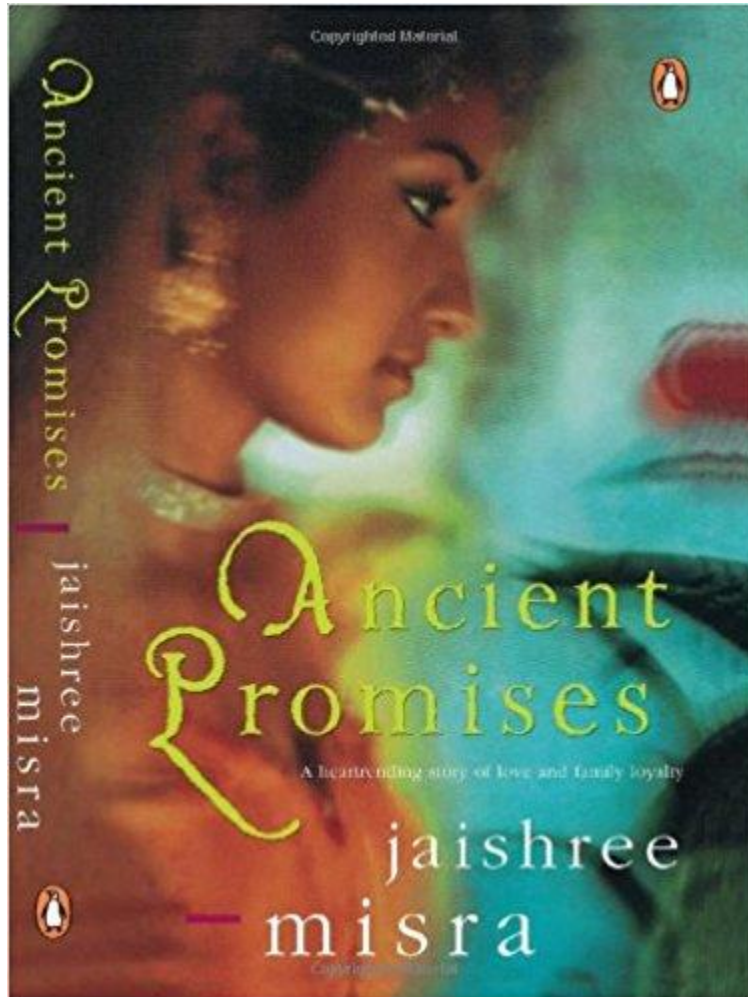


**From *Small Things* to *Big Promises***

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**Abstract**

Women have been the forerunners of the story telling tradition. The stories by the earlier writers have been spun around the patriarchal system of society. They presented the unidimensional views of the male-chauvinist hegemony. Gradually, the women writers started presenting a multidimensional view of society and the struggles of women in society. The

writings by contemporary women pursue to bring to the forefront the hidden voices of the various women of society. They are also instrumental in identifying the marginalized and exposing their latent grievances. They pioneer in recovering the lost voice and in analyzing the efforts of these marginalized individuals who have shaped the present world. The tradition of women's writing is consistent. The contemporary women writers present before the readers, a world of radical female resistance against the patriarchal norms. They protest against the concept of normality. The woman writers widely explore the sociological and the economical realms. They portray a large range of skills of women in the changing Indian society.

The present paper aims at analysing the portrayal of Ammu, the protagonist of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, and Janu, the protagonist of Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises*. Ammu, the unloved wife of a drunkard and mother of two children, dies the silent death of a subaltern, when she is denied her rights to love Velutha, the untouchable. Ammu's destiny is designed by the patriarchal rules of the society and casteism. She is the image of a suffering woman who is usurped by her inner domain, her frustration and her existence in a male-dominated society. However, Janu, representing the contemporary women, succeeds in walking out of the threshold of marriage, when she longs to live her life with Arjun, her former crush. She is exhibited with boldness and lack of inhibitions. The paper highlights the transition of the image of contemporary woman from the silent sufferer to the new woman.

