

Defiance Or Timidity Pivotal To Dignity: A Study Of Women In Margret Laurance's The Stone Angel And Arundhati Roy's The God Of Small Things

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Abstract: Comparative literature is an interdisciplinary field whose practitioners study literature across national borders, across time periods, across languages, across genres, across boundaries between literature and the other arts and across disciplines. In spite of their cultural diversities the two nations share their post-colonial status and their male-dominated societies. In both countries women suffer loss of dignity and self-respect. Atrocity against women cuts across all racial, social, cultural, economic, political and religious boundaries. Margret Laurence, a celebrated Canadian writer and Arundhati Roy, an Indian novelist, are conscious of the marginalization and discrimination meted out to women in their patriarchal societies. *The Stone Angel* is Laurence's first novel in the Manawaka series. Roy's *The God of Small Things* is a Booker prize winning novel. In this novel, Roy pictures the marginalization of women in the society, and exhibits the horrors of caste system in India. The present study compares Laurence's *The Stone Angel* and Roy's *The God of Small Things* to bring out the similarities of problems faced by women and the difference in their attitude towards the problems. It attempts to delineate the reason behind this difference and tries to provide a solution through analysis.

Key words: marginalization, caste, systems, dignity, respect

I. Introduction

I do not wish them [women] to have power over men; but over themselves
- Mary Wollstone Craft

Comparative literature is an interdisciplinary field whose practitioners study literature across national borders, across time periods, across languages, across genres, across boundaries between literature and the other arts and across disciplines. Defined most broadly, comparative literature is the study of "literature without borders". Canada and India are two different countries with their own cultural pluralism, multiplicity of languages, religions and sects, castes and creeds, races and colours, and ethnic patterns. In spite of their cultural diversities the two nations share their post-colonial status and their male-dominated societies. In both countries women suffer loss of dignity and self-respect. Atrocity against women cuts across all racial, social, cultural, economic, political and religious boundaries. Comparing a piece of literature with another helps in the better understanding of both the works on the grounds of culture, tradition, characterisation, theme, technique and background. So in this paper purports to analyse Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, two novels belonging to two different cultures, to bring out the similarities and differences between them.

Though women are geographically separated, they are politically, socially, culturally and psychologically united. Their identities are localised, but their sufferings and the discrimination against them are globalised. Patriarchy is an exploitative structure reinforced by governments, religions and social practices. The oppressive nature of patriarchy has its manifestation as sexism. Man in his attempt to affirm his domain over woman, has caused untold damage to her personality. In a patriarchal society, the woman is subjugated to mere existence with no clear identity, individuality or self-will. The woman is acknowledged for being passive, timid and conventional. None of her unconventionality is applauded but regarded atrocious in an 'androcentric' society. Having realised this, enlightened women demand that women should be treated on par with men in all respects.

Women writers all over the world, strive hard to uphold the nobility and dignity of women. They portray the sufferings of women and fight for the betterment of women through their writings. Women in all the countries, be it first world nations or third world nations, Canada or India are faced with similar problems. Margaret Laurence, a Canadian woman novelist and Arundhati Roy, an Indian woman novelist, have registered their voices against patriarchy. Both the writers have discussed about the sufferings of women in their native lands. Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* deals with the life of Hagar Shipley which covers three stages

namely girlhood, youth and old age. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* deals with three generations of women—Rahel representing childhood, Ammu and Margaret Kochamma representing the youth and Mammachi representing the old age. In Laurence's *The Stone Angel* Hagar is filled with pride throughout her life. Even as a child she has been a proud girl. This pride gives her the strength to face life. Hagar stands strong when her father beats her in her childhood. Her pride and her concern for appearances do not allow her to cry in front of her father. She says "I wouldn't let him see me cry, I was so enraged" (TSA 9). Similarly there are many instances in the novel where Hagar's pride and moral strength is evident. But Mammachi in Roy's fiction is highly submissive. She does not even care to maintain her dignity. She accepts every abuse from her husband passively. Ammu, on the other hand, has the desire to free herself from this patriarchal setup but fate plays a terrible game in her life. Ammu is not rebellious in nature. Even as a child and a teenager, she has watched her father beat her mother. But she never dared to stop her father or question him.

