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Reconceptualising Family in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Kamila Shamsie's *Broken Verses*

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Abstract:

Both Arundhati Roy and Kamila Shamsie, as profound South-Asian women writers, have often been associated with postcolonial politics or feminist agendas. However, this paper attempts to recontextualise their works, The God of Small Things and Broken Verses, respectively, to uncover the particularities of their politics. While enmeshed in the ideas about the nation, patriarchy, and colonialism,

these texts deal with the specificities of individual families. Yet, the representation of the family, in these works, is not conventional as these authors attempt to either reveal the interstitial spaces within the family, or try to restructure a normative bond, or finally, even reject the family to accommodate individual desires. Ultimately, their postcolonial or feminist politics do not overshadow the multiplicity of a family: as an ever-evolving and diversified entity.

Keywords: Family and alterity, feminist politics, postcolonial writing, Arundhati Roy, Kamila Shamsie.

Introduction

Narratives centred around family could resort to either the approach of emotional idealism where families represent sacrosanct spaces marked by affective bonds and homogenous connections which stand resilient in the face of larger political turmoil, or these narratives could use the family as an analogy to represent these bigger political realities thus fraught with tensions and anxieties. In both cases, the inevitability of associating the personal, familial structure with the public, external world becomes apparent which is also evident in both Roy's text, *The God of Small Things*, and Shamsie's text, *Broken Verses*. Tackling issues of national importance, these texts ultimately transgress seemingly contained narratives about one family or one household, for expounding on the macro problems of patriarchy, capitalism, neo-colonialism, and national politics. Critics readily attribute this feature of situating the global in the local in Roy's text — an idea further strengthened by the text's repeated use of the binary between 'big' and 'small' things, as noted by Ruvani Ranasinha: "Understanding capitalism's links with globalisation illuminates Roy's use of the big-small/large-little/macro-micro theme throughout her novel, through which she traces the wider social forces that shape the smaller realities of people's lives" (57-8). Similarly, John Lutz also comments on the

Ayemenem house's familial politics as symbolic of broader national and global concerns: "Ayemenem is presented as microcosm of Kerala, India, and, to some degree, global capitalism" (62). On the other hand, Shamsie places her characters in direct engagement, often in conflict, with the country's strained political climate: Samina's feminist activism, the Poet's rebellious poetry, and Aasmaani's eventual archivism of women's movements, all integral to their family's history.

Such politicising of family allows for viewing it as a heterogeneous arrangement which is ever-changing, unfixed, and pluralistic. This, in turn, can be interpreted as a response to monolithic and biased readings of family perpetuated by postcolonial nationalism or colonial/neo-colonial imperialism. Nationalist narratives appropriate vocabulary of familial affect, its inviolability, and family as the embodiment of national culture, all of which create a singular conception of family, or what Indrani Chatterjee calls an "ideological production of family", subservient to nationalist agendas (4). This can be achieved through various ways: either emphasizing the uncorrupted, inner domain of the family untainted by colonial ravages which Partha Chatterjee defines as a creation of "spiritual domain" where "nationalism declares the domain of the spiritual its sovereign territory and refuses to allow the colonial power to intervene in that domain" (6), or through applying the concept of family as "the domain of disinterested love" to the nation which can thus, not only legitimately, but morally demand sacrifices (Anderson 144). Similarly, colonial and neo-colonial narratives also attempt to posit family as a homogenous category typifying the inferior culture and practices of the colonized country. Avtar Brah critiques the colonial discourses that "pathologise the Asian family" as the "main site of problems faced by Asian women" (74). The most poignant instance of this is the construction of the Muslim family and identity as essentially the oppressor of women i.e., a backward, barbaric counterpart to Western society — a claim — contested and dismantled by novels like Shamsie's which "oppose

overt Islamophobia with a more nuanced sense of multiple possibilities for Muslim identities in the modern world" (Morey 183). Deflating these tendencies to fix the concept of family as equivalent to national culture and vice versa by such national projects and colonial machinations, both Roy and Shamsie present a different image of the family: assorted, unconventional, and with its own politics.

