



Deprivation, Frustration, Jealousy, Vindictiveness, Four Destroyed Lives and Baby Kochamma in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract

Arundhati Roy's family drama *The God of Small Things* (1997) has several women characters who represent typical Indian women. Among them some are tortured, some abuse others. Patriarchy, ill-treatment towards the 'Untouchables,' and the helplessness of married women are the center points of this celebrated novel. It not only portrays the struggle of women in the male-dominated conservative society but also shows how women can cause suffering to other women and men. In this novel women of three generations are discussed. Baby Kochamma belongs to the first generation, who is deprived, toxic, jealous, mean, manipulative, selfish, cruel, and revengeful. Her real name is Navomi Ipe. Roy's debut novel has dealt with the sufferings of the 'Untouchables' and the divorced women through the characters of Ammu and Velutha. This novel mainly highlights the predicaments of a divorced woman, Ammu, who wants to live a new life with her secret lover Velutha. Unfortunately, she becomes prey to her aunt Baby Kochamma, who is deprived of love, home, and family. This deprivation makes her jealous, frustrated, and vindictive to Ammu, her lover Velutha, and the twins Rahel and Eshtha. This paper aims to find out the causes of Ammu, Velutha, and her twin children Rahel and Estha's sufferings and destruction through the character analysis of Baby Kochamma.

Keywords: Deprivation, Frustration, Jealousy, Vindictiveness, Destruction

Introduction

Arundhati Roy's Booker Prize -winning debut novel *The God of Small Things* (1997) deals with the lives of twins, Rahel and Estha, the unfulfilled married and love life of Ammu in the orthodox Indian society, caste system and patriarchy. In the words of Ebrahim Sk "There are subjugation, ignorance and marginalization, atrocities against minorities, children, youth, women and untouchable. Roy's *The God of Small Things* takes note against caste-system, gender bias, superstitions and other wrongs of the

society” (2016). The book received admiration and hatred after its publication. It shows how a mean, jealous, deprived woman can destroy the lives of an “Untouchable” and her close ones remorselessly. It is about “Women of Ayemenem house who do not have much freedom since men rule and decide for their lives” (Sheba, 2021). The book deals with an Indian Syrian Christian family who live in Kerala, a southern state of India. In the words of Alice Traux, “the quality of Ms. Roy's narration is so extraordinary - at once so morally strenuous and so imaginatively supple -- that the reader remains enthralled all the way through to its agonizing finish” (1997). The Indian Ipe family is consisted of a retired government officer Pappachi, his wife Mammachi, the unmarried sister Baby Kochamma, the children Chacko and Ammu. Although Baby Kochamma is widely known as baby Kochamma, her original name is Novami Ipe. She became Baby Kochamma “when she was old enough to be an aunt” (Roy, 1997, p.2). At eighteen, she fell in love with a handsome young, Irish Father Mulligan, who is not from her culture. Baby Kochamma loved the man hopelessly. As she attended the convent to seduce Father Mulligan, her father reverend Ipe got very angry with her. Being apprehensive about her love for a man from another denomination, he decided to bring her home from the convent to send her to America for education. She studied ornamental gardening there and got a degree. Afterwards she adhered to the social norms and suppressed her passionate feelings to herself. She accepted a life of celibacy and spinsterhood and becomes a sadist. She delights in the misfortune of others and manipulates events to bring down calamity upon her divorced niece Ammu and twins for her deprivation, frustration and jealousy.

Baby Kochamma is introduced to the reader in the first chapter of the novel of twenty-five. She is present throughout the novel. When the reader sees her in the first chapter, she is eighty-three years old, wears thick glasses, shiny clothes, jewelry of her dead sister-in-law, and looks fragile. In the past she was ‘extremely large’. Now her face looks conical due to weight loss. Despite this physical change, inwardly she is the same bitter, mean, revengeful woman. The novel starts in 1993 with return of Ammu’s daughter Rahel from America as a divorcee who has come back to the grandfather’s empty house to be reunited with her twin brother Estha after twenty-three years. Estha was compelled to go to his father after the demise of his maternal cousin Sophie Mol. Thus, Rahel’s twin brother got separate from her. Rahel, “after being blacklisted in convent, and expelled from her school, entered a college though she never got her degree” (17). Later on, she married Larry McCasslin. Their married life was bitter and she divorced him. During her stay in New York, she “occasionally wrote to Chacko (her uncle) and Mammachi (maternal grandmothe). But never returned to Ayemenem. Not when Mammachi died, Not when Chacko immigrated to Canada” (18). She always felt the pain of being separated from her only brother. Even her husband found despair in her eyes which the separation from her brother caused. She felt the urge to be reunited with