Hagar is a lovable daughter. Her father likes her very much because she follows him in all the ways. He sends her to Wachakwa for higher education. When she returns from East he says "you're a credit to me" (TSA 43). Hagar's brother, Matt, is not sent anywhere for higher education. Her father says "Matt can learn all he needs right here, if he's minded to do so" (TSA 42). Hagar's father loved her too much that she cannot tolerate the pressure of his love on her. It cannot be even described as love but a kind of possession he exercises on her. Hagar wants to escape from this possession and she chooses to marry Bram. Initially she was drawn towards Bram because he enjoys everything that is restricted to her. Despite his first marriage, Hagar decides to marry him even without the consent of her father. As opposite poles attract each other, she is attracted towards Bram. But this attraction is very short since she realises very soon that Bram is not a perfect match for her.

Ammu is not loved too much by her parents. She lives in that family because she is born in that family. Ammu is denied the right to education. Her father, Pappachi, refuses to send her to college by saying "college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl..." (TGST 38). She views marriage as a solution to her problems in that loveless house. She marries a Bengali without the consent of her father. But very soon she has to move away from her husband because of his rude behaviour. The influence of father-figure is too much on Hagar and Ammu. Hagar has inherited all the refined behaviour from her father but she wants to escape from his possession. Ammu does not like her father and wants to escape from his autonomy.

Both Ammu and Hagar decide to part their husbands because they are humiliated. Ammu's husband is ready to prostitute his wife to retain his job. It is for this reason she left her husband. But Hagar's husband, Bram, is not entirely responsible for their separation. Hagar cannot adjust herself with her husband. She is born in a rich family and abides by the manners and cultural codes. She does not want her husband to be uncultured and tries to change him. But Bram is the same before and after marriage. When Hagar is insulted as an egg woman by her friend's daughter, Hagar feels extremely humiliated. She decides to leave her husband and lead a decent life. Hagar joins as a house keeper in Mr. Oatley house. She earns her living and even gains a reward for her sincerity. She almost succeeds in her aim to lead a decent life.

Hagar does not return to her father or brother but she lives independently. Ammu, on the other hand, returns to Ayemmenem unwelcomed and leads a loveless life. Even when Ammu searches for a job she cannot succeed. The native cultures of both the women play a major role in shaping their lives. The western way of life is to allow children to think and act independently. In Laurence's novel *The Stone Angel* there are many instances to this way of living. All the characters when they reach the age of twenty and above find a suitable job for themselves. Even if by chance they depend on their parents, like Arlene, they decide to repay the money their parents had spent on them. Hagar who is born and brought up in this culture does not depend on anybody. She has the courage, education and exposure to the outer world which allows her to live independently.

In Indian culture, women are always pampered either by their parents or by their husband. They do not have the courage to oppose their parents or husband. So Ammu in *The God of Small Things*, who is used to a dependent life, returns to her parents. Even when Ammu tries to find a job, she is not well equipped to find a job. She is not educated enough to find a suitable job. She is not allowed to meet the outer world alone. So suddenly when she is thrown out of the house she stammers. Before she manages to get a job, death gets her. Ammu dies of asthma, at the age of thirty-one, alone in a hotel room. The main reason for her death is her constant struggle against the odds of life. She does not have the courage to face life. She lacks the strong will that Hagar manifests. Hagar contrasts Ammu in her view of life. Hagar accepts difficulties and happiness courageously and has a philosophy that life must be lived. This allows her to lead a long life till the age of ninety.

