

Reimagining Women's Health in The God of Small Things

Ms. Kowser M¹, Dr. B. Bharthi²

¹Research Scholar, PSG College of Arts and Science

²Research Supervisor & Associate Professor, PSG College of Arts and Science

Abstract— The paper titled “Reimagining Women's Health in The God of Small Things” analyzes the novel written by Arundhati Roy in relation to the theme “Gendering Health: Reimagining Women's Perspectives in the Global South.” While the novel is widely discussed for its critique of caste and colonial legacies, this study foregrounds a less explored dimension that is about the gendered production of illness through emotional repression, social exclusion, and moral regulations on women. Ammu's life becomes an example of the way in which patriarchal control over female sexuality, mobility, and desire creates psychological distress that often remains unnamed and never addressed. Her worsening physical health demonstrates the long-term impact of social and structural neglect, not because she is personally weak, but because she has been continuously ignored and unsupported by the system around her. The paper shows that the novel demonstrates that health is closely connected to dignity, personal freedom, and social justice, which reflects the ideas of Feminist Global Health Policy. Women's suffering is not just a personal issue but is also caused by laws, social structures, and state actions. By closely analyzing the text, the study argues that the story is not just a personal or family narrative, but also a criticism of the unfair health conditions faced by women in countries of the Global South. The novel finally argues for a rights-based and intersectional approach that gives importance to women lived experiences in discussions about health and in shaping public policies.

Index Terms— Feminist Health Value, Feminist Global Health Policy, Social justice, psychological distress, Physical Health, Personal freedom.

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent times, Women's health has been considered an important area in literary and cultural studies. Health is shaped by the social, cultural, and medical conditions in this society. The feminist scholars

believe that while discussing the cause of health issues, women's real lives should be given importance. The reason behind the effect on women's healthcare, their mental and emotional well-being, and their ability to make decisions about their own bodies is due to the inequalities based on gender. Literature explores these aspects and becomes an important space to understand these experiences that are represented through stories that often show the way in which social structures and cultural expectations shape the lives of individuals.

The novel *The God of Small Things*, written by Arundhati Roy, offers a detailed portrayal of the emotional and social struggles faced by women within rigid patriarchal systems. Despite being researched and discussed for its criticism of political tensions, colonial legacies, and caste structures, the novel also focuses on the gendered nature of suffering. The plot of the novel reveals the way in which women's health is shaped by social expectations, family structures, and moral judgments. Especially the experiences of Ammu represent the emotional suppression, social isolation, and institutional neglect that can develop forms of illness that often remain unrecognized and untreated.

II. WOMEN'S HEALTH AND SOCIAL CONTEXT OF THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Discussions of health focus on issues such as poverty, limited access to healthcare, inadequate medical resources, and the prevalence of disease. Feminist scholars emphasize the role of gender in shaping these challenges. Owing to patriarchal structures, cultural expectations, legal systems that restrict autonomy, and persistent stereotypes, women encounter additional barriers. These factors undermine physical health by

adversely impacting emotional and psychological well-being.

The sociocultural pressures imposed by moral codes can engender emotional distress, frequently remaining unrecognized due to their lack of classification as significant health concerns. Feminist perspectives on health underscore the imperative to interrogate the societal determinants of illness, in opposition to pathologizing health issues as manifestations of individual physical deficiency. Narrative strategies employed by authors illuminate the mechanisms through which social expectations regulate women's somatic experiences, emotional states, and quotidian realities. Within this framework, *The God of Small Things* emerges as a salient literary exemplar articulating the intricate interplay among gender, power, and well-being.

III. PATRIARCHAL CONTROL AND WOMEN'S MENTAL SUFFERING

One of the major themes of Roy's *The God of Small Things* is the control practiced over women's lives within patriarchal family structures. Women are expected to maintain obedience, preserve family honor, and follow social conventions, which results in oppressing their freedom to a certain extent. When they fail to meet these expectations, they are often blamed and punished by the community.

In this novel, Ammu's life illustrates this form of control in a remarkable way. As a young woman, she is denied opportunities for independence and is pushed into an unhappy marital life. Her decision to leave her abusive husband and go back to her parental home does not give her the freedom she hopes for; instead, it puts her in a situation where she is constantly judged by her family members and others. Even within the family, she is treated as a burden and is denied the respect given to other members. This situation makes Ammu feel isolated. Her emotions and feelings, like desires, frustrations, and aspirations, are usually ignored or dismissed by family; her emotions and life were taken control of by others, giving her a minimal chance to express herself. The novel represents how this kind of oppression can gradually affect the mental and emotional state of Ammu. Ammu's anger, sadness, and restlessness are not merely traits of her personality; these are her reactions to the restrictive circumstances and environment that control her life.

The novel also presents how moral surveillance functions and exists within a society. Women's behavior is often judged according to social conditions and expectations created by humans. Even a simple act of independence is often treated as a sign of crime and moral failure. This continuous scrutiny develops a mental pressure within women. This restricts women's freedom and questions their self-worth, which gradually affects their physical health.