Estha after receiving a letter from Baby Kochamma, which had the information of the re-return of Estha to Ayemenem house. When she returns from America to the Ayemenem House, she finds only two members in the house: Baby Kochamma and the “vinegar-faced, short-tempered, midget cook” Kochu Maria. Baby Kochamma “loved the Ayemenem house and cherished the furniture that she had inherited by outliving everybody else.” (p.28). Both the women were cruel to the twins during their stay in the house with their divorced mother Ammu. In the past, when Ammu came back after the divorce, she and her children were unwelcomed by Baby Kochamma who “didn’t even trust the twins. She deemed them capable of doing anything” (p. 29). She “disliked the twins, for she considered them doomed, fatherless waifs. Worse still, they were half-Hindu hybrids whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian would ever marry” (p.45). She also showed her meanness to the niece, “As for a divorced daughter from a love marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochamma’s outrage” (p.45). The twins were criticized by the cook Kochu Maria also at the indulgence of Baby Kochamma, “This is not your *house*” (p.83).

After the retirement of Pappachi, the Ipe family shifted from Delhi to Ayemenem house in Kerala. Ammu, the daughter was unhappy in the parental home due to the dominating, patriarchal father who “insisted that a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl” (p.38). To escape from her father, “She hatched several little plans. Eventually . . . Pappachi agreed to let her spend the summer with a distant aunt who lived in Calcutta” (p.39) where she fell in love with a Bangalee Hindu tea garden officer and after the marriage she got compelled to leave him with the twins Rahel and Estha for his drunken violence, laziness and indecent proposal of sending her to his boss Mr. Hollicks to save his job. Ammu decided to leave the house and “returned, unwelcomed, to her parents in Ayemenem. To everything that she had fled from only a few years ago” (p.42). She came back knowing nothing about the negative consequences of her divorce. She found opposition from all, especially from her aunt Baby Kochamma. Chacko, the only son of the family went to Oxford with Rhodes scholarship. There he met his future English wife Margaret but their marriage became unhealthy and the wife divorced him after one year of their marriage. She left him taking the only child Sophie Mol with her and remarried a botanist, Joe. Chacko also returned to Ayemenem house to live with his parents. He also humiliates the divorced sister and the twins for his patriarchal mindset.

The story takes a serious turn when Chacko’s estranged daughter Sophie Mol was drowned two weeks after their arrival to Ayemenem house. She received an invitation from her father, and her mother brought her to her grandfather’s house from England. One night Sophie along with the twins went to the Meenachal River without the knowing of the family members. Later on, she was drowned as the boat which carried the three children was capsized leaving the Ipe family distraught. Miraculously the twins survived and Ammu and her children started to suffer more after this tragedy.

When the dead body of Sophie was found floating on the river, Baby Kochamma put the blame on the twins without hearing their sides of the story. Meanwhile, Ammu's involvement with the 'Untouchable' Velutha, the carpenter and electrician of the Ayemenem House and Mammachi's pickle factory, provokes the family deeply as it is an affair with an "Untouchable". According to her family she ignored the caste system, love law and the threat of the society and the family. In the eyes of Baby Kochamma, Ammu brings shame for the family although Baby Kochamma tried to seduce a man who was not from his denomination. She was disgusted with Ammu's relationship with a low caste Hindu. When Ammu's relationship was disclosed by her lover Velutha's father Vellya Pappen, Baby Kochamma, "saw it as God's way of punishing Ammu for her sins and simultaneously avenging her (Baby Kochamma's) humiliation at the hands of Velutha and the men in the march" of the communist party. (p.257). She decided to lock "Ammu up (tricked her into her bedroom) before they sent for Velutha" (p.258) and keeps the key with her. She also "had the notion that Estha was somehow responsible for Sophie Mol's death" (p.264) as he rowed the boat which capsized in the river causing death of Sophie. She went to the police station and "misinterpreted the relationship between Ammu and Velutha, not for Ammu's sake, but to contain the scandal and salvage the family reputation in inspector Thomas Matthew's eyes" (p.259). She planned "to get Ammu out of the Ayemenem house as soon as possible. She succeeded in her plan by making Ammu and her children actually responsible for Sophie's death. Consequently, Ammu leaves her house. Eshtha went back to his father and Rahel stayed back to the house.

