

An Inquiry into Identity Crisis and Women's Familial Role: A Select Study of Contemporary Indian Fiction in English

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Abstract. In India family is perhaps the most important social institution. Women are considered the integral and central part of this structure. They are perceived as *grihalakshmi*-the bountiful goddess. However, this image is more rigid than flexible and has appropriated the gender roles within the domestic sphere. A number of assumptions and values have been created to keep such roles stagnant. A critical analysis of textual account of women and her condition in colonial and postcolonial times (Chatterjee, 261-62) reveals that new thoughts and the ideas of modernity have not changed the paradigm to perceive the gender roles; rather they have provided new intellectual tools to freeze the stereotypical identity and roles of both, male and female, within the bounds of household and outside it. Nevertheless, the changing scenario has provided women with a chance to speak for themselves. Higher education and contact with the world outside the domestic sphere have filled them with a new acquired identity, confidence and ambition. Though globalization and need of the present time have exposed them to the market, their household responsibilities are not withdrawn in a patriarchal society like India. Sometimes, they are made to abandon their aspirations and choices for the sake of family because the menfolk are still not ready to accept the changes in the structure of familial roles. Women have created a new personal identity but they are unable to actualize it in the traditional format of social and familial obligations. It results in identity crisis among women that adversely affects the whole family. The present paper attempts to problematize this issue in contemporary Indian society through the study of two novels, namely *Gently Falls the Bakula* by Sudha Murty and *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy.

Keywords : Women; familial roles; identity crisis; housewife; modernity.

The family is the smallest unit of society that shapes it. Development of the individual as well as the society depends upon the healthy environment of the family. Though the family is an ancient institution, its internal composition and sophistication are subjected to constant change. Different cultural conditions, shift in ideology and constraints of the particular time and space let not remain family a stagnant institution. Though the structure of the family, its values and principles have undergone different changes, its core structure seems to be fixed. The mainstream traditional families in India feel hard to concede to the divergent interests within and among families, especially on the lines of age and gender.

In India, whether it is a daughter, sister, wife or mother, women are provided their roles within the domestic sphere. To put it in a simple way, most of the times in Indian patrilineal families, women are responsible for household works and child rearing. Men, on the other hand, have to perform their three P's duty i.e. provider, protector, and procreator. In the past and also in the present :

The details were not, of course, worked out immediately...there have been many controversies about the precise application of the home/world, spiritual/material, feminine/masculine dichotomies in various matters concerning the everyday life of the "modern" women—her dress, food, manners and education; her role in organizing life at home; her role outside the home. (Chatterjee, 252)

In this way, patriarchy has always decided how the ideal man and woman should be like. The morality, manner, behaviour, ethics and aspirations are always appropriated to suit the traditional structure of the family and society.

The current scenario of globalization is supposed to provide women with a chance to raise their voices against inequality. They are achieving higher education and are exposed to the market. They can do jobs and be financially stable. The attitudinal changes towards women are seen in the form of good food, quality education, better health care and job opportunities. However, one can question the level of freedom and rights women actually exercise. Even after these changes, women's central role within the family is beyond a significant alteration. Some women get a chance to acquire higher education but not all because many parents like "Pappachi insisted that a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl". (*The God of Small Things*, 43). Moreover, when girls like Shrimati (*Gently Falls the Bakula*) are successful in getting an education, they are made to abandon their career aspirations since their role within the family is fixed.

Such experiences have an adverse effect on the newly formed identity and confidence of the women. Identity is a 'collective approach' rather an individual's exclusive effort to see him/herself. It is affected by the past experiences, present situations and future aspirations. Identity is a fluid concept which changes with one's perception based on different social interactions. Education and exposure to the world (through different media) have made women aware of their rights and have filled them with a desire to establish a social identity outside the domestic sphere. They claim equality on the lines of gender in a more intense tone. This idea stands in contradiction with the idea of ideal women in traditional Indian society where either they are idealized as a goddess or are considered a shadow of menfolk. The spiritual distinctiveness of Indian culture is personified in Indian women. On the one hand, they are glorified as the divine being who put their family before themselves and on the other they are the mute followers of men so they cannot put

themselves before their family. They can adopt modernity but with all the compromises and adjustments that are necessary to retain their true Indian identity. Identity is a shifting position but the accepted identity of a mother, daughter or wife is somewhat fixed on the moral lines. Such contradictions on the basic level result in identity crisis in women.

Women still are not allowed to choose what their consciences will recommend. Even after achieving social and economic independence, their movement in the outer world is hindered. Their dreams are inconsequential and fancy of modern Western influences. Their aspirations and career are not taken seriously, even in urban families. The false image created by social structure perpetuates self-denigration in women and they start questioning their own abilities. Sometimes they have to be ashamed of their desires and capabilities. They are belittled in their own eyes because they are at odds with the traditional social order and imposed gender roles. Such depressing conditions force them to behave neurotically sometimes. This suppression does not affect the woman only but her whole family too. This issue has been pointed out by different writers of the contemporary age.