Both the texts are also wary of the traditional family framework as they show their inbuilt hierarchical nature with its insidious oppressive and suffocating workings. For Roy, families are not the idealistic reservoir of support, intimacy, and affection, instead, they can be sites of conspiracies, jealousies, injustices, and suppressions as she reveals the dual operations of patriarchy and capitalism on the Ayemenem family. The decline of filial relationships is ultimately the result of patriarchal dispossession of and imposition on Ammu, casteist vilifying and annihilation of Velutha, and the overall capitalist temperament of the household, state, and nation which prefers commodities over people and their emotions. As suggested by Elizabeth Outka, there is a direct mirroring of the "trauma" of dysfunctional family dynamics and the emotional numbness of twins in the communal trauma of degradation of the environment, culture and people brought out by neo-colonial market forces making the Ayemenem family as a metaphor and product of the socio-economic reality of India (36). Kamila Shamsie's text, as a feminist intervention, also privileges unconventional families over the usual socially-accepted ones which do not advance heteronormativity, women's subordination, and hierarchical assertion of power and control. Both the novelists depict alternate ways of formulating families where their characters either attempt to fill the interstitial spaces within the existing normative structures of the family with transgressive relations, or they restructure the stereotypical bonds in a more evolved and liberal manner, or, finally, they can completely reject the established ways of constituting family leading to a radical redefining of the concept. Ultimately, these texts challenge, push the

boundaries of, and potentially subvert what Roy's narrator calls the "love laws": "The laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much" (*TGoST* 33).

Interstitial Bonds: Velutha and the twins, Shehnaz Saeed's second marriage

In Roy's text, the Ayemenem family, on the surface, has a neat organisation of its members in proper roles and relations, where the only aberrations are Ammu, Rahel and Estha as the text defines them as the "worst transgressors" for breaking the "love laws" and defying the usual classifications in the family order (*TGoST* 30-31). Their transgression is multifaceted, where it is not only their illegitimate relation with a lower caste man that generates anxiety but, from the beginning, their very presence in the Ayemenem house makes them prone to suspicion. They have no recognizable space in the Ayemenem house, having already lost claim on it through Ammu's marriage and being outcasted from her marital home. The text regularly reminds them and the readers of their precarious position in the family, either through Baby Kochamma's resentment who is "keen for them to realise that they (like herself) lived on sufferance in the Ayemenem House" (*TGoST* 45), or through Kochu Maria's disdained neglect of them (83), or Chacko's labelling of them (backed by Mammachi's preference) as the marginal burdens on the family where he calls them 'millstones around his neck' (85). Rahel and Estha's transgression is further deepened by their unconventional bond, defined as "a rare breed of Siamese twins, physically separate, but with joint identities" (*TGoST* 2), which culminates in a forbidden, incestual physical and emotional union between them at the end. Therefore, the twins, already challenging the bounds of normativity through their existence in their mother's parental home and their uncannily peculiar connection with each other, cannot fit into the normal familial relations which results in their finding gaps in the existing structures and exploiting them to forge new, undefined relations.

In the carefully dramatized scene of "Welcome Home, Our Sophie Mol" performance, the acknowledged and accepted playing out of a family union between a grandmother, Mammachi, and her son's daughter, Sophie Mol, is undercut by the affectionate meeting between Rahel and Velutha, a relation, which is unseen, marginal and lacks name (Chapter 8). Rahel having no valid position or role to play in the authorized family scene as "[s]he was just the landscape" (*TGoST* 172), becomes part of the *othered* ("off stage") scene, or what the text refers to as the "subworld" (176). The twins and Velutha form an alternate familial bond (filling the interstitial spaces of the otherwise strictly spelt out family code) with Velutha acting as a surrogate father figure to the twins: providing them with affection, care, indulgence, and guidance. This bond is defiant, not only in its ability to resist proper classification but also in its defiance of caste hierarchies and blurring the boundary between 'touchable' and 'untouchable'. Velutha is described as the man loved by Ammu at night and by her children during the day (*TGoST* 202) where the only defining contours of their relationship is 'love' and not any socially sanctioned category of family. Roy constructs this unadmitted, unwarranted, and unnamed relation between Velutha and the twins, allowed to exist in the hidden crevices of society, which implicitly defies dominant national and colonial narratives of envisioning family based only on "uniliny, patriliny, the sacralized marriage, primogeniture, and ties of blood" (Chatterjee 250).

