defenseless sister: "What's

yours is mine and what's mine is also mine". Deftly delivered strokes of irony such as these, along with the incongruity - rich build-up, help Arundhati Roy to expose some of the hypocrisies and irrationalities of patriarchy. "The God of Small Things" has a narrative sprinkled with flashes of caustic humour which artfully throws male aggression into relief. Arundhati Roy's erasure of sentimentality from the narrative perhaps enables her to look objectively at situations which arouse extreme indignation. In a scene which is disgusting and comical at the same time, Ammu's father-in-law drives off, in the new Fiat which he himself had gifted to the young couple, carrying "all the jewellery and most of the other presents that they had been given". At another point, after their nocturnal trip into the sanctified world of puranas and epics which ought to purge them of baser instincts, "The Kathakali man took off their make-up and went home to beat their wives. Even Kunti, the soft one with breasts". The novelist seems to suggest that tyrannizing over women is so common a phenomenon that it is uniformly seen among the rich as well as the poor. The subaltern male and the subordinated female in "The God of Small Things", become comrades-in-arms in a losing battle against the forces of oppression.

"The God of Small Things", despite its preoccupation with personal trauma, horror and impending tragedy, allows natural and spontaneous wit to supersede sentimentality. Such a supersession of wit appears to take after Nancy Walker's conclusion. According to her : "..... Sentimentality in literature is a result of powerlessness, wit may be seen as its opposite : an expression of confidence and power".

Roy attacks masculine insensitivity. It becomes atrociously farcical when Ammu on recalling the day of her wedding "realized that the slightly feverish glitter in her bedroom's eye had not been love, or even excitement at the prospect of carnal bliss, but approximately eight large pegs of whisky. Straight Neat". In a subsequent scene when the husband accepts Mr.Hollick's proposal to send Ammu to his bungalow to be 'looked after', the same effect gets created by shifting the focus to Ammu's using of 'The Reader's Digest World Atlas' to hit her husband "as hard as she could. on his head. His legs. His back and shoulders".

Mammachi, the uncomplaining wife of Pappachi, accepts bad marriage as a norm. She is a typical entrapped female who regards her husband as the inevitable oppressor. She is powerless to change things, and she cannot express her resentment. The authorial voice, frilled with irony dwells on the wife's maintenance of decorum after Pappachi's death : "Mammachi pasted in the family photograph album, the clipping from the 'Indian Express' that reported Pappachi's deathAt Pappachi's funeral, Mammachi cried and her contact lenses sled around in her eyes Mammachi was crying more because she was used to him than because she loved him". (50) This passage exposes obliquely the discrepancies between the realities of women's lives and the images of women promoted by culture.

Women's honour down the ages has been dictated by variance in cognitive construction of experience and constraints of cultural and social reception. In a context when the culturally dominant in group (the mainstream/male humour) monopolises the traditionally held constituents of empowered humour such as aggressiveness, dominance and assertiveness, the marginal outgroup (women's humour) remains on the defensive, regarding themselves weak or vulnerable to attack with impunity, the forces that oppress them.

Arundhati Roy's "The God of Small Things" with its sharply functional and vibrant band of humour, cast in the feminist mould, falsifies and shakes the foundations of the culturally dominant group's complacent domain. Her achievement becomes creditable since she initiates, empowers and solidifies a tradition which is capable of articulating and confronting social and political issues from vantage point which is exclusively female in orientation. There was a lot of contradiction concerning feminism. There is sufficient evidence supporting the theme, however there is always a contradicting twist present. For example, Chacko views Margaret Kochamma as his "trophy wife". Here, it is possible that Margaret Kochamma is nothing but an object, in return creating the idea that women are inferior to men. On the other hand, Margaret Kochamma can be seen as an amazing woman that Chacko is proud to have been married to. Margaret corrects him when she said, "ex-wife Chacko". Ammu for instance, acts against the feminist views. She tells Rahel and Estha that they do not need a Baba because she acts as both a mother and a father. Here Ammu is equal to a men. Although Mammachi is the true factory owner or operator, Chacko, the male, gets credit for her work.

