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## Gendered Authorship of the Female Identity: A Gynocritical Comparative Study between Norwegian Wood and the God of Small Things

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Nahreen Saleha Shahadat\*

\*Department of English, Bangladesh University of Professionals, Bangladesh.

Corresponding Email: \*salehanahreen@gmail.com

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**Abstract:** *The paper seeks to elucidate the differences in the representation of women in male- and female-authored texts, specifically analyzing Haruki Murakami's Norwegian Wood and Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things. Numerous critics over the years have noted that male and female authors often portray femininity in markedly different ways. While male authors tend to perpetuate prejudiced or stereotypical views of women, female authors, drawing from their direct experiences of womanhood, provide more authentic depictions that foster female empowerment. Theoretically identifying this marked difference is thus the primary aim of this paper and hence this study employs a qualitative textual analysis, utilizing theoretical frameworks such as Michel Foucault's discourses of sexuality, Elaine Showalter's gynocriticism, Hélène Cixous's écriture féminine, Judith Butler's gender performativity, and Simone de Beauvoir's concept of gender stereotypes. The findings reveal a significant divergence in the way that male- and female-authored texts characterize female figures. Murakami, in his portrayal of Naoko and Midori, has often associated reductive and stereotypical attributes that in essence undermine their agencies and voices; their attributes and mannerisms were shown to be limited to emotional and/or sexual contexts that conflate the female experience and undermine gender fluidity. In contrast, Roy depicted Ammu and Rahel in accordance to feminist sensibilities as they can be seen to portray androgyny as well as employ their sexualities to challenge and subvert social norms and stereotypes. The study therefore concludes that women-authored narratives provide more nuanced and authentic representations of female experiences, whereas male-authored texts frequently reinforce patriarchal frameworks and stereotypical assumptions of one-dimensional gender linearity.*

**Keywords:** *Sexuality, Gender Performativity, Écriture Féminine, Gynocriticism, Stereotypes.*



## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Arundhati Roy's poignant novel *The God of Small Things* is a narrative set in Kerala, India. The novel mainly focuses on Ammu, a character fighting with the strict patriarchal and caste-based society, and her forbidden love affair with Velutha, an untouchable. The novel also delves into the deep relationship between Ammu and her two children, Rahel and Estha, as they navigate the traumas of their childhood which is marked by loss, social taboos, and the lingering impact of their mother's subversion of societal norms. *Norwegian Wood* on the other hand is a coming-of-age novel by Haruki Murakami that centres around Toru and his relationship with two women, i.e. Naoko and Midori. Naoko is a fragile and introspective woman haunted by past traumas, whose mental instability pulls her into a world of isolation, while Midori is a vibrant and unconventional woman who offers Toru a chance at a more grounded and hopeful future. The novel focuses on trauma, sexuality, and relationships.

The characterization of women in literature has always been a prominent interest in literary criticism as women have often been misrepresented. Such misrepresentations have the potential to limit female agency as well as their voices, which is the case of most male-narrated works. Such appropriations of the female identity must be identified in order to decrease, or at least discourage, the tendency towards the patriarchal dictation of the female narrative. Although it is important to acknowledge that not all male-authored narratives misrepresent women, there still is an evident tendency of certain authors to associate one-dimensional homogeneity when it comes to women.

Both of the novels, i.e. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*, have women as their central characters; and it can be seen that the characterization of the female characters drastically differ between the two. The central female characters in Roy's novel, i.e. Ammu and Rahel, exhibit much agency, independence, subversion, and fluidity, while Murakami's Naoko and Midori can be seen to be limited to stereotypes and patriarchal expectations. Thus through a critical analysis, i.e. by employing theories of the discourses of sexuality, stereotypes, female narratives, as well as gender performativity, the paper aims to identify the differences between gyno-texts (female-written texts) and andro-texts (male-written texts) by elucidating the way that women have been characterized.

