

Quest for Identity: A look into Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things* and Shashi Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows*

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Abstract

The paper discusses the identity crisis faced by the women living in different strata of the society. At times, women are pushed out of the main circle and are forced to remain unrepresented and unheard. Though literature has discussed such issues from time to time, it's still a matter of concern. Here, the paper presents the identity crisis faced by the women in Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things* and Shashi Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows* and the struggle that they had undergone.

Keywords: Identity Crisis, Quest, Society, Unwritten Love Laws, Individuality, Independence, Tradition, Society.

When society draw boundaries to the freedom and choices of women and thus tries to create a homogeneous identity for her, writers like Arundhati Roy and Shashi Deshpande re-fashion these ideas giving a fresh insight into the quest for identity. In a way, they dilute the traditionally structured frame works and create space for women in a society that is increasingly patriarchal. When these writers create revolutions demanding the rights for women, they ask for the basic right; the freedom to choose. Arundhati Roy's novel *God of Small Things* and Shashi Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows* unravel such an identity quest through their characters: Ammu and Indu. Both these characters try to question the traditionally acclaimed norms and standards of society, a sort of complete subversion of the system.

Arundhati Roy's character Ammu a typical Syrian Christian girl brought up in Delhi was an educated woman who was bold enough to make her own decisions. Her father's dominant patriarchal attitude denied her university education and forced her to stay inside the four walls of her house. Her determination to break this chain took her to Kolkata where she found her soul mate, a relationship which left her destitute with her two children. Though again and again life gave her severe blows, no matter how badly the patriarchal society turned her down, she was not ready to give up. She had a firm stand against caste, religion, party and even against the decisions of her own family which was evident from her later choice of partner Velutha, a lower caste man.

Indu, the character of Shashi Deshpande is a well-educated woman turned journalist who revolted against her family at her younger age and found out her own ways of living. She even dares to choose a life partner of her likings against the wishes of her family. But at times she could not find out what she wants or how she wants to live. When she looked at the mirror she could not see her own self but of her husband Jayant. Years after she went back to her ancestral home seeking her roots, only to find her own self. At the end she realized that the roots are one's being from where the base of the identity is being made up.

In both novels, characters try to create an identity of their own. Though their situations differ, though they react in different ways, it is only to create space for themselves; to make mistakes; for having choices; simply to live their own lives.

In the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity

(Erik Erikson, a psychoanalyst)

Writers like Arundhati Roy and Shashi Deshpande redraw the structural framework created by the society for the women. Their characters have fluidity in such a way that they move in and out of these systems. Their novels deal with the oppressions created by the male

dominated society which bar the women from asserting their own free will. Here the characters of Arundathi Roy and Shashi Deshpande -Ammu and Indu respectively fought against these systems and evils that existed in the society in course of their journey to unravel themselves.

I

In the novel *God of Small Things*, struggle of different characters against the gender biases, class systems and the age-old unwritten love laws of who should be loved, how and how much can be seen vividly. The trauma undergone while struggling against these preordained systems is well depicted through the character Ammu.

Roy's novel is a blending and binding of both exterior landscape and interior vision. Her protagonists suffer from lack of parental love, disturbed infancy, broken homes. They are disgruntled with their existence and often opt out of the mainstream of life (Kunjambu,2014, p.278).

Ammu, an upper Syrian Christian girl from Kottayam, the daughter of an Imperial Entomologist was brought up in Delhi where she completed her school education. Later she returned to Aymenem, her native place along with her family as her father turned up the age of retirement. As Kamble noted in his article, "The marginalization of Ammu is made possible by traditional patriarchal family structure, where female child always unwelcomed and treated as burden on family" (Kamble, p.2).

Her didn't send his daughter for higher education insisting that a college education was a needless thing for girls whereas her brother was sent to Oxford to complete his education.

Ammu was determined and had an unwavering willpower in taking up her own decisions. She had grown accustomed to the cruelties of an ill-tempered father and had a long-suffering bitter mother.

As she grew older, Ammu learned to live with this cold calculating cruelty.