In *Broken Verses,* Shehnaz Saeed's second marriage becomes another model of concealing the subversive desires beneath the surface of a superficially constructed, conventional family. Keeping up the guise of heterosexual marriage, Shehnaz and her husband are able to safely exercise their socially tabooed homosexual yearnings. Through Shehnaz's character, Shamsie reveals the gap between the appearance and the reality, between the admissible family relations and the ones that threaten to disrupt these conservative notions. Shehnaz employs the sham of her second marriage to dually escape

public infamy for her actions: for leaving her career as an actress for her desires for a woman and for harbouring such transgressive desires in the first place (*BV* 299). It is in the fissures of this sham that Shehnaz locates her actual feelings, and it is these fissures, gaps, or "the missing pictures" that take up a significant role in Shamsie's novel, as explained by Shamsie:

> *I was already aware that, as a novelist, I was interested in silences — those periods of history that don't enter official narratives or are pushed to the margins — but thereafter I started to say that I was interested in the missing pictures ("The Missing Picture" 11).*

If the family is the microcosmic site to interrogate the bigger social questions, then these seemingly small or trivial interstitial bonds, in both the novels, are ultimately connected to their authors' overarching politics — engaging with the issues of caste, class, gender, and nation.

Restructuring the Norm: Aasmaani's families

Presenting a more optimistic picture, Shamsie's novel posits a viable way of modifying the conventional family unit for a more liberal, open, and generous one. Aasmaani, the central protagonist, gets involved in multiple such familial combinations, with many available options for parental figures: Aasmani, Samina, and Poet; Aasmani, Beema, and Aasmaani's father; Aasmaani, Rabia, and Shakeel; and Aasmaani, Shehnaz, and Ed. Her life gets to a considerable extent defined by her attempt to unravel these complicated relations, especially her resentment over her mother's abandonment and her longing for being the Poet's child. In her adulthood, she must further navigate her simultaneous attraction to and suspicion of the mother-son duo: Shehnaz and Ed. On the other hand, Rabia and Beema act as the proxy mother figures to the emotionally fragile Aasmaani, and her actual father and Shakeel (to some extent) become the light-hearted, consoling fathers. What Aasmaani describes as the "odd households" (*BV* 102) is that her

family becomes a mixture of these mutually co-existing relations, yet, despite their differences, all these relations lack any suffocating impositions, competitive jealousy, or suppressive hierarchies, as Shamsie projects a relatively positive image of the family compared to Roy's bleak portrayal of the Ayemenem family.

Aasmaani's relationship with her mother and the Poet is psychologically the most intense, as she must cope with the idea of having a mother who is also a lover and a political activist, and a stepfather who is legally unrelated to her. However, despite its emotional troubles, this relationship is mainly responsible for Aasmaani's political and philosophical education. Her mother's feminist activism enables her to look beyond narrow and prejudiced patriarchal mindsets and propel her toward her eventual role as an archivist of women's movements. Aasmaani remarks:

> *At twelve, I knew exactly how the world worked and I thought that by knowing it I could free myself of the world's ability to grind people down with the relentlessness of its notions of what was acceptable behaviour in women (BV 254).*

Initially, deriding the ineffectiveness of Samina and the Poet's political actions, Aasmaani, finally, acknowledges the value of their work, of their ability to fight tyranny in the discursive field (*BV* 336). While Aasmaani grudges their physical absence, the text makes it apparent that, being her intellectual guides, it is to Samina and the Poet that she owes her acute political and philosophical sensibility. Another tense family dynamic for Aasmaani is her building relationship with Shehnaz and Ed: Ed adopts the double role of an ally and a romantic interest for Aasmaani offering her the relatability of having extraordinary mothers and having shared a common feeling of neglect in their childhoods, and Shehnaz extends her motherly role to Aasmaani giving her relationship advice and solace. Even if she cannot completely trust Shehnaz and she has to face betrayal from Ed, they both provide her with a way to cope with the loss of her mother as Shehnaz gives her an insight into her

mother's psyche during her final years, and Ed's deception allows her to finally accept and let go of the past. The text does not gloss over the flaws of these potential families possible for Aasmaani, yet it does not reject them for their unconventionality or non-idealism, instead, it asserts their importance in formulating Aasmaani's character.