Rahel and Margaret Kochamma in Roy's novel are depicted as women with western way of life. Rahel, Ammu's daughter, marries a westerner and lives in America for a few years. She leaves her husband because she cannot involve completely in married life. Even before marriage she has been working and after her divorce she does not find any difficulty to make a living. Rahel does not hesitate to inform that she is a divorcee, rather

she wants to shock the narrow-minded people like K.N.M. Pillai by saying that she is a divorcee. Rahel faces life with practicality like a westerner.

Laurence's Hagar has an aversion to motherhood. Hagar's mother was very feeble and died when Hagar was a child. She thinks of motherhood as weak and submissive. Her pride does not allow her to be a mother. When Marvin takes leave of her to serve in the First World War, her inner mind wants to beg him not to go but her pride allows her to suppress her emotions and speak practically. Though Hagar loves John more than Marvin, she does not cry on his death. Hagar is never a loving and caring mother. Though she has love and care within her heart, she does not express it. Roy's Ammu is a loving and caring mother. She is both Mom and Baba to her children. Ammu, being hated by everyone in the family finds solace with her children. Infact, she leaves her husband when he begins to beat the children. She returns to Ayemenem for the sake of her children. She is drawn towards Velutha because he is the only person who loves her children. When Ammu is sent out of the Ayemenem house, she strives hard to find a job for the sake of her children. On the whole, Ammu lives and dies for her children.

Hagar does not remarry after her divorce. Though she is living in a land where pre-marital and extra-marital relationships are common, Hagar does not even think of a legitimate second marriage. Even when she longs for physical relation she thinks of returning to Bram but not to marry another man. Hagar does not want to perform another experiment in the form of second marriage as the first one itself has been a failure. Hagar could have inherited this mentality from her father. Her father did not remarry after the death of her mother. Being strongly influenced by her father, Hagar restrains from second marriage. In the case of Ammu, her dreams are shattered by her divorce. She knows that life had been lived and there are only torments in stock for her. Remarriage is a deadly sin in a family like hers. Being so young, her biological urges compel her to make love with Velutha. She knows very well that if their relationship is detected the consequence will be very bad. Mammachi, who accepts Chacko's relationships as men's needs, does not approve Ammu's relationship as woman's need.

Hagar has a great concern for cultured behaviour. She does not like John-Arlene relationship before their marriage. She hates Bram for his uncultured behaviour. But Ammu breaks the cultural codes to show her anger against the world which is ruled by the powerful people. Her first transgression is by marrying a Hindu Bengali without the consent of her father. This shows her anger against patriarchy. Again she breaks the love-laws when she touches the untouchable. This shows her anger against the ruling class.

Both Ammu and Hagar do not inherit their father's property. The reason for Hagar's disinheritance is her marriage without the consent of her father. But in Ammu's case it is because she is the daughter and not the son. Usually in Indian families daughters do not inherit the property of their parents. Hagar at least expects her father's property for the sake of her sons but Ammu never expects it because she knows very well about the mentality of her family. "Thanks to our wonderful male chauvinistic society" (TGST 57).

II. Conclusion

To conclude, both the novelists have portrayed the land and characters to which they are familiar. Laurence has presented a typical western woman with strong will, raging nature, and the ability to succeed in life. Roy has portrayed a typical pre-independent Indian woman, Mammachi, a post-independent Indian woman, Ammu and a modern Indian woman, Rahel. The characteristics of all the women in both the novels are products of their own native culture and the situation in which they are brought up. The Canadian and the Indian experiences of these novelists prove that the experiences of women are not limited to any geographical boundaries but are truly universal. It can be observed that the pain and dilemma of Hagar Shipley is not different from that of Ammu. But what makes the difference is how they face their problems. Hagar was defiant from her childhood. She was strong willed and had a thirst for a dignified life. This makes her to strive for a decent living and she succeeds in it. Ammu on the contrary was timid from her childhood. She does not cherish any strong will or independent thought. She moves with the stream of life, succumbs to the odds and ends her life. To sum up one has to be strong, bold and defiant to lead a dignified life.

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