**Keywords:** male-dominated society, contemporary women, *The God of small things*, female resistance

### **Women as Traditional Storytellers**

Women have been the forerunners of the story telling tradition. The stories by the earlier writers have been spun around the patriarchal rules of the society. Being the pivotal theme, literature is pervaded with her presence in every nook and corner. However, when a man describes the life of a woman, the internal aspects are either missing or do not have internal momentum. A man's description of a woman is what he sees of her from a distance and what he sees externally. This has been one of the reasons that alerted the women writers. The

contemporary women writers have started exploring the various stereotypical images that society has inflicted upon women. When a woman writes, she portrays every inch of woman's life, both externally and internally. Thus, the contemporary women writers have succeeded in portraying the emergence of women in literature through their writing.

The earlier writers of Indian fiction have shaped the ideologies based on the patriarchal system and its rules. In those days, women used to write about women's perception and experiences within the enclosed domestic arena. Anuradha Roy says:

In order to establish their claims as significant writers, they have to battle with certain deeply-ingrained critical prejudices: one of these is prominently gender-based. Patriarchal assumptions of the superior worth of male experience have contributed to a systematic devaluation of their work, in common with that of women writers all over the world. (9)

### **Focus on Women as Readers**

The first phase of writing by women focused on women as readers. They presented the unidimensional views of the male-chauvinist hegemony. The women writers, in the earlier phase, started writing on enclosed domestic life. The themes of these novels were spun around the domestic life. The intention of these writers was to stress the importance of reading with a realization as an experience by a woman, because the first phase literature portrayed stereotypical pictures of women. These stereotypical women were embodied as selfless angels with purity, docility and self-effacing qualities.

### **Women Writers dealing with Socio-psychological Problems of Women**

In the 19th century, more and more women actively participated in India's reformist movement depicting the psychological suffering of the frustrated house wife. Gradually, the women writers started presenting a multidimensional view of the society and the struggle of women in the society. As a consequence, the second phase of women novelists started dealing with socio-psychological problems of women. On the march to delve deep into the themes, they

have reached new levels. They dealt with ethos and multi-cultural elements. They inverted the literary scene competing with their men counterparts in writing fiction in English.

### **Contemporary Women Novelists**

The contemporary women novelists have given a new dimension to contemporary literature. They write, without fear, and come out through the written medium. This artistic independence has motivated women writers to write their experiences and to give vent to their thoughts. When a woman transcends herself as a contemporary writer, she redefines the female individuality. She does this with the help of the potential she gains from the female aesthetics. This strikes a change in the mode of creativity – she transcends from stereotypical creativity to direct creativity. She actively creates a sequence of her subjective experiences, which she wants to be heard by the public. The contemporary women writers present before the readers, a world of radical female resistance against the patriarchal norms. They protest against the concept of normality. The woman writers widely explore the sociological and the economical realms. They portray a large range of skills of women in the changing Indian society.

### **Ammu in *The God of Small Things***

The present paper aims at analysing the portrayal of the pictures of Ammu, the protagonist of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, and Janu, the protagonist of Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises*. The socio-economic structure of the Indian society is male oriented. Therefore a woman finds the minimal scope of empowerment. She is guided through each and every aspect by the norms scheduled by the men and so she has lost her identity, having fumbled for generations in this society which is steered by patriarchal rules.

Roy paints the picture of Ammu, the single parent of dizygotic twins and segregated daughter of an Orthodox Christian family. She is born to Pappachi, an entomologist and Mammachi, a mother who comprehends her son's needs but neglects her daughter's. Ammu's brother Chacko marries a white woman named Margaret, who mothers Sophie Mol, but divorces him and marries Joe. Ammu is neglected by all for having been separated from the Hindu man, of her own choice whom she marries. She receives solace in the company of her twins Rahel and

Estha. She dreams of Velutha, an untouchable carpenter, and longs to be with him. The novel ends with the consequences of Ammu's wish.