Feminist is present when the male figure is credited for Ammu's actions. Ammu, the tragic heroine of the novel, is the most conspicuous representative of the fourth generation who died at a young age of thirty-one which is described as "not old, not young" and "viable die-able age". Her suffering started at a very young age. Her father Pappachi insisted that college education was unnecessary for a girl, so she had to leave for Delhi after schooling, she had nothing to do at Ayemenem other than waiting for marriage proposals. But no proposals came her way because her father did not have enough money to raise a suitable dowry. She dreamed of escaping from Ayemenem, from her ill-tempered father and bitter, long suffering mother. Finally, she was let to spend the summer with a distant aunt who lived in Calcutta. There she met her future husband at someone else's wedding reception there. She had an elaborate Calcutta wedding. But very soon things began to take a very bad shape. Her husband was really a misfit to her. He was an alcoholic and he made her smoke. Twins were born to her and by the time they were two years old, drinking had driven him into an alcoholic stupor. Meanwhile, Mr. Hollick, the bungalow owner to tell him that he should resign. He referred Ammu as "An extremely attractive wife" (P.41) clearly the Manager had an eye on her. He suggested that Ammu be sent to his bungalow to be 'looked after'.

The only choice left before her was to return, unwelcomed, to her parents in Ayemenem and she did so. Greater misery awaited her at Ayemenem on her arrival with her children there. Her world, there, was confined to the front and back verandah of Ayemenem. Somehow the well-built Velutha, the paravan carpenter created ripples in her. Ammu was drawn to Velutha and this was, in fact, the beginning of the end. Very soon this developed into physical relations between them.

Vellya Paapen, Velutha's father, was a mute witness to whatever went on near his house and he rushed to Ayemenem house to give a full factual report. Ammu was locked in a room and meanwhile as a coincidence Sophie Mol got drowned. Then we hear about her death in a grimy room in the Bharat Lodge in Alleppey, where she had gone for a job interview. Ammu went away without anyone there even to bid goodbye to her. The church refused to bury Ammu. So Chacko had to take the body to the electric crematorium. He had her wrapped in a dirty bed sheet and laid out on a stretcher. Finally she became a number; Receipt No. Q 498673. That was the number of the pink receipt the crematorium 'In-Charge' gave them. That entitled Chacko and Rahel to collect Ammu's remains. Ammu's story is more than a tragedy. She is made to suffer even from a very young age and continues to suffer throughout her life. She would have liked to study in a college if she had got a chance. She did have the dreams of a young girl about marriage and married life. But the hope was shattered when she came to know that nobody was there to provide her dowry to get her married off. Her escape to Calcutta invited fresh troubles. What she achieved if at all it was an achievement, was only a married life which lasted for less than a couple of years. Hopes were once again shattered when she returned to Ayemenem to discover that nobody was interested in her.

Later as fate would have it, she was drawn to Velutha and that marked the beginning of the ultimate tragedy. She was humiliated at the hands of the police, her near and dear ones and also the public at large. In short Ammu, without her knowledge becomes an instrument in the hands of the patriarchal society. Women who constitute half of the human population but paradoxically not treated on par with man in all spheres of human activity. They are oppressed, suppressed and marginalized in the matter of sharing the available opportunity for fulfillment of their lives, despite the fact that every woman slaves for the development of her family, her husband and children. This is the predicament of women all over the world. Simone de Beauvoir says that : A free and autonomous being like all creatures, a women finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of other".

In Arundhati Roy's novel we can see the compulsion faced by women in the male dominant society. From a theoretical point of view, the complicity between feminist commitment and post colonial theory is obvious. During colonial regimes women were doubly colonized: as the object of racist, abusive behaviour carried out by colonizers, and at

the same time, by traditional sexist role models that tended to assign to women subaltern positions inside their own family and local community. The fact that countries were decolonized does not mean that women's position as marginal figures in relation to power and hegemony has changed, nor is their position as members of a dependent, impoverished society necessarily altered. In both the colonial and post colonial processes, woman have particular histories of oppression and appropriation.

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