

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

**Representation of Women and Children in the Novels of
Arundhati Roy and Anita Desai**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Philosophy

in English

at

Massey University

Chandramohan Raman Pillai

1999

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the representation of women and children in Arundhati Roy's novel, *The God of Small Things*, and Anita Desai's novels, *The Fire on the Mountain* and *Clear Light of Day*. Each of these novels has at its centre a female protagonist who resists the demands of tradition. The interactions of these women with the antipathetic forces of tradition and culture are seen from a female point of view and with a profound understanding of female sensibility. How far to conform, how far to break away to assert one's selfhood, and how to resolve the crisis brought about this challenge - these are the questions asked, and the answers are slightly different in each case. While resistance to traditional norms leads the protagonists of *The God of Small Things* to a complete rejection of them, Anita Desai's protagonists turn inward, and achieve a wider and more unified vision of life by coming to terms with socio-cultural realities. The chosen novels also display remarkable insights into the minds of children, whose perceptions are based on a different order of reality from that acknowledged by the adults. However, overwhelmed by adult reality and faced with demands beyond their comprehension, they are unable to sustain their distinctive view of the world. At best they are able to synthesise their childhood fantasies with a more adult discretion.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have great pleasure in recording my profound gratitude to my supervisor, Dr Dick Corballis, for his meticulous guidance and constant encouragement in compiling this work. I am especially indebted to him for his diligent scrutiny of my manuscripts and critical insights into the topic at every stage of my endeavour without which it would have been simply impossible to shape this work into the present form. I consider it a rare privilege to have been encouraged, counselled and guided cheerfully by him.

I thank Dr Victoria Carchidi for her helpful suggestions and comments during the period of her supervision.

Finally, I must thank Lekha, my wife, for her constant encouragement and support all through my project.

CONTENTS

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Women in <i>The God of Small Things</i>	6
Chapter 2: Women in <i>Fire on The Mountain</i>	34
Chapter 3: Women in <i>Clear Light of Day</i>	49
Chapter 4: Children in <i>The God of Small Things</i>, <i>Fire on the Mountain</i>, and <i>Clear Light of Day</i>	65
Conclusion	98
Bibliography	102

INTRODUCTION

A great proportion of Indian novels in English illustrate social and cultural aspects of Indian life such as the role and position of women in the family and society, their relation to men and the extent of freedom they enjoy in their respective social set-ups to live life on their own terms. The response of women to the socio-economic and political situations in which they find themselves is a rewarding study by itself. A theme that constantly occurs in Indian novels and writings in English is the plight of women in families and societies whose systems are controlled largely by male power, and the consequent agony and apprehensions experienced by women.

In India a woman has been considered, from time immemorial, an embodiment of sacrifice, silent suffering, humility, faith and knowledge. Marriage is considered the final destiny for woman. She should be chaste, virtuous, submissive, homely, graceful, and devoted to her husband and his family. She must seek pleasure in these relationships. This is as much as to say that a woman should not have rights of her own; that she has duties only in relation to man. Shirwadkar (23) observes:

In the complex fabric of the Indian family, society and culture, the woman's sphere of life and activity was in the past bound by the protective and prohibitive walls raised by the moralists, from the middle ages down to the beginning of the present century. The taboos laid down by Manu were tightened during the centuries that followed to restrict woman's life to the family.

Krishnaswamy (10-11) in this regard comments:

Throughout Indian history, in subtle ways, the Indian woman's essential commitment to her religion and the institutions and rituals such commitment entails, has enabled her to be portrayed as the guardian of culture and religion. ...The women have been described as the embodiment of purity and spiritual power and respected as godly beings on the one hand and on the other, viewed as being as essentially weak creatures constantly requiring the protection of man as their lord and master.

The subordination of woman has restricted her individual role in the family and society over centuries. Mukherjee (99) remarks:

Individualism has been emerging as a human ideal in the west for a couple of centuries, and even though in actual fact a woman's life lacked the relative autonomy of a man's the possibility did exist as an idea. In India even though exposure to the west was beginning to make an alternative ideal available in the nineteenth century, such individualism was alien to traditional thinking.

The social order takes precedence over the man and woman in marriage. Family and marriage laws bind women completely to ensure social cohesion. Krishnaswamy (12) observes: "The Indian woman marries into a family, into a community. Once married, she is expected to eschew all personal ambitions and goals: she has to find her fulfilment in the family, not outside it. she is generally segregated from men and her social life is confined to the home, the temple and the company of female relatives."

Though people of several religions co-exist in India, tenets of all those religions deny women freedom and equality with men. Desai and Patel (12-13) remark:

The Indian sub-continent is inhabited by people practising various religions such as Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Zoroastrian, Jain, Buddhist, Sikh etc. Within each religion there are various sects. But all of them in one form or another overtly or covertly support subjugation of women. Our secular state believes in respecting all religions. The constitutional provision of respecting 'personal laws' of various communities has resulted in perpetuating unequal status of women in various religious communities. The personal laws of Hindu, Muslims, Parsis, etc. directly affect women's lives and status. These laws are not discriminating against women but they have a deep-rooted prejudice against women. None of them consider woman as an independent human being with individuality but as dependent on father, husband or son.

In the chapters that follow I attempt to explore the representation of female characters in their familial, social and cultural contexts. The protagonists in these novels are caught in conflict situations. How far to conform, how far to break away to assert their individuality, how to overcome their sense of alienation and how to resolve the identity crisis - these are the questions that intrigue them.

In *The God of Small Things* the protagonists are in conflict with the culturally prescribed norms of female identity. Though Ammu rebels against her marginalisation in the family and society she tragically succumbs to the socio-political forces dictated by tradition. As

Kapur observes, "Along with the now-familiar tale of class and caste rebellion, *The God of Small Things* is also about female rebellion: Ammu's affair with Velutha is a flagrant - if hopeless - violation of what Roy calls society's 'Love Laws'". However, in the novel Roy seems to privilege the process of violating the social code and the ensuing struggle of the protagonist despite its tragic outcome. By valorizing Ammu's struggle above everything else, Roy seems to condemn unequivocally those cultural codes and structures of power that perpetuate the subordination of women.

Desai's protagonists are fugitives from a male-dominated world and in their desperate search for freedom and fulfilment, as Jena (13) observes, they also "turn out to be rebels" against societal values. Pabby (33) observes: "[Anita Desai seeks] to portray the agonies and tensions suffered by sensitive women placed in critical situations. These situations arise, more often, owing to their emotional involvements with their past as also to love, marriage, family, home including generation gap." However, this trauma causes them to explore their inner psyches, and consequently they experience higher visions of life which enable them to transcend their conflicts. As Jena (17) aptly remarks, "Her novels are certainly reflective of social realities, but she does not dwell like Anand on social issues; and rather delves deep into the forces that condition the growth of a female in the patriarchal, patrilineal, male dominated Indian family. She observes social realities from a psychological perspective, not as a social reformer or moralist". In their different ways, then, both novelists present a narrative in which received models of womanhood are challenged and reinstated.

All three novels also inquire into the fate of children who are marginalized in various degrees, ranging from neglect to outright victimization. The novels feature a portrait of childhood that underscores the fragility of the children's dreams and fancies when confronted with the adult world. The contrast between the child's perspective and the adult one is built into the very structure of these novels. As the adult world continues to impinge on the world of children, they are unable to sustain their dream world; yet with the enhanced awareness of their inescapable interaction and involvement with the adult world, they can achieve a fuller maturity involving a unity between childhood experiences and adult existence.