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Chandigarh**

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## **‘Of Unmixable Mix’ – Ammu’s Illness and Sickening Culture in *God of Small Things***

**Navdeep Kaur & Nikhilesh Yadav**

### **Abstract:**

Researches in medical anthropology in the end of twentieth century have exposed many hidden layers in the interaction of body and culture on which previous researches were silent i.e. how cultural constraints enfold into bodily experience. Arthur Kleinman’s research on chronic illness in *Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing and Human Condition* has added a dimension to what earlier was just thought to be bodily dysfunction. Through his sessions with persons with chronic pain, he finds out that illness is essentially a social issue and is often shaped by culture. He presents bio-psycho-social model of disease. By using this model, the paper aims to examine how illness in Ammu points towards frustrations of desire in her as a woman in South Asia. The researcher wishes to explore Ammu’s illness because through her illness, Roy has probably tried to unweave issues related to gender marginalization and its impact on the mental health of women in South Asia.

**Keywords:** Illness, Medical Anthropology, *God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy, Disease, Marginalization, Gender, Culture

The second half of the twentieth century saw a keen interest in social scientists for understanding the interaction between body and culture. One such link between body and culture is illness-experience. Medical Anthropologists working on this interaction understand illness not as personal issue rather a social issue. This is based on the assertion that body by embodying culture essentially becomes a social body. In this regard, Judith Lorber and Liza Moore write in their book *Gender and Social Construction of Illness* “social practices produce social bodies all through life and death – and beyond (consider how corpses are handled)...” (Lorber and Moore



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5). Illness-experience is no exception, because what is viewed as natural and normal in a culture is the result of shared understanding based on the social acceptance among the members of that society.

Arthur Kleinman, a Medical Anthropologist, in his *Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing and Human Condition* conceptualizes bio-psycho-social model of disease. He writes that psychological and social factors are often the “determinants of the swing towards the amplification” (Kleinman 9). Even though he asserts that they are not necessarily the origin of the disease, however, his study proves that they become factors to the larger level. In the similar vein, Judith Lorber and Liza Moore write, “what we actually experience as illness is a disturbance of our social lives so that we cannot go about our usual pursuits, a situation which may or may not be the result of actual bodily dysfunctioning (Lorber and Moore 1). Kleinman and Lorber give a broader perspective to understand illness-experience. One becomes ill not just because of bodily dysfunctions there are life situations that enfold into bodily experience. Since they endorse illness as a social issue, therefore, they advocate the understanding of illness only in the cultural context. Furthermore, Kleinman makes a distinction between disease and illness. For him, illness is very subjective experience of sickness “a lived experience” and in the biomedical sense, “disease is what practitioner creates in the recasting of illness in terms of theories of disorder” (Kleinman 5). However, he maintains that in bio-psycho-social model, disease is more than what a practitioner is trained to look at. It is “embodiment of the symbolic network linking body, self, and society” (Kleinman 6). Even though the distinction between disease and illness is for convenience in the medical parlance, the researcher finds the concept “illness” broader than “disease” and hence will use it often in place of disease. Keeping the above mentioned insights, the researcher aims to understand the interaction between the body and the culture through the perspective of Ammu’s disease in the novel *The God of Small Things*.

Ammu alias Ammukutty, the mother of Estha and Rahel, has a strong role to play in Arundhati Roy’s novel. But her disease seems to play even a stronger function. Ammu dies of tuberculosis at the age of thirty one – ordinarily an age too young for anybody to die. Frequent



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references to her and her state of declining health in the novel fetch the attention of readers. Then the word ‘madness’ is also frequently used in her regard. Ammu’s death, in the novel, in the age of only thirty one leaves many questions behind.

In the paper, the researcher attempts to understand - why does the writer need to show Ammu’s death in disease even when she could do away without it? This question seems unavoidable even when the towering issue of caste threatens to hijack the essence of Roy’s novel. The researcher wishes to explore Ammu’s illness because through her illness, Roy has probably tried to unweave issues related gender marginalization and its impact on the mental health of women in South Asia.

