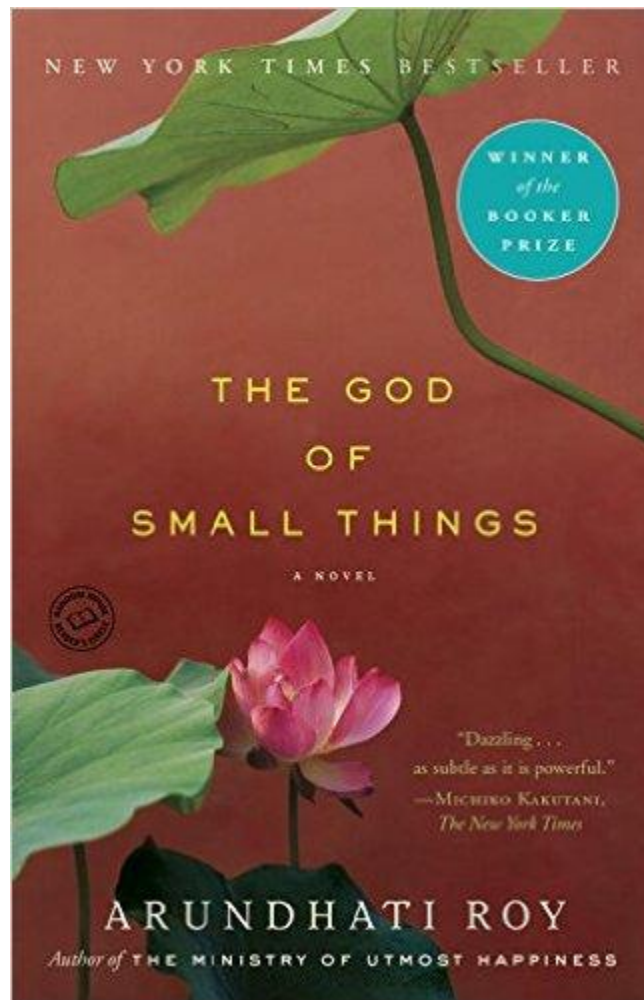

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Dr. R. Anuja, MBA, M.Phil., Ph.D., Editor

Aspects of Gender Conflict in English Literature

**A Comparative Study of the Subjugation of Women Characters in
Arundhati Roy's and Nathaniel Hawthorne's Novels**

Dr. Padmini Fenn



Abstract

This paper is an attempt to portray the exploitation and discrimination of women in the social systems of South Indian society and the American society as portrayed in the novel *God of*

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Small Things by Arundhati Roy and *The Scarlett Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne. The women characters sketched in these two novels share almost the same kind of discrimination, plight and sufferings though they belong to different countries and ages. Arundhati Roy's novel is the portrayal of the Syrian Christian society in Kerala and Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel displays the discrimination in the Puritanical society in eighteenth century America. The women are treated just as objects and subjected to extreme oppression. Some kind of opposition is put up by them but they are thwarted in their endeavour. Though the characters in the novels belong to entirely different countries it is evident that the subjugation of women is the same in all the countries and in all ages.

Key words:

Subjugation of Women Everywhere!

Subjugation of women is a global phenomenon as the treatment of women is the same in almost all the countries. The term subaltern derived from, a Latin word *sub* (below, under) plus *alter* (other) or *alternans* (alternate) which result in *subaltern* (subordinate). It means a lower ranking or an inferior individual. This word has gained prominence in social, political, religious and economic hierarchies of the twentieth centuries. The synonym of subaltern is subordination or subjugation.

This paper presents a study of the female characters that share the common bond of subjugation and miserably struggle for their survival. They belong to different countries but the same religion. The women characters in Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things* belong to the Syrian Christian Society from Kerala while "Scarlet Letter" portrays the Puritans in 18th century America. In order to understand the gender dynamics and the manners of a country, we need to study the historical and socio-economic factors of the respective country.

"Syrian Christian, [who] believed that they were descendants of the one hundred Brahmins whom St. Thomas the Apostle converted to Christianity when he traveled east after the Resurrection" (Roy p. 66). The Puritans were a group of English Reformed of 16th and 17th

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centuries who sought to "purify" the Church of England from all Roman Catholic practices, maintaining that the Church of England was only partially reformed.