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

Gynocriticism is a term coined by Elaine Showalter in order to refer to the study of women-authored texts. According to her notion of gynocriticism, it "is concerned with woman as writer – with woman as the producer of textual meaning, with the history, themes, genres and structures of literature by women. Its subjects include the psychodynamics of female creativity, linguistics... female literary career..." [1, p. 147]. In reference to this [2] noted that most writings "homogenized all women into one category... Such homogenization denied a diversity of women's experiences and, therefore, of women's writing" [2, p. 27]. Thus gynocriticism was postulated by Showalter [1] in order to advocate for the accurate representation of women by women in literature.

*Écriture féminine* is a literary and philosophical idea that arose during the twentieth century, fundamentally connected with French women's activist scholars and journalists like Hélène



Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva. The term translates to "female writing" in English, and it represents an exploration of the unique qualities and expressions of women's writing in contrast to traditional male-dominated literary forms. It is often considered to be an extension of Showalter's concept of gynocriticism. The key characteristics of *écriture féminine* by Cixous [3] are fluidity and non-linearity, authentic depictions of the body and sexuality, rejection of phallogentrism (Freud's castration complex, and Lacan's Symbolic order), exploration of eroticism and pleasure, and rejection of gender norms; it glorifies women's otherness due to their fluidity.

Michel Foucault in his *History of Sexuality* [4] presented his theory on the discourses of sexuality. Discourse, according to Foucault is an agent to establish power within society; it conditions people's lives by shaping the way they perceive certain things and the way they think. He thus presented four discourses of sexuality that marginalizes queer sexuality and argues that certain forms of sexuality were considered as "unnatural and evil" [2, p. 185], as a result stigmatizing both non-heterosexuality and female sexuality. Two of Foucault's discourses are relevant to the current paper. The first strategic unity is the "hysterization of women's bodies" and its corresponding sexual object is the "hysterical woman". The female body is thought to be an object that is "saturated with sexuality" [2, p. 187] and thus should be studied medically. In order to avoid hysteria and ensure normalcy the woman must be placed in the context of a family. And secondly, Foucault identified the strategic unity of "psychiatrization of perverse pleasure" and its sexual object the "perverse adult". Overdeveloped sexual drives were perceived to be biological and psychic conditions that must be institutionalized in order to be kept under control. Through these unities the agency of individuals are limited as well as stigmatized.

Gender stereotypes are pre-existing and widely accepted convictions and anticipations concerning the roles, conduct, and attributes customarily linked to individuals based on their gender. These stereotypes frequently sustain traditional and culturally established gender roles. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* [5] coined the subject-other theory, which alludes to the binary opposition between men and women. While men are perceived as the strong, logical and authoritative subject, women are seen as the weak, emotional, and hysterical other. These labels are common gender stereotypes and the underlying reason why "for him she is sex – absolute sex, no less" [5, p. 6]. Thus they are used to limit authentic representation of the female narrative and experience which limits their voice as well as agency.

Judith Butler is a well-known figure in the field of gender studies, celebrated for their theory on gender performativity. Butler postulated the idea that 'men' and 'women' are social categories and thus, by extension, implying that gender is not a fixed category. This means that there is no such thing as innate femininity or masculinity. Butler thus states "gender is not passively scripted on the body, and neither is it determined by... the overwhelming history of patriarchy" [6, p. 531].

The research therefore hypothesizes that gyno-texts subvert reductionist portrayals of female identity by challenging the issues theorized by the aforementioned theorists while andro-texts are hypothesized to reinforce reductive ideologies.



### **Significance of the Study**

Both Norwegian Wood (1987) and The God of Small Things (1997) are contemporary novels that depict modern societal structures, making the study's findings relevant. The characterization of women in literature is critical as misrepresentation, particularly in male-authored texts, often leads to ill-disposed stereotypes that restrict women's agency and freedom. Identifying these patriarchal narratives is essential to counter misrepresentations and promote female empowerment. Additionally, there seems to be a notable gap in comparative analyses of gyno- and andro-texts that examine gendered authorship of the female identity which this research addresses. Furthermore, by employing multifaceted feminist theories – such as Foucault's discourses of sexuality, Showalter's gynocriticism, Cixous's *écriture féminine*, Butler's gender performativity, and Beauvoir's gender stereotypes – the study provides a comprehensive view of how Murakami and Roy have portrayed female characters. Thus the findings aim to highlight the reductionist and stereotypical representations of women in male-authored literature, advocating for a more nuanced and empowering depiction of female identity.