IV. SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND PRODUCTION OF ILLNESS

The novel shows social exclusion that shapes the experiences of women's health and well-being. Ammu's connection with Velutha is a pivotal point in the novel because it illustrates the harsh consequences faced by Ammu for crossing the social boundaries. By forming this relationship, she challenges both caste hierarchy and the gender norms that strictly control women's choices. Ammu's health falls apart as a result of their relationship becoming inappropriate in the community's social structure.

The reaction from the family and society is immediate and very harsh. Ammu is humiliated, separated from her children, and finally forced to leave her home. A woman's position in society is weakened by this form of exclusion, which also leaves her with emotional wounds that compromise her dignity and general well-being.

Social isolation creates a serious impact on a person's mental health. When an individual loses the support of their family or community, they tend to experience loneliness, anxiety, and feelings of hopelessness. In Ammu's case, the absence of family protection and social acceptance gradually leads to a decline in her health. The novel portrays the loss of her health as the consequence of persistent rejection and neglect over time rather than something that happens overnight.

Arundhati Roy emphasizes through this portrayal that sickness can also arise from social environments rather than medical conditions. The emotional pain experienced by characters like Ammu is mainly created by her family and the environment in which she lives. In this sense, health in *The God of Small Things* is represented as something that is shaped by larger social conditions rather than being only a biological state.

V. STRUCTURAL NEGLECT AND THE DECLINE OF AMMU'S HEALTH

The decline in Ammu's health condition that takes place in the later part of the novel is considered to be the result of long-term structural neglect. After she gets ignored by her family and excluded from the community, she is forced to live without proper support or resources. As a result, her life becomes uncertain and lonely, and she struggles with financial problems.

The novel does not provide detailed medical explanations regarding the causes of her health issues, but the situation and the environment surrounding her become a reason for the worsening of her health condition, and her death shows the effects of long-term neglect. In this novel, Ammu dies alone in a cheap lodge, which is far from the home where she once lived with her family. After her death, the uncaring attitude of the authorities and the absence of sympathy from society show how she has been pushed to the margins and treated as unimportant by the community and even by her own family.

This representation of a person's life questions the usual tendency to see illness as something that is considered a result of personal factors alone and ignores the societal pressures created and imposed upon humans, especially women. Ammu's death does not simply represent individual weakness or unfortunate fate. It reflects the weakness in the minds of society, and it shows the effects of a social system that does not provide proper care or support; instead, it creates a situation that affects the psychological health of a person. By ignoring her suffering, the community itself becomes a reason that eventually leads to her decline.

Through this novel, Arundhati Roy encourages the readers to analyse the deep and close connection between health and social justice. The well-being of a person is unavoidably affected when they are denied care, respect, and equal opportunities. In this way, Ammu's story in *The God of Small Things* reminds us that health is deeply conditioned by the social structures that influence the everyday life of a person.

IV. FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE ON HEALTH AND DIGNITY

Feminist perspectives on health give importance to understanding the experiences of women within the social conditions in which they live. The formation of health policies, therefore, must consider issues such as gender inequality, violence, discrimination, and the lack of independence. When these factors are ignored while forming health policies for women, the effect and outcome remain incomplete and ineffective.

The God of Small Things reflects many of these concerns related to women's oppression through its portrayal of female characters. The novel reflects how social conditions give immense trouble for women's health, and in this context, women's bodies become spaces where social power controls and maintains their actions. The right-based perspective on health that is presented through the story of Ammu highlights the importance of dignity, freedom, and justice for a person's well-being. Overall health, quality, and purpose of life are affected when women are restricted from these basic rights.

The other female characters in the novel also represent this idea. Baby Kochamma's character shows how patriarchal ideas are strongly internalized in the minds of humans, even in women, through which they judge and control the behavior of other women. This situation represents that gender inequality continues in society, not only because of male authority but also because of women's attitudes and actions in *The God of Small Things*.

VII. CONCLUSION

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* powerfully illustrates the complex relationship between gender, power, and health within a deeply patriarchal social structure. Through the life of Ammu, the novel reveals how emotional repression, social exclusion, and moral surveillance imposed on women can gradually produce psychological and physical suffering. Her experiences demonstrate that illness cannot always be understood merely as an individual or biological condition; rather, it is often shaped by wider social forces such as caste hierarchy, patriarchal authority, and institutional neglect.

By examining Ammu's declining health within this socio-cultural framework, the novel exposes the ways

in which women's well-being is closely connected to dignity, autonomy, and social acceptance. The narrative therefore challenges traditional understandings of health that ignore structural inequalities and highlights the need to recognize the lived realities of women in the Global South. In this context, *The God of Small Things* extends beyond a personal or familial story and emerges as a critique of the systemic conditions that shape women's health and agency. Ultimately, the novel underscores the importance of adopting a rights-based and intersectional perspective that acknowledges women lived experiences as central to discussions of health, justice, and policy formation.

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