There are suggestions in the novel that Ammu dies of tuberculosis: “After Ammu died (after the last time she came back cortisone and rattle in her chest that sounded like a faraway man shouting)...” (Roy 15). The disease of tuberculosis, according to Susan Sontag, has ordinarily been too much romanticized in English literature: “The use of metaphors drawn from TB to describe love - the image of a "diseased" love, of a passion that "consumes"—long antedates the Romantic Movement. Starting with the Romantics, the image was inverted, and TB was conceived as a variant of the disease of love” (Sontag 20). But, it is not presented as a romantic disease in the novel. The author has not given any clue if this loneliness is due to Velutha’s absence. She is shown to be shedding tears in the bus after her meeting with the Police Officer over accusation on Velutha (Roy 8) but that is not sufficient evidence to understand that her loneliness is due to absence of her object of love. Roy informs:

Ammu died in a grimy room in the Bharat Lodge in Alleppey, where she had gone for a job interview as someone’s secretary. She died alone. With a noisy ceiling fan for company and no Estha to lie at the back of her and talk to her. She was thirty-one. Not old, not young, but a viable, die-able age (Roy 161)



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The novel does not seem about frustration in love, rather about frustration in a woman's life caused by personal relationships and the socio-cultural norms. For example, Roy informs the reader how after divorce, Ammu faces the sense of meaninglessness in her life whereby "she felt like a road sign with birds shitting on her. She had an odd, feverish glitter in her eyes" (Roy 161). It may be due to a painful awareness in her that her individual need for happiness, and peace can never be met and that her social life is over. She could gauge that her life is leading towards an end: "Life had been lived. That her cup was full of dust. That the air, the sky, the trees, the sun, the rain, the light and darkness were all slowly turning to sand. That sand would fill her nostrils, her lungs, her mouth." (220). Metaphors of 'dust' and 'sand' describes the nothingness she experiences in her life. Roy, through the character of Ammu, clearly establishes the link with a woman's loss of control over her environment and her sense of loss over her relationship with her body which further becomes the cause of loneliness in her life.

It wasn't what lay at the end of her road that frightened Ammu as much as the nature of the road itself. No milestones marked its progress. No trees grew along it. No dappled shadows shaded it. No mists rolled over it. No birds circled it. No twists, no turns or hairpin bends obscured even momentarily her clear view of the end. This filled Ammu with an awful dread, because she was not the kind of woman who wanted her future told (224).

Through the metaphor of 'road', Roy seems to have explored the life of a divorcee woman in South Asia. The dreary, deathlike and deserted look of this road points towards the uncared, depressive and lonely life Ammu lives. Now the question rises why after all, Ammu feels this sense of moving towards death at such a young age. Not many sociological or psychological researches are found on the lives of divorcees in South Asia. However, Vrinda Nabar's book *Caste as Woman*, though silent on the lives of divorcees, yet helps in understanding in South Asian girls' expectations in marriage based on the social conditioning



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they are brought up in their own parents. Girls are brought up by filling a sense of marginality in them that they can get their real home only in their husband's. Ammu's expectation of getting her own share of love and happiness is aggravated by the violence and mental torture that she experiences at her parent's house. Even though "as she grew older, Ammu learned to live with this cold, calculating cruelty" (Roy 181) yet this makes her more vulnerable to the outside world. Even in choosing a husband for herself, "Ammu did not pretend to be in love with him. She just weighted the odds and accepted. She thought that Anything, anyone at all, would be better than returning to Ayemenem..." (39). Through Papachi's act of shredding Ammu's most loved gumboots when she was young, Roy very poignantly exposes the mental violence that many south Asian girls have to endure even at their own parental house. The neglect by her parents makes her ready to love the outside world. As her marriage turns disastrous due to her husband's drunkenness and violence, she is left with no other place than her parents. Here it seems to be the real crisis for Ammu, to return to none other than her own disgusting parents who never cared her at all. She returns because South Asian Society does not give respect to women who live alone.

Ammu left her husband and returned, unwelcomed, to her parents in Ayemenem. To everything that she had fled from only a few years ago. Except that now she had two young children. And no more dreams (Roy 21)

The word "unwelcomed" is quite revealing and seems to expose the gender bias and social disintegration a women face in their day to day life. It also underlies mental suffering and depression that women pass through thereafter. Most Women, in South Asia, are only brought up to be given to somebody in marriage. They are socially conditioned to live a dependent life throughout-under the control of father or husband or son. It also exposes a social setup where women cannot escape violence and therefore, live under severe mental depression. Ammu, a representative of women in South Asia, can be seen as a woman with no locus stand; a woman



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who is not given any formal or vocational education to live an independent life nor allowed to do so, and who has to come back to the oppressed and biased world even if she does not like it.

Ammu, unlike her many counterparts in real life, is a woman who stands against the hostile social environment and keeping in mind the hugeness of it, fails and is swayed in its whirlpool. Ammu has no place to go – away from her partial parents and violent husband. She has to return to the same place where she is always considered an outsider and where no one understands her needs. Sense of marginality and the knowledge that her sorrow is perpetual makes her body a battlefield where she fights not an unknown enemy but known yet a giant enemy in front of whom she looks so dwarf and helpless – the patriarchal society in which even women play from men's side. And her body, naturally, gives way. Her husband, Papachi, Chacko, Baby Kochamma and Mammachi – representatives of patriarchal society – never make her comfortable rather perpetually make her realize that she, as a social body, has no place in the scheme of things. This is evident in Chacko's a "surprisingly high laugh for a man of his size and fatness" over her helplessness suggesting "what's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine" (Roy 57) and in Baby Kochamma's keenness for them "to realize that they (like herself) lived on sufferance in the Ayemenem House, their maternal grandmother's house, where they really had no right to be" (45).