### **Research Objectives**

Primary Research Objective:

- a. To delineate the differences in the characterization of women in male- and female-authored novels.

Secondary Research Objectives:

- b. To theoretically analyse the manner in which Haruki Murakami has chosen to characterize women in Norwegian Wood.
- c. To theoretically analyse the manner in which Arundhati Roy has chosen to characterize women in The God of Small Things.

## **2. RELATED WORKS**

Haruki Murakami is notorious for the way that he has chosen to depict women in most, if not all of his novels. In fact, in a 2004 Art of Fiction interview, he stated, “women are mediums – harbingers of the coming world. That's why they always come to my protagonist; he doesn't go to them.” (Murakami). Thus it is of no surprise that the female characters in Norwegian Wood don't have the most feminist outline and why many critics have identified and acknowledged this fact.

[7] in his thesis on gender representation in Murakami's novel identified the author's tendency to marginalize women in order to highlight the male protagonist. This marginalization, according to [7], limits the individuality of the characters. It has been noted that the “two female characters are denied their own personal growth and are ultimately employed to cast light on the growth of the male protagonist, Watanabe. By doing so, the novel in fact reproduces the existing sexual oppressions” [7, p. 21].

[8]'s views on the way that Murakami chose to portray women can be considered a bit different than we've seen in [7]'s study. In her work, although she did acknowledge Murakami's one-dimensional view on women, [8] defended his choice of characterization. [8] does not necessarily take Norwegian Wood as its central topic of analysis, rather she comments on



Murakami's writing style in general, mainly focusing on his novels *IQ84*, *A Wild Sheep Chase*, etc. The critic states that it is true that Murakami did not choose a feminist lens to depict his characters, but rather than being misogynistic, the women in his novel are "representative of realities many women face in contemporary Japan" [8, p. 229].

[9], although does not directly acknowledge the issue of gender representation in Murakami's novel, the findings of the paper can contribute to feminist studies. The paper focused more on the psychoanalysis of Naoko and came to the conclusion that she suffered from hysteria. This conclusion was drawn based on the correspondence of her symptoms to that of Freud's concept of hysteria, i.e. "paraphasia, hallucination, depressive symptoms, anxiety, somnambulism, hysterical action, and suicidal ideation" [9, p. 2]. This identification of Naoko's hysteria is important for feminist studies because hysteria is a common trope and stereotype associated with women in order to portray them as weak, out of control and, overall, inferior to men.

*The God of Small Things* has also been the subject of much feminist analyses. Although theoretical approaches to their characterizations are relatively rare, the findings are nonetheless relevant.

[10] in her paper, for example, focused on the way the female characters, mainly Ammu and Rahel, have rebelled against the oppressive patriarchy of Indian society at the time. The critic first acknowledged the highly patriarchal context of the novel as well as society's tendency to subjugate women and limit their agencies and independence. However, Ammu and Rahel have shown the potential to go against the oppressive patriarchal society. [10] writes "the women of contemporary period have launched a severe attack against patriarchy" [10, p.142]; she also wrote that "Ammu appears as the epitome of the 'New Women' [10, p.145]. She attributes this idea of being a 'new woman' based on Ammu's act of not tolerating domestic abuse from her husband, her relationship with Velutha, as well as her courage in going to the police station to claim his innocence. Thus Ammu has been portrayed to be a feminist character.

The same sensibilities have been evoked in [11]'s paper. She writes that despite the very patriarchal society that favours men (such as Chako) over women, Ammu was able to re-establish her female agency by acting against such gender based-societal norms. [11] wrote "It shows different kinds of discriminations one on the basis of gender and sex. It provides multifaceted issues of suppression, oppression and tormenting activity against women in male dominated societies" [11, p. 179].

