

Redefining Femininity: An Analysis of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Vikas Bahl's *Queen*

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Abstract

This research paper offers a comparative analysis of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Vikas Bahl's film *Queen* (2013), focusing on the portrayal of Indian womanhood, resistance to patriarchy, and the protagonists' journeys of self-discovery. Both works center on female characters who challenge societal norms and assert their agency in different socio-cultural contexts. Ammu in *The God of Small Things* defies traditional caste and gender expectations but faces tragic consequences, while Rani in *Queen* breaks free from patriarchal constraints, achieving personal empowerment. By applying feminist literary and film theory, this study explores themes of autonomy, modernity, and tradition, examining how these characters navigate the intersection of gender, class, and caste. The paper underscores the evolving representation of women in Indian literature and cinema, highlighting the contrast between personal triumph and social oppression in their respective journeys.

Keywords: Indian Womanhood, Patriarchy, *The God of Small Things*, *Queen*, Gender, Social Resistance, Self-Discovery, Modernity, Tradition, Caste

Introduction

Indian womanhood has evolved and undergone a massive transformation in literature and film especially because of the changing socio-political landscape and globalization of post-colonial India. Femininity was once restricted to patriarchal norms but it has now become a feat of empowerment, self-assertion, and contestation. Female protagonists in both literature and cinema are no longer restricted to traditional roles but are seen challenging societal expectations through acts of self-discovery, independence, and defiance.

The God of Small Things (1997) by Arundhati Roy and the film *Queen* (2013) by Vikas Bahl will be analyzed in this research paper as to how the novel and the film redefine the traditional notions of femininity. Ammu and Rahel in the novel, and Rani in the film, the protagonists undergo personal journeys of self-realization while swimming through the treacherous waters of societal pressures. This study will focus on their self-realization and hard struggle for agency. Also, how these are important commentaries on Indian womanhood, and how these narratives can be read in conversation with the larger cultural contexts where they were produced. The paper seeks to juxtapose the respective works in their invocation of a feminist film theory and feminist literary theory in challenging the oppositional structures of tradition versus modernity, agency versus subservience and conformity versus rebellion in the representation of Indian women.

Literature Review

It is important to place this research within the broader framework of feminist literary and film criticism before commencing the analysis of *The God of Small Things* and *Queen*. The limitations imposed on female autonomy by traditional gender roles have been concerned with the feminist discourse on Indian women. *Gender Trouble* (1990) by Judith Butler and

Gayatri Spivak's concept of "subaltern" has helped critically analyze and examine gendered subjugation in post-colonial societies.

1. The Representation of Women in Indian English Literature

Representation of women, a reflection of their struggles, vulnerabilities and their victories has often been addressed in Indian English Literature. In *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (1989) Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid have examined women as to how they have been portrayed in history concerning caste, religion, and colonialism. *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy has been praised for its detailed representation of women who revolt against societal norms. The expectations of being a woman, wife and mother have been challenged by the central figure of the novel, Ammu in an extremely orthodox, patriarchal society. Similar defiance has been seen in the character of Rahel, daughter of Ammu who showcased similar traits because of her scarred childhood.

2. Women in Indian Cinema: From Stereotypes to Empowerment

Women have been long presented in stereotypical roles as submissive wives, objects of male desire, and dutybound wives in the mainstream Indian film industry. However, if we look at *Queen*, a recent film, the portrayal of the female character Rani Mehra is done with extreme complexity and agency. The story of Rani Mehra, in *Queen*, is of a young woman who leaves all the patriarchal boundaries behind after being betrayed by her fiancé and travels solo to Europe. Rani is portrayed in the film as a woman who breaks free from her traditional Indian upbringing and heartily accepts her individuality and independence. Rini Bhattacharya and Rajeshwari Pandharipande (2011), critics of Indian cinema have noted the popularity of women-centric narratives that present women's escape from stereotypical gender roles and activities and have stated the evolution of women characters in Indian cinema.