### **The Psyche of Janu**

Misra probes deep into the psyche of Janu, the daughter of a Malayalee family. She is born and brought up in Delhi. She is forced to get married to Suresh Maraar, in spite of her love for Arjun, a Punjabi boy. She has to put aside all her wishes and be a good bride. She is neglected by all in the Maraar household. The situation of Janu is worse, when she is blessed with a mentally challenged daughter, Riya. Janu is fed up with the struggle in the Maraar household and finds her way out, at the starting point of which she happens to meet Arjun, her former lover. She has to undergo a long struggle to unshackle herself from her chains and Misra ends the novel on an optimistic tone.

### **Love as Mark of Husband and Wife Relationship**

A man and a woman, though married, cannot be husband and wife, until they love each other from the depth of their hearts. Both of them need love and warmth from each other. This harmony is absent in the life of Ammu, in *The God of Small Things*. She put up with her husband's drinking. However, when her husband goes to the extent of bartering her to his manager, for ensuring his getting a job, Ammu hits him and leaves him to return to Ayemenem, the town which she leaves with the thought that anywhere other than the town would be nice, to escape from the wrath of Pappachi, who thrashes his wife regularly. When disgusted with no one to love, her attention turns towards Velutha, the untouchable carpenter of Mammachi's pickle factory, and he nurses a secret love for her. Having recollected the earlier days when Velutha had gifted her with tiny objects carved out of wood, she loves to be in his world. To her he is "the God of Loss, the God of Small Things". (*The God of Small Things* 220) Her children too love Velutha a lot and play with him. She loses herself to him and their clandestine meetings last for thirteen nights. She rows across the river Meenachal, in a boat. Roy says, "The boat that Ammu would use to cross the river. To love by night the man her children loved by day." (*The God of Small Things* 202)

### **Janu's Love for Arjun**

Similarly, in *Ancient Promises*, Janu's love for Arjun is described in a poignant manner. If Ammu has been relishing a thirteen-day innings, Misra paints the ninety-eight day happiness of Janu with Arjun. Like Ammu, Janu too nurses her love for Arjun, secretly. She has never had secrets before. However, she realises that the thought of Arjun should be nursed secretly. Janu says, "... I hugged these new, unfamiliar thoughts to myself with a secrecy that both puzzled and thrilled me." (*Ancient Promises* 23)

Roy gives a precise picture of the dreams of Ammu, when she longs to be with Velutha. Roy writes, "That afternoon, Ammu travelled upwards through a dream in which a cheerful arm with one arm held her close by the light of an oil lamp." (*The God of Small Things* 215) The dream for Janu is her longing to be with Arjun. She says, "I wanted to be able to get into his head and wander around in it, exploring his innermost thoughts." (*Ancient Promises* 23)

### **Patriarchy Rules**

However, the dreams of women hardly turn true, provided the society follows its patriarchal rules. The rules designed by patriarchy are male-oriented and hence classify women as the other gender. A woman is torn apart in her attitude, her way of life, her culture and her civilization. These factors have marked a thick line of segregation between a man and a woman. This line of segregation is very lucid in the life of Ammu. She had married a Hindu earlier; and later, she and her twins had started loving an untouchable man, as the line of segregation gets thickened. Roy says, "They all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tampered with the laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much." (*The God of Small Things* 31) The segregation is visible throughout the novel. However, the line of isolation is apparent when Mammachi comprehends her son's physical needs, which she terms as "a Man's Needs" (*The God of Small Things* 168), but is raged at the thought that her daughter is in love with an untouchable. Roy shows this demarcation clearly in her words when she writes of Mammachi as, "Her tolerance of 'Men's Needs' as far as her son was concerned, became the fuel for her unmanageable fury at her daughter." (*The God of Small Things* 258)



Misra, too writes in a similar manner, of the laws of segregation that are forced on Janu by her parents. On hearing of Janu's love for Arjun, she is warned by her mother. Janu recollects her mother's words. She says, "Later Ma said that was because these things were always less worrying for boys' families. The reputations of families were carried on the shoulders of their daughters, she said. And parents of boys didn't have to worry about things like..." (*Ancient Promises* 47)