There are other papers that have done feminist studies in regards to Roy's novel, however the focus was on the patriarchal and oppressive structure of society more so than on the way that women have dealt with the said societal structure. For example, [12]'s paper focused mainly on how the female characters were not given the same position and statutes in society, i.e. "Ammu is portrayed as a tragic figure, a woman struggling against her family, her motherhood and society" [12, p. 13]. Similarly, [13] in his paper also focused mainly on the struggles of women due to the patriarchy, i.e. according to the author the novel "shows the women's marathon struggle for seeking the sense of 'identity' in a totally averse and envious society" [13, p. 2). In essence, both the papers illustrate how women are treated by male-dominated societies. Overall, upon analysing literature authored by women it can be seen that women tend to portray female characters more accurately. For example in [14]'s paper it can be inferred that Monica Ali has aptly depicted the experience of diasporic women in a postcolonial setting, i.e. "the entire journey of Nazneen reflects a feminist journey of a woman" [14, p. 9]. This



simply acts as an example of how female-authored literature are better able to and are inclined to draw accurate images of the female identity.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

An explorative approach is adopted based on analytical and close reading method. The study is primarily qualitative in nature and takes Haruki Murakami's Norwegian Wood and Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things as the primary sources of data. The secondary sources, through which additional information and necessary data has been collected, include books, journals, articles and various internet archives. The analogies found from the aforementioned sources have been focused in order to meet the objectives of the research. The research incorporates a number of feminist theories, specifically Michel Foucault's discourses of sexuality, Elaine Showalter's gynocriticism, Helen Cixous' *écriture féminine*, Judith Butler's gender performativity, and Simone de Beauvoir's gender stereotypes. Finally, the research frames the concepts under the theory of gynocriticism, as introduced by Elaine Showalter.

The methodology is framed by incorporating the selected theories in order to conduct a comparative analysis between gyno-texts and andro-texts. Through this comparison the main aim is to be able to delineate how women-narrated literature provide a more accurate depiction of the female experience and identity while men-narrated literature propagate patriarchal assumptions of gender linearity. Firstly, the principles of *écriture féminine* are utilized in order to illustrate how andro-texts deviate from the accurate representation of female sexuality and physiology. Secondly, Foucault's discourses of sexuality are employed to identify reductive expectations towards women in andro-texts as opposed to gyno-texts. Thirdly, Beauvoir's stereotypes are used to detect how andro-texts propagate ideas of conflated femininity, while gyno-texts reflect feminine reality. Finally, Butler's idea of performativity is incorporated to determine how andro-texts reject gender performativity while gyno-texts glorify it.

### **4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **Divergence in the Portrayal of Female Sexuality and Physiology**

The authentic portrayal of the female experience is the key element of *écriture féminine*. These authentic portrayals refer to female sexuality as well as the depiction of the female body. Murakami's novel can be seen to fall short of these portrayals.

Sexuality is a dominant theme in Norwegian Wood since the sexuality of both male and female characters have been depicted by the author. However, it can be seen that the way that Murakami chose to illustrate male and female sexuality strongly differs. Sex for the male characters, i.e. Toru and Nagasawa, have been shown to be a sport and/or a way to control sexual urges. For example, Toru notes "not that he was dying to sleep with the girls he found: it was just a game to him" [15, p.42]. This tendency to frequently participate in casual sexual relationships portray the male characters' sexual independence and the absence of the expectation of monogamy as both Nagasawa and Toru engage in meaningless sexual relations despite being committed to their respective girlfriends, i.e. Hatsumi and Naoko. However, Naoko, Midori and even Reiko's sexualities are far more limited than that of the men in the



novel. Each of the female characters can be seen to maintain monogamous relationships, and even in that case they lack the complete agency that the men seem to have. For example, it was later revealed that Naoko was able to have sex with Toru, unlike in the case with Kizuki (even though she wanted to), because she was able to get sexually aroused by Toru. Naoko stated “I was ready to sleep with him... We tried a lot. But it never worked” [15, p. 147]. This shows the lack of control she has on her sexuality. Additionally, in the case of Midori, despite her several sexual advances towards Toru, he was always the one to turn her down. Thus Murakami showed that while men have sexual independence and control, women’s sexuality is mostly dictated by men rather than their own personal choices.