Literature is rightly said the mirror of society. The ideology, the events, and movements of society are captured and recorded in literature. Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, and Shashi Deshpande are some of those feminist writers who have addressed the problem of women's restlessness and their maladaptation in traditional familial roles.

Sudha Murthy is a significant feminist novelist of the present age who portrays women with potential and ambition to achieve their dream. They are traditional as well as modern in their outlook. In her first novel, *Gently Falls the Bakula*, she deals with multi-layered complications in Indian families. She says :

It was purely patriarchal society where the head of the family decided everything—be it arranging a marriage, making a donation to a temple or an ordinary household matter. The women were always in the background, and subservient, irrespective of their age (GFB, 12).

The other writer, with which the present paper is concerned, is Arundhati Roy who has elaborated the theme of bondage and desire for freedom in her novel *The God of Small Things*. The inferior position of women in family and society forms one of the central themes of the novel. The novels have been written in the 80s and the 90s but they are still relevant.

In a patriarchal set-up, a woman's voice not only goes unheard but it is also suppressed to the point of absence or completely misinterpreted. Both the authors have aptly elaborated this point. Shrimati once tells a story of a sage

whose wife had sacrificed her youth and life for her sage husband and accepted to be a shadow of him. When Shrimati asked Shrikant whose sacrifice he found more appealing, he replied, “I feel the single-minded perseverance of the sage, without getting distracted by the worldly pleasures, is praiseworthy”. (83) This is how the sacrifices of women are overlooked because it is considered the moral duty of them. In exactly the same way, the sacrifices made by Shrimati was ignored by Shrikant. He was passionate, ambitious and hard-working, yet he never appreciated Shrimati’s support and devotion. She suffered from erasure to the point of non-existence. She left her passion for history and embraced this unproductive and boring life of being a shadow of her husband, “For a person like her, neither very ambitious nor very courageous, such situation meant that her own priorities were always pushed to the lowest rung”. (84) Shrikant used to get more dependent on Shrimati and, “At least for his official secretary there were timings, but for her, it was an all time job” (147). Shrimati waited that she might eventually be awarded the company and the lost love of her husband, but the material thirst of Shrikant could not make this happen. In *The God of Small Things* Ammu chose to marry a person of her own choice than to be tortured by her father. But this could not be proved a right choice for her. Escaping from one patriarchal condition she had entered in the second. In such situations, she decided to tolerate everything like a typical Indian wife. But her tolerance was shattered when her own husband agreed to send her wife to his boss. Mr. Hollick. The movement of women is restricted on the account of security from the dangers of outside world. However, many a time, the domestic sphere becomes the prime site of exploitation of women. Ammu could not accept such agreement so she left her husband and returned to Ayemenem. Her resistance was too big to be digested by society. Roy speaks the society through Baby Kochamma :

She subscribed wholeheartedly to the commonly held view that a married daughter had no position in her parents’ home. As for a divorced daughter—according to Baby Kochamma, she had no position anywhere at all. And as for a divorced daughter from a love marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochamma’s outrage. As for a divorced daughter from an intercommunity love marriage—Baby Kochamma chose to remain quaveringly silent on the subject. (*The God of Small Things*, 45)

Thus, her resistance was interpreted in terms of deviance from the norms and her act was considered shameful because she left her husband.

In the patriarchal social order, the dreams of men and the dreams of women are perceived differently. Women’s desire and dreams are not serious and urgent but a man’s aspirations are significant and inevitable. Shrimati was a bright and talented student who wished to pursue her Ph.D. in History. However, she took a

break from studies to marry Shrikant. When her professor suggested her not to leave her studies, she replied, "Sir, I do love history but I love Shrikant as well. I can always continue my studies later". (GFB, 49). On the other hand, when Shrikant was asked about his priorities of life he answered, "I cannot answer such a nonsensical question...it is your duty to support a husband like me. Now, you are emotional and being silly". (148) This temperament towards women makes others perceive women as inferior to man. This is why Chacko says that Ammu has no 'Locust Stand I' and "What's yours (Ammu's) is mine and what's mine is also mine". (TGST, 49)

This suppression and negligence results in a kind of crisis in women. It results in the feelings of low self-worth, inferiority complex, self-depreciation and having low self-esteem. Even after having secure marriages, children and financial security, identity crisis is not impossible. Betty Friedan inquires this matter in her book *The Feminine Mystique*.