Comparative Analysis of *The God of Small Things* and *Queen*

1. The Journey of Self-Discovery and Empowerment

The female protagonists in both *The God of Small Things* and *Queen* venture into a path of self-discovery by rejecting patriarchal control. Both women showcase extremely different journeys where Ammu's journey takes a tragic turn as she was a divorcee in a profoundly conservative society and belonged to a lower caste background. Her first step towards freedom was when she went against her father's wishes and married a man whom she loved, but her life did not end in happiness even then, her husband turned out to be abusive and it led to their divorce. Then if we look into Rani, her journey in *Queen*, was fueled by the jilt from her fiancé which led to her self-liberation. Even after such an event she musters up the courage and decides to go on her honeymoon alone. This is the decision that helps her to reclaim her life and freedom which becomes symbolic.

Both narratives examine ways in which these women push back against societal norms and patriarchal power, though in different ways. This rebellion is forced out of Ammu, and her eventual message is one of a lost cause: Ammu is marginalized and dies as a consequence of her desire to live outside of the hierarchical norms of society. On the contrary, Rani is granted emotional and psychological freedom at the climax of her journey. At once, the works provide opposing portraiture of women's efforts to claim their independence in the shrouds of oppressive social structures.

Textual Analysis: Ammu's Defiance and Tragic End in *The God of Small Things*

In the novel *The God of Small Things*, Ammu defies the patriarchal and caste-enforced codes of conduct by refusing to conform to the codes laid down by her family and society. Her union with a man of her choosing — against her wishes — suggests her yearning for freedom. Her eventual divorce led to her being ostracized and she is labelled as being

“unsuitable” for remarriage as she is a woman with two children. Also, she is made a pariah in the community when she returns home.

The pivotal moment in the novel is Ammu’s forbidden romance with Velutha, a lower-caste man. This defiance is at once a personal testament to her autonomy and a radical refusal of the caste system. Roy writes, “Ammu had an elaborate plan. It involved the tender detaching of Velutha’s hair from his skull, the glueing of his smile onto her soul.” In this act, Ammu tries to claim her right to love, and to her body, but the price is devastating. Ammu’s affair leads to Velutha’s gruesome murder by the police, and Ammu herself is ostracized by her family, dying a lonely and early death. Roy’s representation of Ammu is a potent indictment of the way patriarchal and caste oppression intersect to regulate women’s lives.

Film Analysis: Rani’s Journey in Queen

It is rather important to compare Rani’s character in *Queen* to Ammu’s character in *The God of Small Things* where we notice that Rani’s journey is of empowerment, self-discovery and growth whereas Ammu’s is a tragic story. When the film begins, Rani is shown as a conservative, shy and traditional young woman from Delhi who has encapsulated her life around her family and her fiancé. Rani is left devastated, heartbroken, and humiliated after Vijay, her fiancé calls off their wedding. But instead of hiding away and retreating to her shell, she decides to venture alone to her honeymoon destination. This very act marks the stepping stone to her journey toward independence.

Rani meets new people and encounters new cultures and experiences that challenge her orthodox thinking and presumption of self-worth and womanhood when she travels in and around Paris and Amsterdam. A remarkable event in the film is when Rani displays her independence by working in a restraint in Amsterdam and fighting for her roommate's rights. Rani recognizes her potential and strength due to these events and experiences which leads to her rejection of Vijay when he tries to win Rani back at the end of the film. Thus, *Queen*,

provides a buoyant representation of a woman's journey to self-empowerment, as compared to Ammu, in *The God of Small Things* where her life ends in tragedy.

2. Tradition vs. Modernity: Managing Traditional Culture

Still, *Queen* is oriented on the ideas of tradition and modernity concerning Indian women, and *The God of Small Things* deals with the same issue. Ammu and Rani want to do what traditions demand but, how they respond to these demands is exactly the opposite.

Tradition in The God of Small Things

In Roy's novels, the Ayemenem family is portrayed as being traditional, especially the rigidity of the caste system and the chauvinistic role assigned to women. For this, Ammu defies the traditions of her village- by having a love marriage and then having an affair with a lower caste man is rejected by her society. Once again Roy appears to have adopted a negative approach to tradition in the role she paints it regarding the lovers' infractions of tradition; both Ammu and Velutha pay dearly for their transgression.