She developed a lofty sense of injustice and the mulish, reckless streak that develops in

someone small who has been bullied all their lives by Someone Big. She did exactly nothing to avoid quarrels and confrontations. In fact, it could be argued that she sought them out, perhaps even enjoyed them. (P; 182)

Her father never had enough money to raise a marriage for her. So years passed by. Ammu grew desperate and hatched several wretched little plans to escape from her ill-fated life. Thus when an opportunity came by her side, she went for Kolkata where a distant relation of her resided. There she met a Bengali Hindu boy at a wedding reception. Within no time she fell in love with him. She married him and moved to Kolkata where he had a job. Her unfaltering determination to break all the unbreakable and to cross all the boundaries that had been drawn was such that no unwritten laws of caste, religion, social status and love laws were strong enough to touch her fate. She found it as a means to a life that was denied to her; a better world that she had never seen before and as a space to assert her individuality. She found her destiny in him. But as the novel moves on, we found a broken relationship, leaving her all alone, but with ailing asthma. She owned nothing; no house no education no living and no more 'locust stand I' but two zygotic twins.

She was forced to return to Aymenem. She was Wild. Sick. Sad.

As a mother she always tried to fulfill her duties. She helped her twins with everything she could. She poured all her motherly affection over them. Once when she scolded Estha she mentioned that as they had no Baba so that she loved them double. In the backdrop of Sophie mole's death when separation between the three became inevitable, as they hadn't had enough money to stay together Ammu was forced to send Estha back to his father and leaving Rahel alone in Aymenem house she moved to a rented room. When she came back to the house for the last time to meet Rahel, with her remaining meager income she bought her gifts, which were merely the presents for a seven-year-old child when she was eleven. When Estha

and Rahel got separated she even consulted a Twin expert from Hyderabad to know the pros and cons of it. She never allowed them to lose their hope. Even in her worst situations she promised them about a life together with a comfortable income and assures them that their problems will end shortly.

She had a strong hatred towards the systems prevailed in the society. One afternoon when she found Velutha, a low caste paravan working in their family's pickle factory playing with her daughter Rahel, she was realizing the sub world of her daughter where she had no part to play. That day she realized that he had a better part in her life too. Her childhood memories about him swayed in her mind where he had presented her with many small gifts. She remembered that he carried no features of his childhood but except his smile as a mark. She wished if he was the man Rahel saw in the Communist march on their way to Cochin for receiving Chacko's ex-wife and their daughter. She felt that he was raging against an 'ordered' world where everything was predetermined, the systems and boundaries she wished to rage against; a world which Ammu herself wanted to throw away; the one which she despised even more and more.

Suddenly Ammu hoped that it had been him that Rahel saw in the march. She hoped it had been him who raised his flag and knotted arm in anger. She hoped that under his cloak of cheerfulness, he housed a living, breathing anger against the smug ordered world that she so raged against. She hoped it had been him (P: 176)

She found her dreams and hopes in Velutha who became the 'god of small things'. When Velutha turned towards her he could see the deep pimples on her cheeks.

That knowledge had slid to him that afternoon. Cleanly. Like the sharp edge of a knife. When history had slipped up. While he had held her little daughter in his arms. When her eyes had told him he was not only the giver of gifts. That she had gifts to give

him too, that in return for his boats, his boxes, his small windmills, she would trade her deep dimples when she smiled her smooth brown skin. Her shining shoulders. Her eyes that were always somewhere else (p; 332).

For her, he was

The god of loss

The god of small things

The god of goose bumps and Sudden Smiles.

When they fell in love, they had neither future nor past to look into because they had known the fact that even a single day could change their fate.

.... they knew they had to put their faith in fragility. Stick to smallness. Each time they parted they extracted only one promise from each other.

Tomorrow?

Tomorrow. (Page-339)

For, Ammu, Velutha was never a tool for her biological needs but a 'certainty'; an orifice to give out her feelings emotions that she had tied back inside her inner self; the tears she had suppressed, her smiles, frustrations of her crumbled dreams, desperateness at her failing life, sarcasms at the hypocrisy of the play she was forced to be a part of. She tore off her mask in front of him. She stood skin to skin with him. Both of them were aware of the reality they had to face. Unwritten love laws that ran deep rooted in the society despite the rise of political parties and the progressive turn of mind, lay bare in front of them; who should be loved how and how much. A Syrian Christian girl from an upper stratum of society and a low cast paravan with 'disgusting smell'.