Rabia and Shakeel, and Beema and Aasmaani's father might seem like the normative familial bonds available to Aasmaani, however, Shamsie's depiction of them borders on utopic, as she reformulates them to replete them of almost any negativity. The text overtly acknowledges this as it declares Beema and Rabia as "Saints-in-waiting" (184) who unconditionally provide moral support, genuine care, and guidance to Aasmaani. Aasmaani, gratefully, points this out to Rabia: "You're the one who's always been my rock, you and Beema together the anchors who keep me moored to sanity" (*BV* 178). Both Rabia and Shakeel, and Beema and Aasmaani's father provide Aasmaani with the much-needed safety net to handle her psychological trauma and to give her material support. However, despite being plainly cast as her guardians, they do not impose on Aasmaani or create any claustrophobic environment for her in the name of protection, instead, they allow her enough mental and physical space to enable her self-realization and freedom of action. Such idyllic representation of family in the text offers a different way of perceiving Muslim households than their popularly demonised image in the Western imagination. As exposed by Chandra Talpade Mohanty, there is a simultaneous homogenizing of Muslim familial structure and Muslim women as "the oppressor" and "the oppressed", respectively, by Western feminism while dismissing their subjective, contextual differences and positing them as "singular, coherent" and "given entity" (28). However, the aim of the text does not seem to counter one completely vilified representation with another completely glorified, instead, it reveals these narratives for they are: selective and biased by one's own politics. Shamsie presents an alternative version of the Muslim

family which reconstitutes religion from being a patriarchal tool to a cultural, communal joy (*BV* 133), displaces the expected rivalry between Samina and Beema with a bond characterised by friendship and complementary roles (184), and, finally, places all its family members in relations of equal respect and mutual affection. Puncturing the norm, all of this allows Shamsie to suggest the multiplicity, specificity, and heterogeneity of Muslim families.

Rejecting the Family: Ammu and Samina

A feminist potential can be recognised in both the texts, which appears most prominently in the characters of Ammu and Samina, respectively. Stepping out of conventional familial ties to situate their non-accommodable desires, both Ammu and Samina enter into relations which lack any vocabulary to name them as these have no place in the socially-defined, ordinary scheme of families. Having been assigned the identity of divorced mothers, they are condemned for acting out the roles of unmarried lovers, which places their romantic relations with Velutha and the Poet, respectively, outside "family" itself — thus considered illicit. Their movement outside familial confine is prompted by their disdain for its rules of propriety and the marginal positions accorded to women in it — a feminist intervention — defying any status of victimhood. This, again, challenges the Western notion of viewing the Third World women as a "homogenous 'powerless' group often located as implicit victims" (Mohanty 23). Instead, what they achieve is a successful subversion of the limits of their gender, which Rose Casey identifies as the aesthetics of bursting i.e., exceeding the enclosures of "property, possession, and propriety" (392). They resist being reduced to proper roles of wife and mother, and defy families which perpetuate their material dispossession and minimal status.

Ammu and Samina get automatically disqualified from conventional family structures, as they form romantic bonds outside marriage while also escaping gender politics implicit in marriage. Ammu

replaces her former marriage's violence, abuse, and disrespect with an out-of-wedlock alliance with Velutha which is fuelled by love, passion, and desire. Ammu keeps her relationship discreet, hidden from her family and society, which not only allows her to avoid outside gaze and interference but is also in direct opposition to societal/familial injunctions of maintaining the so-called caste purity. This makes their relationship politically charged as the text also associates Ammu's attraction toward Velutha with their mutual disdain for the dominant order: "She hoped that under his careful cloak of cheerfulness, he housed a living, breathing anger against the smug, ordered world that she so raged against" (*TGoST* 176). Brinda Bose also recognizes this political strain in their union as she argues that Ammu's transgression is not a "womanly eroticism" or an "elitist indulgence", but it is as "revolutionary" as Velutha's Leftist leanings are (63, 70). Similarly, Samina also rejects the official tag of marriage to define her relationship with the Poet which is prompted by the Poet's suspicion of the institution as it had previously rendered her mother an outcast, and Samina's reluctance against its monetary and the religious implications (*BV* 89). Evading the socio-culturally defined subordination of women in marriage, both Ammu and Samina can form relationships on their own terms, even if they exist outside the boundary of family.