Women in *The God of Small Things*

Roy in *The God of Small Things* gives us a view of the Syrian Christian in Kerala. Gender oppression may be analyzed through the examination of marital and inter-gender relations of Ammu, Mammachi, Baby Kochama and Rahel. These female characters are resourceful, smart and they belong to the affluent class but they are deprived of realising their capabilities. They are not strong enough to openly defy the social order. These women are torn between traditional norms and modern attitudes. They try to challenge the moral and social attitudes in society but are overwhelmed and this leads to their destruction.

Ammu Ipe

Ammu Ipe, a middle class woman marries a plantation owner in Bengal to escape the suffocating conditions at home. She thus tries to break free of the caste, clan and gender inequalities. "Thanks to a male chauvinistic society", as Ammu says, her life has ended in destruction. Compared to her, her brother Chacko Ammu is more intelligent and articulate. But her family denies her all the rights. She falls victim of a marriage that did not work well as she expected. Her husband turns out to be a chronic drunkard who inflicted beastly treatment on her. He behaved as her Boss and Ammu felt very humiliated. When she no longer could put up with his ways she returned home to Ayemenem with her twin children Rahel and Estha. On the train ride back to Ayemenem she says "He's dead ----- I've killed him". She seeks refuge in her father's house and it turns out to be a disaster. She is subjected to humiliation, insults and mental blows by her own family members.

Ammu was discriminated against her brother Chacko who was Oxford educated and had returned home after divorcing his English wife. Ammu who was also in the same situation was ignored by her family. A man can do anything whereas a woman has to retain her chastity and has no right to leave her husband. Chacko always marginalised Ammu and her children. He thought that they were millstones around his neck. Ammu silently suffered the cruelty meted out

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to her. She did everything to avoid quarrels and confrontation. A single woman, with two children to look after and no means of livelihood, saw in Velutha, a “low caste” carpenter the refuge she was seeking. She developed a clandestine relationship with him and this was against the traditional norms of the Syrian Christian society. Because of her moral transgression the church refused to bury her. She was disowned by her people and society.

Mammachi

Mammachi, who belongs to the older generation, possesses sharp business acumen and starts a pickle factory all by herself. Her husband Pappachi did not do anything to help her. But she has no right over her factory. After her husband's death her son Chacko took over the factory and she was made just a sleeping partner. Mammachi does not resist her son and silently acquiesces. Chacko flirts with the pretty women in the factory and she justifies his action by saying that he is a man and they can do anything. Mammachi has talent for music, but he stopped her learning music because he felt that she may surpass him. But like Ammu, who is the daughter of Mammachi, Mammachi never questions her situation and accepts whatever comes to her. She passively accepts the reality passively like most women of her age.

Baby Kochamma

Baby Kochamma is another character who is maltreated by all. She is shocked when her dream of marrying Father Mulligan is shattered. She conspires with the inspector to murder Velutha. She is a failure and starts living in isolation in the Ayemenem house. She felt that she had the "fate of the wretched man-less woman." She, like Mammachi, submits to the patriarchal social norms without any hesitation.