Each time she tried to break the boundaries created by the society, it even more forcefully thrust back upon her. The gender biases and the forced patriarchal system were clearly visible throughout the story. She was suppressed by the male as well as the female characters in the novel. When she married a Hindu boy she became an outcast, but when Chacko did the same the whole family consciously forgotten it. When Chacko indulged in illegal relationships with women workers of pickle factory mammachi considered it as 'Men's Need' but when Ammu fell in love it became an 'unforgivable act.' Her tolerance of 'Men's Needs' as far as her son was concerned, became the fuel for her unmanageable fury at her daughter.'(p;258)

Though Ammu committed suicide at the end, till then she wasn't ready to give up her fight against destiny. Though Velutha became a channel which helped her to tore off her mask and realize what she was and what she needed. Yet, destiny had something else for her in its store. Being jobless, dependent, and with ailing asthma her future was predictable and in one way her suicide attempt can be redefined as her last attempt to keep her destiny away from the predetermined political systems of the society where she had lived, though not justifiable. 'She simply escaped—'With a noisy ceiling fan for company and no Estha to lie at the back of her and talk to her'.

Shashi Deshpande's novels usually deal with the conflicts faced by the educated Indian middle-class women in the long run for self-expression. She also raises concerns over the women caught between the domination of patriarchy and the traditions in which they lived. The novel *Roots and Shadows* deal with the struggle of an educated middle-class woman Indu who is caught between the domination of patriarchy and tradition and the ordeals she pass through in the process of attaining an identity of her own.

II

Life doesn't make any sense without interdependence. We need each other and the sooner we learn that, the better for us all (Erik Erikson).

Indu the protagonist of the novel 'Roots and Shadows' lived in her ancestral home for eighteen years, where she was brought as a fifteen days old baby. Now after a gap of eleven years, she returned back to her home as she was informed that Akka selected her as the new heir of the family, on her deathbed. Indu was brought up in a traditional Hindu joint family dominated by Akka, her grandfather's aunt. Alike typical traditional families, it enveloped a culture of its own. It had standards and forms and rituals and ceremonies of its own, from the method of serving food to conducting wedding ceremonies. Right from her childhood she was a rebel and found it difficult to live by others rules. Though the changes for which she rebelled were small the result was catastrophic. She scorned at the idea of being submissive; being dominated. She never liked to inculcate herself into a structure and framework created by others.

From the day she became a woman, she had an aversion to her sex. She was always taught that a woman has no choices but to submit and accept. For the same she resented her woman hood. 'Yes, it was true I felt hedged in, limited by my sex. I resented my womanhood because it closed so many doors to me'. (Page 78) When kaki (uncle's (kaka) wife) informed her that she became a woman, she felt those words as brutal and graceless. 'And that had been my introduction to the beautiful world of being a woman. I was unclean' (page-78). Later on, it could be seen that she even got offended to work in a female magazine and later shifted to another journal which she thought as better. She found it too difficult to assert herself while mingling with woman alone. She felt like locked up in a cage.

When she turned eighteen, she shifted to a hostel, where she resumed her education and became a journalist. She left the old house that had been her family for eighteen years only to be free; to assert her own space and individuality. Later she married Jayant from another caste,

thinking that by marrying him she would become complete as a person. But after marriage her concepts about marriage such as perfect communication and complete understanding became mere illusions which would never occur. Though it seemed to be a perfect relationship for outsiders she found it as something that took away her ability to stand alone. She had a sense of futility and vacuity towards her married life as she lost the ability to assume her identity in front of him.' When I look in the mirror, I think of Jayant. When I dress, I think of Jayant. When I undress I think of him? Always what he wants.' (Page -53)

He wanted her to be submissive and could never imagine her to shed her shyness even in their private affairs. If she took the initiative, it shocks him to find passion in a woman and causes crack in their relationship. So she pretended; pretended to be passive, unresponsive, still and dead. At the same time she deeply loved him. She wanted to be loved and cared. She felt ashamed of herself for yearning for him; for being too dependent on him. She left behind her home and its traditions, only to assert independence and her own free will but her married life failed her miserably. She was afraid of failures and was never willing to display her feelings even to her own family whom she turned her back on.