However, such radical exclusionary action complicates their roles as mothers. Roy's text presents a conflict between Ammu-as-mother, whose life holds no more dreams or chances (*TGoST* 43), and Ammu-as-lover, who is characterised by a "wisp of madness" (223) and "Unsafe Edge" (44). Ammu further verbalizes this dichotomy as she, in her anger, blames her twins for her lack of freedom and her incarceration, and she calls them "millstones" around her neck (253). Comparably, Samina, too, often faces this dilemma of choosing between her womanly desires and maternal duty. Shamsie's text emphasizes society's notion of the irreconcilability of motherhood with a woman's individuality, as lamented by Shehnaz: "when we were growing up no one taught us how to be

mothers and something else at the same time. Motherhood was an all-or-nothing business" (*BV* 101). Samina is often blamed for her negligence as a mother as she chooses to assert her independent will; and Ammu, pressed by maternal responsibility, needs the support of the Ayemenem household and thus cannot evade its intrusion on her life choices. Both of them are, therefore, forced to either subsume their subjective desires under the prescribed role of motherhood or exercise these desires at the expense of being labelled as failed mothers. "I can't stop being a woman because I'm your mother" (*BV* 203), states Samina, but this is exactly what a typical family advocates them to do.

Finally, a traditional family often dispossesses women of any real property right, relegates them to a peripheral position, and confines them in domesticity — which further qualifies their movement outside familial space as having feminist possibility, especially in Ammu's case. Roy's text builds a valuable contrast between Ammu and Chacko to stress on Ammu's inferior and bleaker situation compared to Chacko. Firstly, Ammu lacks any social belonging or legal entitlement to the material property of the Ipe family, unlike Chacko's possessive appropriation of each aspect of the family's assets (*TGoST* 57). This makes Ammu dependent on her brother's charity, and losing that, she is faced with the threat of economic annihilation (which is realised in the end). Secondly, Ammu is condemned for both her intercommunal marriage and affair with her social inferior, however, Chacko escapes censure for both of these supposed crimes as his actions get justified by being couched as "Man's Needs" (168). Lastly, the gendered hierarchy of the Ayemenem family allows Chacko economic privilege to pursue professional advents and legitimate freedom to move beyond the space of the home, while Ammu, married or unmarried, is contained in its domestic arrangement. Ruth Maxey suggests that "[c]lassically gendered ideas of home, in both national and domestic terms, are linked here to the notion of women as embodiments of cultural tradition" (57), which would imply that these texts' inbuilt critique

of gender discrimination in family deflates these very narratives which attempt to glamourize women's subordination by posturing it as tradition, cultural identity, or national legacy.

Conclusion

The representation of family in both the texts seems to be guided by a wish to counter dominant narratives which try to essentialize family for their own political agendas, be it the postcolonial nationalist versions which posit family as the microcosmic site depicting the uncorrupted national or cultural identity, or the neo-colonial narratives which conjure a homogenized negative image of Asian families to assert their professed progressive, superior mindset. Therefore, both the texts recognize the inevitable entanglement between the supposedly personal sphere of family and the public, political world as issues of family are directly informed by larger issues of class, caste, and gender in both novels. Wary of traditional familial arrangements which perpetuate hierarchical gender biases, suffocating rules of social propriety, and exclusionary politics, these texts propose alternate ways of forming or conceiving family: finding interstitial gaps in existing structures to situate the unrecognized relations, reconstituting ordinary family relations towards a more ideal family dynamics, or a radical rejection of available definitions of family and construction of one which is outside the norm and its patriarchal impositions. To conclude, what these texts attempt to do is provide a revised image of what a family can be — an image — which is fluid, contextual, evolving, and diversified.

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