After Baby Kochamma's failed romance, she continued to live with her elder brother Mr. Pappachi and her sister-in-law in Ayemenem house as a spinster, and passed her time keeping a garden there. With the passage of time, she started spending her time doing nothing except watching American television, and conspiring against the niece and the twins. Her only companion is the Christian domestic help, Kochu Maria. The house becomes poisonous with her presence there. She pretends to be religious by carrying a rosary, and becomes a manipulative member in the Ayemenem house. In the presence of all the members of the house, she shows her abuse to Ammu and her twins. She is like Hindley Earnshaw and Heathcliff of Emily Bronte's master novel *Wuthering Heights*. After being deprived of fatherly love, Hindley gets frustrated and jealous of his foster brother Heathcliff after the death of his father Mr. Earnshaw. Ultimately, he takes revenge on Heathcliff's life by reducing his status from a foster son to a servant. He also made him uneducated. Similarly, the deprived Heathcliff takes revenge on Hindley's son Hareton by reducing his status from the actual owner to a servant of his house *Wuthering Heights* and make him an uncouth person without education and refinement. He also destroys the life of his wife Isabella and his own son Linton as Edgar, Isabella's brother, married Heathcliff's true love Catherine, who is also his enemy Hindley's only sister and was the only hope for Heathcliff's survival. In this novel, Hindley and Heathcliff felt

insecure, threatened by the deprivation of love, which lead them to be frustrated, jealous, mean, cruel, and revengeful on some close persons of their lives remorselessly.

Baby Kochamma, after the return of the divorced niece Ammu and her twins to the house became insecure and felt threatened by the new arrival as she thought her position would be snatched away from her by the niece. Her insecurity had no basis as Ammu had no plan to do so. She desperately needed just a safe home for her and her children. In her personal life, her unfulfilled love causes deprivation, jealousy, meanness and vindictiveness in her life without a husband, children and family. She started employing her nasty tricks over the innocent divorced niece Ammu and her children, who had done no harm to her (Baby Kochamma). Her meanness reaches the summit when she discovers Ammu's secret romantic relationship with the 'untouchable' Velutha who occasionally works in the pickle factory of Mammachi as a carpenter. She decides to destroy Ammu and Velutha's affair. After the drowning of her grandchild Sophie Mol, she gets the opportunity to set a trap for Velutha. She goes to the police station to file a report for defaming Velutha's character after hearing Ammu's affair with the 'paravan'. She conspires against him and tells lies about his involvement in Sophie Mol's disappearance. Finally, she gets success to destroy the life of Velutha along with the lives of Ammu and her two innocent children.

Ammu and her twins return to Ayemenem house, her secret love life with Velutha, the accidental drowning of Sophie Mol reveal the true color of Baby Kochamma. Sophie Mol's arrival to India and her unexpected shocking death unmask Baby Kochamma completely. She conspires against Ammu, Velutha and the twins. Her lies destroyed Ammu's life who died alone in her room and was cremated instead of burial as the cemetery authority refused to bury her body there for defying love law. Baby Kochamma got furious with Ammu's relationship with the low-caste Hindu Velutha as she prefers family reputation over the happiness of Ammu and her children. After Sophie's death, she compelled the twins to accuse him as a kidnapper and murderer. She threatens Rahel and Eshtha, "It was not an accident So now you'll have to go to jail, three of you in different jails" (p.317). The terrified children agreed to accept the lies of Baby Kochamma to save their mother and told the police accordingly. Being depended on her FIR, the police beat Velutha up inhumanely, which led him to his death and estrangement from his lover Ammu and her children who found him a substitute father. Velutha died in police custody and his death is "Just the end of living for a family of three" (p.32) only because of a sadist, vindictive woman. The family decided that one twin could stay in Ayemenem. Not both. Together they were troubles. 302)" and the twins were forced to be detached from each other for a long time. Rahel remained in the house for some years till her migration to America and Estha went back to his father till his return to the house after twenty three years. Roy states, "By the time Chacko immigrated to Canada, the family's only income came from the rubber estate that

adjoined the Ayemenem house and the few coconut trees in the compound. This was what Baby Kochamma and Kochu Maria lived off after everybody else has died, left, or been returned” (p.281).