Jayant and I...I wish I could say we have achieved complete happiness. But I cannot fantasize. I think of the cries that had filled me earlier... I want to be loved; I want to be happy. (p.23)

She was shocked to hear when Naren, her cousin pointed out that she had changed and became softer. Because once her features were harder more like a rebel; a rebel against anything that demands submission. But in course of time, she learnt to be submissive and learnt to pretend and 'behave like a woman'.

Indu had a great obsession with past and this obsession depicted the conflict she had faced in her struggle between modernity and tradition. Long gap of eleven years completely made her new to the atmosphere of her home, yet many a times she felt like a child. Though

she left the home out of her sarcasm towards the beliefs and the culture the family had nurtured up, sometimes she found herself caught up in it even for little things. She found herself unable to take a coffee without having a bath. 'We flatter ourselves we have escaped the compulsions of the past; but we're still pinioned to it by little things' (p-41). When old uncle died and Indu got emotional, it was Jayant who thought it in a practical way. He said that if old pillars were gone, new pillars would take its place and considered her as an old pillar. When the house was planned to be demolished, it hurt her deeply but she tried to convey herself that it was the relics of a bygone age which always tied her to the past. It was a sort of realization that you can't always cling on to something of past, sometimes you may lose other times you may win, in short, you should learn to move on.

Her return to home was a transition period for her from the act of mere pretense to her real identity; where her masks torn off. A place from where she learnt the truth that it is not by detaching but by being honest to oneself and by creating space for themselves in the circle, the life really moves on. Naren, her cousin was the only person who was able to reach across the barriers she had built around herself. When he talked to her, she could see the sincerity hidden in his words. It is her relationship with Naren that made her realize what she was in need of and what she lacked the most; courage. Courage to make decisions without being influenced. She was realizing the fact that she could not ever built a comfortable life on dishonesty or on mere pretense.' Now I would go back and see if that home could stand the scorching touch of honesty' (p-168).

When she began to find courage for herself, she perceived the fact that she never allowed anyone to cross the barriers she had built around, even Jayant couldn't. But when she unraveled those folds Jayant began to discern her strengths as well as her weakness gradually.

Now I think he knows me better, my strengths, which I had hidden from him, as well as my weaknesses. Perhaps, because of this, we have a better chance. There is an ease in our relationship that was not there before. (Page-24)

She recollected the words old uncle had told her about having some rules in life so that it can have both dignity and grace. She realized that in life no one can detach from everything as long as they live.' Attachment...we can't escape it. It's the law of life. You can never protect yourself against love (P-102)'. She realized that in life everyone would be interdependent and be loved. It is not detachment that gave self-expression, but finding freedom within the circles of life is success. From the death exuded eyes of Naren she understood that detachment is only for dead not for living.

She decided to talk to Jayant about her interest. Her preference for writing than working as a journalist. And she never again ashamed for being in need of him and no more she felt attachment and interdependency as a crime but accepted it as a way of life. She discovered that even in small things one could find happiness and came to the conclusion that one should have the courage to assert one's own identity and this courage to live ones lives within the circle can present us with freedom.

III

Despite the situations they encountered, the ages in which they lived, an ultimate struggle could be seen in the lives of women characters in majority of the novels. They weren't ready to submit themselves for the predetermined political systems of neither society nor family. They hesitantly moved out of it and created a life out of their self-interest. Ammu the protagonist in 'God of Small Things' fought against the barriers created by the society though she herself ended up in suicide whereas Indu, the protagonist of 'Roots and Shadows' who caught up in the traditions and patriarchal dominations overcame those social barriers and created an identity of her own.

Both the characters show resistance to an ordered world where they never had the sense of belongingness. They had undergone the stigma of alienation, loss of love, crumbled family life and hopelessness in the struggle of search for identity. Though both of them faced different situations, their quests were for the same; to attain a self-independence and identity.

Ammu and Indu can be considered as the representatives of modern Indian women. If the identity problem is discussed broadly, it can be seen that everyone's life, especially that of a woman, depends on a 'Conduct certificate'. What you wanted to be or how you needed yourself to be identified isn't the matter but how others perceive about you is the real concern. Nothing else matters. Unless women are ready to change this attitude, this struggle for identity will continue and is going to be an endless struggle.

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