Over and over women heard in voices of tradition and of Freudian sophistication that they could desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity. Experts told them how to catch a man and keep him, how to breastfeed children and handle their toilet training,...They were taught to pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets or physicists or presidents. They learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights—the independence and the opportunities that the old-fashioned feminists fought for. (Friedan, 1)

Thus, she finds that the reason behind this is the gendered socialization within the family. Women are told that they can find happiness and satisfaction by performing their traditional roles but in this gendering women's individuality, their different experiences and the changing scenario around them are highly neglected. When women from different backgrounds, having different aspirations and capacities cannot find happiness in such traditional roles, they are bound to feel themselves without having an identity. In the novel *Gently Falls the Bakula*, we see that Shrimati is a dutiful, dedicated and sincere wife. She left her studies because Shrikant was important to her but Shrikant failed to recognize her devotion. Now was not able to identify herself even as the wife. She was only a secretary to him, unpaid and unacknowledged. A disappointed Shrimati says to Shrikant, "I used to welcome your guests, keep your accounts, look after the house, and fulfil the duties just the way your personal secretary does. I was your valuable, glittering ornament in the social circuit" (162). She had compromised with her dreams but she could not compromise with her being a non-identity. She sank in deep depression day by day. Her health was keeling over but Shrikant could not understand the reason.

She wanted to live her life and pursue her passion because this only could make her alive once again. Instead of destroying her life with depression and repentance, she took a bold step. She decided to leave Shrikant for her other love i.e. History. She says to Shrikant, "A person can live only by his own faith. He needs to travel on his own path, whether it has stones or thorns" (162). Shrimati, thus, finally took hold of her destiny. Roy also portrays emptiness and vacuum created in the lives of Indian women through patriarchal moral impositions. The psychological stress and domestic confinement of Ammu push her to the heights of madness. Ayemenem house becomes the centre of domination and torture and symbolises tradition, custom, patriarchy, affluence and religious fascism. Her own desires and social morality wrenched her to the level of extreme frustration :

What was it that gave Ammu this Unsafe Edge?
This air of unpredictability? It was what she had
battling inside her. An unmixable mix. The infinite
tenderness of motherhood and the reckless rage of
a suicide bomber. It was this that grew inside her,
and eventually led her to love by night the man her
children loved by day. (*The God of Small Things*, 44)

Her desire for Velutha was her last hope to become alive. It was no less than a revolution to her. Her desire was linked with the politics of speech. Ammu's anger, contempt, and disgust for the social hypocrisy were turning her ill from inside. Not knowing what to do, sometimes she becomes violent with her children. For her, there was only Estha and Rahel who belonged to her. She feels free to shower love and occasion slaps over them. Though she repented every time she hit her children, she could not let herself go mad with anger. So, she transgressed the boundaries she was set in, "Ammu was struggling within to get out of the suppressing morality and patriarchal norms. Ammu grew tired of their proprietary handling of her. She wanted her body back. It was hers". (222) She could not hold her anger within forever. So, she was waiting for the right time for her desires to be fulfilled. Roy's novel focuses on the lines that one cannot, or should not, cross – and yet those are the very lines that do get crossed, if only once in a while – and then that makes for the politics of those extraordinary stories. Such transgressions are necessary because they are the symbol of agency within an individual.

A woman is never out of the question of morality and gaze. A highly-praised position of women in Indian society could not make her free from domestic confinements. The novels show again and again the importance of marriage in society. The society is highly obsessed with this idea. Marriage has been conceptualized in some specific ways and the irony is that the educated men too are not willing to challenge those conceptions. Though Shrikant never openly denied Shrimati pursuing her ambition, he was never at ease with his wife diverting her attention from him and the family. Apart from dependence, Shrikant's chauvinistic attitude is responsible for such a dual tendency. He is a modern man, highly

educated, who can get over the familial enmity to marry his love but he is not modern enough to digest the success of a girl. When Shrimati got the first position in the school, he consoled himself by saying, "I agree she is good but only in arts subjects like history and language. Normally women are very fond of history because it is an accumulation of gossip—like some emperor had three wives, the last wife had six sons, etc. This does not require any logic or reasoning, only memorizing facts, which girls are good at" (GFB, 5). His views about marriage were also very typical of Indian patriarchal society. After getting his job he had written to his mother, "Avva, I am tired of hostel and hotel food. Now I would like to get married and make a home in Bombay" (56). In *The God of Small Things* Ammu had seen the shallowness of such marital relationships so she said that "choosing between her husband's name and her father's name didn't give a woman much of a choice". (96)

Society is, of course, an extended model of family. An analysis of women's position in society naturally takes us to her position in the family. The novelists have discussed how variously growing modern ideologies have failed in modifying the situation of women in a significant manner. It will not be an over-generalized fact to say that women are discriminated against men right from their birth, even before their birth in most of the Indian families. We get a clue of it in the novel *The God of Small Things* when we consider Rahel's thoughts and we know that "Chacko was Mammachi's only son. Her own grief grieved her. His devastated her". (5) For such a second-hand child of the family, education is never a priority because the ultimate career for them is to perform their feminine duties. The idea of masculine and feminine are created outwardly and men and women are forced to fit into that idea. This results in dissatisfaction and frustration in both but in quite different ways. To take one's decision by oneself strengthens one's identity but women are not allowed for taking such decisions for themselves. This problem can be addressed by challenging the traditional structure of the family that imposes strict gender roles. Both, man and woman, have to be critical and balanced in performing their roles within and outside the family. One has to understand that women are more than being a mother, daughter or wife. They have their own identity and capabilities that must be accepted with sincerity.

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