At the beginning of the novel, we see Mammachi, Baby Kochamma and Ammu portray the typical Indian women. They have unfulfilled love. Ammu divorced her husband due to the rocky relationship with Bangalee abusive, drunkard husband and her mother Mammachi was never happy with her dominant husband who used to abuse her physically although he never showed his brutal side to the outsiders. She put up the violence, abuse of her husband unlike her divorced daughter who dared to come out of her terrible husband’s life. Baby Kochamma never marries due to her failure to seduce Father Mulligan, who once charmed her intensely. In their frustrations, Mammachi and Ammu never tried to destroy the lives of the surrounding people, but baby Kochamma did. She becomes malicious, destructive and manipulative. The selfish woman concerns only about her. Her target is the helpless divorced niece and her twins. For her at the Ayemenem house “Ammu was more of an intruder and less of a member” (Krishnaveni, 2014, p.421). and became the subjects to her constant criticism, verbal abuse. She also did not spare Ammu’s secret lover Velutha, who received brutal beating by the police due to her lies about him. Her conspiracy got successful when Velutha died of police beatings and shame. Sophie Mol’s death triggers the racist Baby Kochamma to destroy the lives of Ammu, Velutha and the twins although Sophie’s death was accidental. She tries to prove that the twins planned their cousin’s drowning in the Meenachal River one night. She planned with Mammachi the removal of Ammu from the Ayemenem house. She “had to pack her things and leave” (p.302). Before her departure, she was “locked up into her room. Baby Kochamma had the keys” (p.252). For locking Ammu into her room “Mammachi provided the passion. Baby Kochamma had the plan” (p.258). In the end, Baby Kochamma’s jealousy, scheming becomes successful to destroy the lives of Ammu, Velutha and the innocent twins.

The God of Small Things deals with the sufferings of married women in the hands of patriarchy. The women also suffer in the hands of vindictive woman like Baby Kochamma, a representational woman of Indian sub-continent who gets revengeful on other innocent women due to deprivation, frustration and jealousy. In the words of Dr. Darkhasha “. . . the Indian society is so intricately woven that in some way or the other a woman is the sufferer at the hands of, none but, another sect of women who are patriarchal in nature or rather misogynist like men” (2022,p. 368). She and her brother Pappachi always wanted to uphold social code rigidly. Ammu and Velutha are their opposites who defied it.

As a young woman, Baby Kochamma was also calculative. She “tried to seduce Father Mulligan with weekly exhibitions of staged charity. Every Thursday morning, just when Father Mulligan was due to arrive, Baby Kochamma forced bathe a poor village

child at the well . . . (p.23)”. The priest was a regular visitor to their house to spend time with her dad, Rev. E. John Ipe, on Thursdays. For making him respond to her love, she became more scheming, shameless person.

Twenty-three years after the beginning of the story, Baby Kochamma is remorseless and has remained the same spiteful, mean, vindictive woman. Out of frustration, insecurity, jealousy, she cannot tolerate Rahel’s and Eshtha’s return to the Ayemenem house, which she considers her own in the absence of all the real owners. The insecure old woman vulgarly said to Rahel, “What are your plans. How long will you be staying? Have you decided . . . Baby Kochamma was a little intimidated by Rahel’s quietness” (p.29). The arrival of the twins make her feel threatened for their plan to relive here. Ammu and Mammachi are no more, and Chacko is in Canada. She develops an obsession with satellite TV, and the house appears to be neglected, messy. From the beginning till the end of the story she comes out as a hateful, unlikeable character who cannot tolerate the happiness of others who surround her. According to Sharad Rajimwale, “Traditional joint families are neatly structured where some women assume dominant role with greater authority over others who are lower down, and, therefore, enjoy certain power” (p.136). Thus, Baby Kochamma is the true representation of such characters who destroyed the four lives.

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