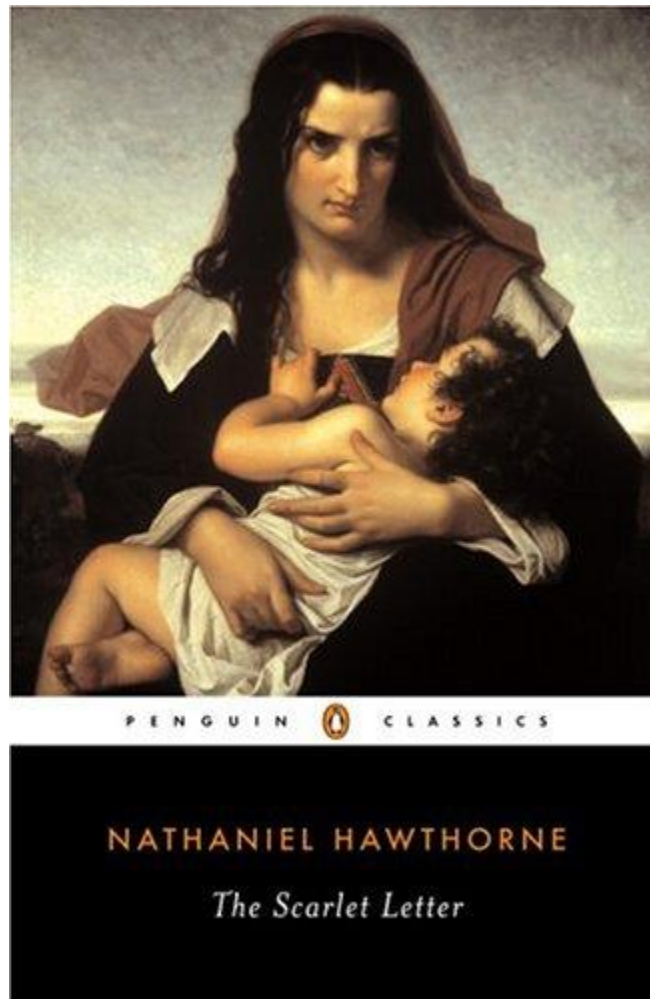
Rahel

Rahel is a girl who is deprived of parental love. She is the offspring of a Bengali Hindu father and a Kerala Syrian Christian mother. She was expelled from school three times and was not co-opted by the school. She is disliked by her relatives, especially the ladies. She considered Velutha as her father but on discovering the illegal liaison between her mother and Velutha she becomes upset. When the police arrests Velutha she goes to the police station to identify him as a

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criminal. She fails to connect with the people around her and lack self-confidence. She goes to Delhi to learn and there meets Larry McCasline, a researcher, marries him and goes to U.S.A. but she is soon divorced and returns to Ayemenem. The only compatibility she has is with her twin brother Estha. She is just a dreamer and imagines things. Rahel indulges in a sexual relationship with her own brother. Both Ammu and Rahel transgress the social norms of the society and show some kind of defiance.

Hawthorne's *Scarlett Letter*



In Puritan era, women were expected to be subordinate to their male counterparts. Life as a Puritan woman was very regimented with societal dictates for clothing, speech, family structure and religion. Varying from those expectations often resulted in social and physical

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punishment. Nathaniel Hawthorne has depicted the social ostracisation undergone by a woman in the face of all odds.

Hester Prynne

Hester Prynne the protagonist of Hawthorne's *Scarlett Letter* was a strong-willed and impetuous young woman — she remembers her parents as loving guides who frequently had to restrain her incautious behavior. The fact that she has an affair also suggests that she once had a passionate nature. As a young woman, Hester marries an elderly scholar, Roger Chillingworth, who sent her ahead to America to live, but never followed. She has a clandestine affair with a minister named Arthur Dimmesdale following which she gives birth to a girl child who she names as Pearl. She is shamed and alienated and the Scarlett letter A is stitched on her fabric. Dimmesdale stands by a mute witness to the shame that Hester was put to. She was willing to take on her own the shame and humiliation while protecting the man she loves. Her alienation and shaming makes her into a matured woman. She is publicly abused but she refuses to name the father of her child. Her husband comes to America and was there when she was publicly accused of adultery. He tries to find out the father of the child, Hester remains a stoic and freethinker. She refuses to reveal the name of her lover. She tries to protect him as much as he could. This shows the strength of her character. Pearl her daughter was the only hope for her, so she tempers her behaviour and subsequently becomes a sort of mother figure to the women around her trying to help them out of their difficulties. Hester also becomes a kind of compassionate maternal figure as a result of her experiences.

Pearl

Pearl who is Hester's daughter is a symbol of purity. She is a reminder of Hester's sin. She was quite young when all the incidents mentioned in the novel happened. She provokes the adult characters and asks pertinent questions. She was attracted to the letter A on her mother's fabric. She enquires about the relationship about her mother and Arthur Dimmesdale. Pearl is more than a punishment to her mother. She is also a blessing. Her existence gives Hester a reason to live, boosting her up when she is tempted to give up.

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Authors Compared

When we study the worlds of Hawthorne and Roy, we observe that the female characters, though they hail from separate countries and separate religion are still intertwined by common link: and that is the bond of suffering and subjugation. The difference lies only in the degree of their suffering. Hawthorne makes no attempt to conceal the ordeal that his female character Hester has to undergo. The characters of Arundhati Roy also fight against the hegemonic forces in society. They endure all the sufferings in the male dominated society. In Roy's *God of Small Things*, Mammachi and Baby Kochamma are of older generation, who silently endure all the discriminations in their lives. Ammu and Rahel are second generation women who show some kind of resistance in society. Hester Prynne the female protagonist of Nathaniel Hawthorne undergoes all the shame heaped on her by the society and she very stoically bears all the humiliation.

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