Modernity in Queen

On the other hand, the phenomenon of the *Queen* is set in today's Indian society and instead of the traditionalist approach, the people start to embrace freedom and rebellion motifs. She learns new attitudes to life and Italian culture through her travel through Europe and slowly frees herself from the Indian traditions which inclined her before. In other scenes, Bahl's film shows this process as a positive process and shouts about the possibilities and openings that the Indian women were getting in a newly rebuilding Indian society. The film presses on the importance of breaking the shackles of patriarchy and suppression and freeing oneself from the restrictions imposed by traditions through Rani's solo journey.

In *Queen*, modernity is depicted as a liberating force through which Rani is liberated from her punitive culture. This shy and reserved woman changes with time; she attains the feeling of assertiveness to the credit of Indian tradition as she takes control of her own life.

This change is reflected especially in the relaxation in regards to orientation in unknown spaces like streets of Paris, and Amsterdam and constant development in communication with people from different cultures. Therefore, Rani changed and emerged from the movie, not as the woman who is controlled and muted by her engagement to her fiancé. She on the other hand is painted as a fully headed woman and a bodied person who can be able to make decisions for herself.

Although Ammu's tyrant small world turns dark because she does not rebel against the oppressions of her tradition, the *Queen* narrates the other side of the story of the transformation of Rani. They indicate the difference in historical and social connectedness and backgrounds of the two works. If they are from the conservative Keralite or caste culture of the 1950s then Ammu is indeed a victim too. Rani possesses all the freedom that a modern Indian woman has or should have in the independent India of the latter half of the decade of the 20s.

3. Agency and Resistance: An Analysis of the Rebellion of the Female Protagonists

There are many overarching themes in *The God of Small Things* and *Queen*, however, it is evident that the most apparent theme is the main character going against the norms being the decision maker and taking control of their lives. To some extent, both Ammu and Rani reject the status that was assigned and ways of behaviour that were expected from women but in the end both the characters have opposite endings.

Ammu's Resistance in *The God of Small Things*

Ammu's character is defined by her rebellion against the patriarchal norms and her acts of disregard are personal and political. Be it breaking free from the chains of spirituality and releasing herself sexually from the fetters of her middle-class Malayali womanhood by making a strong decision to marry a man not of her caste and later having an affair with Velutha. Ammu's rebellion leads to punishment, unlike men and it ultimately leads to her

death. Maybe that is the reason behind Roy's painting of female rebellion in *The God of Small Things* and its consequences sadder than others. She poses a direct challenge to the caste system and hierarchy of the social community by having a love affair with Velutha. This act of disobedience is seen not only as a personal sin but as a threat to the entire society, and it is punished through violence.

Roy nuances Ammu's antagonism in a very measured way. Thus, the rebellion in which Ammu's separatist activities are painted as assertions of her egoistical and autonomous behaviour is soaked in risk. The tragedy of Ammu's character – being thrown out of the house by her family and then dying alone is a frightening reality for anyone defying feudal-patriarchal and caste norms in a society. Her attempt to gain control over her own life and her body despite all the constraints of tradition and class is nevertheless a failed one because the more powerful structures of oppression cannot be felled.

Rani's Resistance in Queen

Roy's portrayal of Ammu's resistance can be said to be complex in the following way. Though one may say, that Ammu indulges in rebellion which is so crucial an assertion of her identity, these acts of defiance are murderous. Ammu's final state of rejection by her people, her own family, and death alone symbolises the harsh extent to which women have to pay for rejecting the societal norms of male domination and caste prejudices in India. Her fight for autonomy is thereby noteworthy but futile, so cultural and classist oppression triumphs in the end.

Defiance comes in many shapes in Rani's character. "Non-girlish" behaviour is the first one and the need for novelty and desire to meet and learn about new people and cultures is the second one. The final scene reveals her changed and better persona where she finally rejects Vijay who had returned to her with a marriage proposal. This scene marks the beginning of Rani's transformation which shows how she acted against patriarchy which once

succumbed to her. Her “no” to Vijay, sets her free and she is no longer defined by her man Vijay.