Given that the novel is written from the perspective of a male narrator, Toru, the descriptions of the female body can be seen to be limited; the women were often described in much sexualized manners as opposed to more realistic manners. For example, in Toru’s first impression of Reiko, he noted that she was “long and slim, she had almost no breasts” [15, p. 123]. Similarly, in a description of Naoko, her breasts were emphasized, i.e. “lovely curve from waist to hips, the rounded richness of her breasts...” [15, p. 174]. In both cases Toru paid more attention to their breasts which shows the very masculine perception of the female body.

In contrast to Norwegian Wood the depiction of female sexuality and the female body differs drastically in *The God of Small Things* as Roy was able to illustrate a more authentic portrayal of women. The novel mostly depicts female sexuality more so than male sexuality. Both Ammu and Rahel subvert social and gender norms through their sexualities. For example, Ammu engages sexually with Velutha despite him being an untouchable, while Rahel has sexual relations with Estha. In both cases, the two female characters show more independence in choosing their sexual partners despite social barriers and gender norms. Unlike in Norwegian Wood the female characters here show more control over their sexuality and who they have sex with; through their sexualities they “broke the Love Laws. That lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much” [16, p. 328]. In terms of the depiction of the female body, Roy did not put much focus into the description of either Ammu or Rahel’s body, rather their personalities and individualities were highlighted. For example, in terms of Ammu, Roy wrote “sometimes she was the most beautiful woman that Estha and Rahel had ever seen” [16, p. 45]. Thus an image of the authentic female experience, in terms of sexuality and physique, can be found in Roy’s *The God of Small Things* as opposed to Norwegian Wood. This is because while Murakami illustrated lack of control in female sexuality and overemphasized their breasts, Roy showed sexual independence in spite of social norms and emphasized on individuality rather than their bodies.

### **Masculine Inclination of Depicting Female Hysteria and Institutionalization**

As described before, Foucault outlined certain discourses in regards to sexuality which are often used to limit the sexual agency of individuals. The first strategic unity identified by Foucault is the “hysterization of women’s bodies” of which the corresponding sexual object is the “hysterical woman”. According to the theorist, the female body is “saturated with sexuality” [2, p. 187] and in order to ensure the regulation of this sexuality they must be put into the context of a family; inability to do so can lead to hysteria. This is exactly how Murakami has depicted Naoko. Because she was unable to control her sexuality, she became hysterical. Her hysteria can be identified based on her symptoms of “paraphasia, hallucination, depressive



symptoms, anxiety, somnambulism, hysterical action, and suicidal ideation” [9, p. 2]. Furthermore, her anxiety has been portrayed to be based on her assumption of not being able to be sexually aroused in the future; this is also what further triggered her condition, i.e. “I just don’t want anybody going inside me again. I just don’t want to be violated like that again – by anyone” [15, p. 374].

Foucault also identified the strategic unity of “psychiatrization of perverse pleasure” and its corresponding sexual object as the “perverse adult”. According to this, ‘improper’ sexuality must be institutionalized in order to be put under control. Naoko’s admission into Ami Hostel exhibits this idea of institutionalization as her sexuality was a significant trigger that led to her institutionalization. Thus Murakami showed how subversion of ‘proper’ sexuality can have disastrous effects, i.e. as seen through Naoko’s suicide and her institutionalization. However, none of the male characters were depicted in such a manner; their polygamous relationships had no consequences whatsoever. Thus female sexuality was depicted very negatively and was stigmatized while male sexuality was glorified in the novel.

Contrastingly, both Ammu and Rahel show similar sexual activities but the consequences differ drastically. While Naoko’s sexuality led to hysteria and her institutionalization, Ammu and Rahel’s sexuality subverted social norms. By having sexual relations with Veltha, Ammu subverted the hierarchal class system and acted against the prejudice towards the untouchables. Furthermore, Ammu was able to thrive more after coming out of her abusive marriage. Similarly, Rahel’s relationship with Estha, although incestuous, reinforced their telepathic bond and subverted social norms. Here, female sexuality was used as a tool to diminish the rigid hierarchal social stratification as well as the love laws; hence the notion of the empowerment of female sexuality is imperative.