If Roy claims that the novel is about biology it is because her body is shown to be a site that breaks the socio- cultural rules in desperation to pull herself out of the perpetuity of her position. Ammu's self who does not have 'any locust Standi' and who struggles to search one in her own way, finds it nowhere but in the other marginal territory – Velutha's world. Ammu's soul, on the verge of madness, demands an urgent confirmation of the self and she slides in Velutha's world, listening to her biology and breaking a taboo.

Ammu leaned against the bedroom door in the dark, reluctant to return to the dinner table, where the conversation circled like a moth around the white child and her mother as though they were the only source of light. Ammu felt that she



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would die, wither and die, if she heard another word. If she had to endure another minute of Chacko's proud, tennis-trophy smile. Or the undercurrent of sexual jealousy that emanated from Mammachi. Or Baby Kochamma's conversation that was designed to exclude Ammu and her children, to inform them of their place in the scheme of things....As she leaned against the door in the darkness, she felt her dream, her Afternoon-mare, move inside her like a rib of water rising from the ocean, gathering into a wave. The cheerful one-armed man with salty skin and a shoulder that ended abruptly like a cliff emerged from the shadows of the jagged beach and walked towards her. (Roy 329)

Perhaps, for Roy, to romanticize the disease would have meant becoming blind to sense of marginality with which every moment millions of women in South Asia live by. Roy focuses on these socio- cultural shackles that bring about the downfall of the Ammu as a body and soul. Ammu's attraction towards Velutha is occasioned by absurdity and depression in life where her own people play an important part in ruining her life. It is when she is abandoned by the hopes of some happiness in her own social milieu, she looks for the same in Velutha. Velutha becomes a gratification for what she has already lost.

It seems that through Ammu's depression and physical disease in life, Roy also wishes to question the relevance of socio-cultural institutions like marriage. This institution is shown to be aggravating the depression in women on day to day basis. Instead of working as a support system to women, it works as a trap that cages women's subjectivity forever in oppressive and hostile environment. In the novel, Ammu learns painfully that her parent's house and her husband's house both are spaces that deny her a sense of self: "When she looked at herself in her wedding photographs, Ammu felt the woman that looked back at her was someone else. A foolish jeweled bride." (43). But this knowledge comes at a more painful time when she has two children to bring up – a role that also demands the same – sacrifice of the desires. The suppressed desire in Ammu threatens to mitigate her social role as mother. Her mind fights a clash between her desires and her responsibilities. As a result, she goes on the verge of madness—



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of “an unmixable mix. In the infinite tenderness of motherhood and the reckless rage of a suicide bomber” (Roy 44).

Ammu listened to songs that she loved on the radio, something stirred inside her. A liquid ache spread under her skin, and she walked out of the world like a witch, to a better, happier place. On days like this there was something restless and untamed about her. As though she had temporarily set aside the morality of motherhood and divorcehood. 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. (Roy 44)

Roy in presenting her mental state – ‘of unmixable mix’ highlights the struggle between her own self and herself as social body. Sigmund Freud calls this “something” an “abnormal repression” (Freud) of desires which can also be held responsible for her behavior – “restless and untamed”, and which Ammu calls “Madness” (Roy 111). Michel Foucault’s book *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* provides an insight into how madness can also be seen as a social construct understood from the cultural point of view. From his example of history of madness in Europe, he records the historical shifts when the stigma of madness came to be extended to those who didn’t fit into economic structure of the society: “For a long time, the house of correction or the premises of the Hospital General would serve to contain the unemployed, the idle, and vagabonds” (Foucault 50). Even this can also be applied on Ammu’s state of mind which she calls ‘madness’ – a desire in her body which is biologically natural but culturally is not considered normal.

Therefore, Ammu’s TB exposes the underlying life conditions in which she lives. Ammu has been mentally fighting many battles, - with her own desires, with her own role as mother, with patriarchal society. When these conflicts take her children in their whirlpools, Ammu loses her emotional balance. The latest blow in the succession of traumas is her sudden separation from most loved in the world – her children. Her children - whom she protected from the world like anything and whom she loved double – are snatched from her by the



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circumstances created/constructed by the patriarchal society. The separation with her children shocks her and her mind goes awry refusing to acknowledge the time when she is not with her children.