Queen celebrates Rani’s journey as a triumph of personal growth and female empowerment. Where Ammu is doomed by the forces of tradition, Rani successfully escapes the structures of her upbringing and becomes a confident, independent woman. This results in a much more hopeful concept of females fighting back and agency, one that now allows women to reclaim their lives and agency in the modern world.

Intersectionality, Class, Caste, Geography and The New World Order

Both, *The God of Small Things* and *Queen* are very much concerned with how their female protagonists are shaped by class, caste, and geography. Both Ammu and Rani suffer as a result of patriarchal dictates, but their struggles are complicated by their positions within society and the environment in which they live.

The Role of Class and Caste in The God of Small Things

In *The God of Small Things*, caste is a core theme and a central factor in Ammu’s life. Ammu belongs to the Syrian Christian community in Kerala and occupies a precarious place within the social order. While her family is relatively privileged in terms of class, they are still subject to the caste-based prejudices that dominate the society in which they live. Ammu’s affair with Velutha, a lower-caste man, is seen as an unforgivable transgression, not only because it violates the norms of female behaviour but because it crosses caste boundaries.

Roy’s novel explores how the intersection of caste and gender serves to further oppress women like Ammu. Her social position as a divorced woman already makes her vulnerable to ostracism, and her relationship with Velutha only exacerbates her marginalisation. The novel’s portrayal of caste-based violence, particularly in Velutha’s brutal death, underscores the harsh realities faced by those who dare to challenge the caste system.

Ammu is another character, although she belongs to the female sex and the higher cast; the similar conditions make her both an oppressed and an oppressor.

Class and Geography in Queen

Although *Queen* is not associated with caste you can see reactions of class and geography in the plot of Rani's journey. As a middle-class woman from Delhi, Rani's experiences are shaped by her upbringing in a conservative, patriarchal family. Her decision to travel abroad exposes her to different social and cultural norms, and much of the film's humour comes from Rani's initial discomfort with the more liberal attitudes she encounters in Europe.

It could be treated as a factor in the change of Rani as following her veterinary education and becoming a member of a middle-class family, her life experiences are narrower and are limited only to the family and closest circle. But through traveling she can leave behind those restricting female domesticated roles and ways of thinking. By depicting strong shifts in Rani's education from middle-class Indian morality to that she experiences in Paris and Amsterdam the director gets across the simple message that a woman's progress is significantly associated with her exposure to progressive or liberal cultures.

While Rani's journey is less overtly concerned with the intersection of class and gender than Ammu's, it nevertheless highlights how social position and geography shape women's experiences. Rani's ability to travel and reinvent herself is made possible by her relative privilege as a middle-class woman, even as she faces significant challenges due to her gender.

Conclusion

While Roy further deepens that discourse in her novel by looking at specifically Indian female experience in *The God of Small Things*, Bahl's *Queen* also gives a layered view into Indian womanhood and her journey of claiming self and power through her narrative.

Whereas Ammu who narrates *The God of Small Things* endures a tragic death being a victim of caste, class and patriarchal violence that still govern women's existence in pre/post-modern Indian context, Rani who is the protagonist in *Queen* is a testament to neo-liberal globalized India where a woman can thrive and overcome the odds.

Through a comparative analysis of these two works, this research paper has demonstrated how both literature and cinema are powerful tools for challenging and redefining conventional notions of femininity. Ammu's defiance in the face of societal oppression and Rani's assertion of independence both serve as critical commentaries on the evolving role of women in Indian society. However, the ending of their journey makes them the epitome of the next generation of women's issues and struggles between tradition and modernity as well as death and life.

Ultimately, *The God of Small Things* and *Queen* represent two sides of the same coin: in both novels, women do not fit the mould of wife/sister/daughter as dictated by their male counterparts, however, while Ammu's rebellion spells doom for her, Rani's journey opens up a possibility to envision the future of woman empowered enough to reclaim her identity and rightfully stake her claim to the world. Consequently, both the novels by Roy and Bahl do add something to discussions of female subjectivity and gender and sexual identities in Contemporary Indian literature and Film that may help to explain the diversification of Indian femininities.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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