When women are perpetually weighed down with the rules of patriarchy, they start thinking of their state of existence. When psychologically analyzed, the state of transition is traced in them as a developmental achievement of the ego. The idea of emergence is sowed in a woman when she analyses the sensations and the emotions experienced by her ego. The internal and external forces that determine the status of a woman in the different domains, help in the achievement of her emergence. Swati Shirwadkar comments that "Changes in certain components of culture such as values, norms, ideologies etc. bring about, in turn, changes in the social structure, i.e., patterns of social actions and interactions". (25)

### **Transitions**

Roy records such transitions in Ammu, when she is in an urgent need to despise friends and relatives who sympathize with her about her divorce. It is to escape the "ugly face of sympathy" that Ammu slowly enters another world. Roy records,

A liquid ache spread under her skin, and she walked out of the world like a witch, to a better, happier place... Even her walk changed from a safe mother-walk to another wilder sort of walk. She wore flowers in her hair and carried magic secrets in her eyes. She spoke to no one. She spent hours on the riverbank with her little plastic transistor shaped like a tangerine. She smoked cigarettes and had midnight swims. (*The God of Small Things* 44)

The same transition is recorded in the life of Janu when she studies that her husband Suresh practices the art of escapism every time she wants to tell him something or she wants him

to spend time with her or Riya. Suresh seeks the company of whisky rather than Janu's and so she has to suffer the jibes of the Maraar household and suffer with Riya, who fails to be at the receiving end of her mother's thoughts or sufferings. It is at this juncture that Arjun again enters her life and she loses herself to him. When she has successfully planned the second stage of her life that she is to spend with Arjun and Riya abroad, Janu asks Suresh for a divorce. Suresh is shocked to see the transition in her. She recollects, "With every word I uttered I knew I was taking one more unreturnable step into the territory previously trodden only by very foolish or very bad women." (*Ancient Promises* 219)

However the transitions recorded do not mean that the society accepts these transitions, without questioning the existence of a woman. This is revealed from the death of Velutha, in *The God of Small Things*, when he is beaten to death by the police for the fabricated case of an attempted rape of Ammu, filed by Ammu's aunt Baby Kochamma. Ammu has to return Estha to his Baba and leaves Ayemenem to work for meagre wages. After her last visit to Ayemenem, she is found dead in a lodge at the age of thirty-one, "Not old. Not young. But a viable die-able age." (*The God of Small Things* 3) The consequences of Ammu's death are awful; she is denied proper burial by the church, on account of her relationship with an untouchable. Ammu's body is transported to the electrical crematorium. When Ammu's body is fed into the incinerator, Roy describes the pitiable situation through Rahel's eyes. "... Rahel's Ammu was fed to it. Her hair, her skin, her smile. Her voice... All this was fed to the beast, and it was satisfied." (*The God of Small Things* 163)

### **Changing Situation**

The situation undergoes a change when Misra helps her protagonist break the shackles of society and come out of the patriarchal boundaries. Unlike Roy's Ammu, Misra's Janu does not want to lead a pessimistic hopeless life. Misra sketches a plan to help Janu seek a divorce from Suresh, after a long struggle, to lead a happy life with Arjun and Riya, in England. Janu knows that she would bear the tag of "a divorcee with a child" (*Ancient Promises* 304), however, she does not want to "keep some relentless old promise". (*Ancient Promises* 304) When she is divorced, she looks forth to fulfil some ancient promises. When she is set free again and finds



solace in the company of her mother and her daughter, she says, “It was strange that I’d had to come back to her to be set free again”. (*Ancient Promises* 4)

## To Conclude

Thus, the paper analyses the hypothesis that contemporary women writers portray the “New” woman, validating her through the incidents in the life of Ammu and Janu. Ammu, the protagonist of *The God of Small Things*, has to suffer as a consequence of her love for an untouchable in a patriarchal society. However, Janu, representing the contemporary women, is able to break the shackles and succeeds in emerging as the New Woman with clear sketches of life, to be lived in the way she likes.

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