It was as though Ammu believed that if she refused to acknowledge the passage of time, if she willed it to stand still in the lives of her twins, it would. As though sheer willpower was enough to suspend her children's childhoods until she could afford to have them living with her. (Roy 159)

Suspending the children's childhood indicates refusing to acknowledge the reality, being unable to observe the shock or the crisis and therefore, living in the past. Snatching from her very reason of living leaves her despondent and takes from her reason and rationality. She lives in a constant fear – of what her children might learn from others which may be harmful to them, “like loving people who didn't really love them” (43). That's why, when she comes to see her daughter in Ayemenem, she does not let her daughter talk. This refusal to face the present indicates the pressure and depression she must be undergoing.

The last time Ammu came back to Ayemenem, Rahel had just been expelled from Nazareth Convent (for decorating dung and slamming into seniors). Ammu had lost the latest of her succession of jobs—as a receptionist in a cheap hotel—because she had been ill and had missed too many days of work. The hotel couldn't afford that, they told her. They needed a healthier receptionist....She was swollen with cortisone, moonfaced, not the slender mother Rahel knew. Her skin was stretched over her puffy cheeks like shiny scar tissue that covers old vaccination marks. When she smiled, her dimples looked as though they hurt. Her curly hair had lost its sheen and hung around her swollen face like a dull curtain. She carried her breath in a glass inhaler in her tattered handbag. Brown Brovon fumes. Each



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breath she took was like a war won against the steely fist that was trying to squeeze the air from her lungs. (159)

Ammu tries jobs for the custody of her children and their survival when she could hardly afford for her own survival only. The burden that mind carries with it takes her strength to live.

Her association with Velutha is seen as her failure towards being a responsible mother and a cultured woman in the novel. This second stigma – as a failed mother – (first being a divorcee) takes from her the very essence of her being. The very last conversation between Estha and Ammu, and the very freak possibility of meeting him again drowns her soul in despair -

She scanned the finger-nails of the little hand she held, and slid a black sickle of dirt from under the thumb-nail.

“And look after my sweetheart for me. Until I come and get him.” “When, Ammu? When will you come for him?” “Soon.”

“But when? When eggzackly?” “Soon, sweetheart. As soon as I can.”

“Month-after-next? Ammu?” Deliberately making it a long time away so that Ammu would say Before that, Estha. Be practical. What about your studies?

“As soon as I get a job. As soon as I can go away from here and get a job,” Ammu said. – “But that will be never!” A wave of panic. A bottomless bottomful feeling. The Eating lady eavesdropped indulgently (324)

From the above evidence, it can be said that just because Ammu cannot get a job, she cannot get her children. She cannot get a job because she is not educated enough to get a decent job to bring her children up decently – “A wave of Panic. A bottomless Bottomful feeling”.

Ammu gets ill because she is compelled to do for what she is not prepared by her society- that is, role of a provider. She is not given education, like Chacko, in a university. After her schooling, her parents did not send her to any college for graduation. She is not socially prepared for an unpredictable future because she is only taught to dependent upon men – father or husband. The “bottomless bottomful feeling” panics her at the thought of not earning a



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handsome amount of money because she does not have required qualifications for jobs. Impossibility of getting the custody of her children breaks her psychologically.

From the above discussion about Ammu's disease, Roy seems to have exposed the cultural constraints upon her. It shed light on how girls are not brought up as independent beings in the South Asia cultural setting resulting in their inability to take decisions and stand on their own if marriage fails. The novel is about Ammu, her ruin as a divorcee and consequences of her ruin – her illness and death. Of course, it involves her children also. It is about socio-cultural shackles enforced upon her woman-body and self that turns her into psychological ruined personality– mentally fighting a battle with the patriarchal south Asian society in which she is born. All the events in the novel seem to have deep link to Ammu's state of mind – Rahel and Estha's withdrawn nature, their sense of loss, Velutha's entry into Ammu's life, and his death also etc. Sense of meaninglessness which she suffers since her marriage seems to be due to "social structural oppression", a term given in Iain Wilkinson's "Social Suffering as an Approach to Human Understanding" by which he means causes of suffering "rooted in social situations and conditioned by cultural circumstance" (Wilkinson 1). The novel seems to highlight the reasons because of which she falls into deep depression and her body becomes a site of struggle between her need as a person and her role as a woman in the society.

By placing Ammu's illness in her cultural context, the researcher is able to explore that the novelist has presented a stark truth of South Asian family set-up in which girls have a very limited access to happiness. Second, the novel does not leave its focus from the outcome when girls are given 'distrust', 'unstability', 'inferiority', 'loneliness', and 'non-care' in inheritance of relationships. Third, the novel even when it is about biology, it is even more about sickening culture wherein women are not allowed to see themselves as independent persons.

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