### **Patriarchal Reductionism and Conflation of Femininity**

Two common stereotypical views, in accordance to Simone de Beauvoir’s subject-other theory, are that women are sexual, weak, and emotional while men are perceived to be strong and logical. These stereotypes have been reflected in Murakami’s novel. All of the female characters have been sexualized in one way or another as their connections with Toru are based on their sexual relationships. Toru fails to have a plutonic relationship with any of the characters; this shows that Murakami perceives women as solely sexual beings. Furthermore, they were also shown to be too emotional as both Naoko and Reiko were institutionalized in order to be able to regulate their emotions. Even Midori was shown to be driven by her emotions at one point as her sexuality flourished after the death of her father. The men on the other hand aren’t portrayed as emotional. In fact, it can also be argued that Nagasawa was devoid of emotion all together, while Toru is driven by his passivity rather than emotions. Finally, women were also shown as the weaker gender as Naoko was shown to be unable to overcome her emotions and eventually commit suicide.

Ammu and Rahel on the other hand subvert such stereotypical assumptions regarding women. Rahel was described to be a reckless adolescent, i.e. “six months later she was expelled after repeated complaints from senior girls. She was accused (quite rightly) of hiding behind doors and deliberately colliding with her seniors” [16, p. 16]. Roy also stated that it was a common perception among those who knew her that “she didn’t know how to be a girl” [16, p. 17]. This reckless attitude goes against the idea of stereotypical feminine fragility. Ammu on the other





hand was described as a free spirit ever since she divorced Baba, i.e. “She wore flowers in her hair and carried magic in her eyes... the infinite tenderness of motherhood and the reckless rage of a suicide bomber... on that skyblue December day, her wild, curly hair had escaped in wisps” [16, p. 44-45] and so on. These descriptions depict Ammu as an independent women and thus subverts gender stereotypes.

### **Performativity of Women-narrated Female Characters**

Although the female characters in Norwegian Wood are not completely stereotypical, their overall depiction does not fully subvert gender norms. They very occasionally exhibit masculine traits. For example, both Naoko and Midori can be seen to have a sense of authority in regards to their lives. For instance, Naoko took the initiative of admitting herself to an institute in order to better cope with her loss. Furthermore, Midori also seems to exhibit autonomy as she makes sexual advances at Toru, which is not a stereotypical feminine inclination. However, despite their performativity, their roles are restricted to sexual and emotional contexts. Any agency or independence they have showed are linked to their emotions or their sexualities which are stereotypical areas for women.

Ammu and Rahel however exhibit agency beyond these two categories. Ammu shows it in terms of her marital life, her motherhood, her spiritedness as well as her sexuality. Similarly, Rahel also shows her performativity through her boyish personality and robust attitude. Hence, both of the characters can be said to portray androgyny. Thus Ammu and Rahel are better portrayals of gender performativity as opposed to Naoko and Midori.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

Therefore based on the comparisons drawn between Haruki Murakami’s Norwegian Wood and Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things through the lenses of *écriture féminine* /gynocriticism, discourses of sexuality, gender stereotypes and gender performativity, it can be concluded that the characterization of women differs drastically between male- and female-authored works. Murakami depicted the female characters, especially Naoko and Midori, in a manner that limited their agencies and their voices; both of them were over-sexualized, shown to be victims of their sexualities, depicted as stereotypically emotional and weak, and were limited to emotional and sexual contexts. On the other hand, Ammu and Rahel could be seen to use their sexualities to subvert class-based prejudice and societal norms, showed control and autonomy over their lives and choices, and portrayed androgynous characteristics. Overall, the paper shows how masculine narratives restrict the authentic portrayal of women and subsequently limit the representation of the female experience.

Thus when analysing and even creating literature, readers and authors should be mindful of how female characterization can impact the literary canon. Therefore female identity should not be appropriated or in any way limited to stereotypical categories, just like we’ve seen in the case of Norwegian Wood, so that the female identity and experience can be glorified and empowered the way that Arundhati Roy did through The God of Small Things.



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