



Reclaiming Desire and Defying Conventions: An Analysis of Female Sexuality in Mrs Dalloway and the God of Small Things

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Abstract: *The paper offers a detailed analysis of the complexities of female sexuality in Mrs Dalloway and The God of Small Things from a feminist perspective. It investigates how female protagonists overcome and defy societal norms and expectations concerning their sexual desires. The obstacles of conventional sexual norms align with the ‘repressive hypothesis’, coined by Michele Foucault in The History of Sexuality which posits that the modern discourse on sexuality is characterized by repression. This theory is used to depict how societal repression shapes and is shaped by the narratives of Clarissa and Ammu. The paper is qualitative and uses close textual analysis as an analytical tool. For the study, primary data were collected from textbooks, and secondary sources including various books, websites, articles, and journals were used to gather secondary data. The clear finding is that Clarissa has a sexual desire for Sally which is not accepted by post world war British society and Ammu, being a divorcee and upper-class woman, reclaims her sexual agency and attempts to fulfill her sexual desire by making a romantic relationship with Velutha which is prohibited in the post-colonial Indian society. Through the blending of sexual desires with more general societal issues like race, class, and cultural identities, both novels deconstructed conventional depictions of female sexuality. Thus, the study contributes to the ongoing conversation on the role of women’s sexual desires and their place in a postmodern world where autonomy, self-expression, and the deconstruction of conventional norms are of paramount importance.*

Keywords: *Female, Repression, Sexual Desire, Sexuality, Society, Etc.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Human sexuality has long been a popular topic in literature. Female sexuality has often been ignored or marginalized due to various cultural, historical, and social factors. This paper addresses the complexities of female sexuality as presented in two influential works of



literature: 'Mrs Dalloway' by Virginia Woolf and 'The God of Small Things' by Arundhati Roy. Though there are synchronic, geographical, cultural differences between these novels, they deal with the expectations and conceptions of female sexuality. 'Mrs. Dalloway' was first published in 1925, conveys an ordinary day from the life of an affluent Clarissa Dalloway in London following World War I, while 'The God of Small Things', a 1997 novel, presents the struggle that a divorced woman faced with her twins in Kerala, India. These stories are connected by their in-depth analysis of how women overcome the complexities of sexual desire in a society established by inflexible norms.

Repressive hypothesis provides us with an invaluable tool to dissect and interpret the portrayal of female sexuality within these novels which enables us to confront and question the conventional norms that have frequently repressed women's choices and desires. To identify the ways in which these texts both reflect and defy prevailing norms and expectations regarding female sexuality, the female protagonist of these texts and their desire, their struggle, and the impact of society have been examined. So, the purpose of this study is to investigate how Ammu and Mrs Dalloway subvert sexual norms and traditional gender expectations and provide a new understanding of female sexuality and desire in the early and late 20th centuries.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous studies on these two plays from various angles have been done. The researcher read numerous works in preparation for this study.

Instead of just portraying women positively, David Powers Corwin contends that Woolf's female characters uphold the ideological language of masculinity. The patriarchy that marginalizes women, according to Cowrin, is defended by Richard's "encounter with maintaining his masculine identity." (Cowrin208) Marbun provided a Marxist analysis of the social class dynamics in the society, focusing on the novel "Mrs. Dalloway" and its characteristics. Umida Fayzullaeva conducted a study on how Virginia Woolf rejects outside intervention by emphasizing the variety of her characters' inner lives. She argued, "Virginia Woolf, in Mrs. Dalloway, shifts the focus from external actions to the rich inner lives of her characters, using stream-of-consciousness techniques and temporal structure to explore complex relationships and reality's essence." (Fayzullaeva49) Li applied Freud's Thanatos theory to interpret this novel. As per the study, Septimus and Mrs. Dalloway lost their Eros and became stupid as a result of the war and society's worship of power, similar to what happened during the sexual invasion. (Li120) Li claims that Mrs. Dalloway "is the best demonstration of Freud's theory of Thanatos and has excellent insight into people's subconscious." (Li120) Regarding this novel, Wu examined the trauma and issues that women suffer as well as gender discrimination against women. According to Wu, Clarissa "has an intense hunger for freedom," yet she eventually experiences an identity crisis as a result of her marriage. (Wu 565) Jweid claimed that Woolf "incorporated a textual portrayal of female identity in Mrs. Dalloway with feminist suppressed voices." (Jweid 10) Woolf, according to him, "offered new expression of feminist voices which faced obstacles during modernism." (Jweid 10)

From a postcolonial feminist standpoint, Angelika Olsson examined Arundhati Roy's book *The God of Small Things*. She also discussed subalternity, how "Third World" women are portrayed in theory and literature, and Cultural Studies' idea of agency by studying and



comparing Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, and Ammu. In spite of their oppression and marginalization, the study asserts that Roy has made a significant contribution to the diversity of portrayals of subaltern women in the "Third World" who exhibit agency and are deemed accountable for their own actions. In a research, Nandi looked at the ways in which a variety of these fantasies, desires, and fears both reinforce and contradict the political message that Roy's work seeks to convey. Imam Alam Khan argues that this novel personifies the tragedies of the characters, such as Ammu and Velutha. In his article, he stated that the relationship between Ammu, a wealthy woman, and Velutha, an untouchable, has been viewed as evil, inappropriate, and intolerable in both the family and society. This is the untouchability sensibility in a society that results in the terrible deaths of two important, innocent individuals. (Khan 281) A study conducted by Elizabeth Outka argues, Roy talks about how Chacko's drawing of the History House, which at first glance appears to be limited to discussing the effects of colonial rule, embodies this idea of community temporal hybridity. (Outka14) Finally, Roy presents a viable response to trauma that simultaneously bears witness to trauma's persistent potential for continuous damage and imagines through narrative a new sort of temporal recovery. Roy does this by deftly translating a traumatic version of temporal hybridity into a potentially liberating one (Outka25) Rekha Tiwari and Vishnu Kumar Sharma stated that "The God of Small Things" presents a vivid portrayal of society's ugly side and highlights the plight of women in India and their constant struggle against exploitation. It also paints a clear picture of women's pathetic state and their inexplicable struggles. (Tiwari and Sharma275) Elsa Jose Sheba states, "In addition to expressing the emotions of repressed women, Roy offers a hope for women's empowerment through the representation of strong female characters who are attempting to fight injustices and practices against women." (Sheba164) Suleman and Mohamed describe how the most significant violation of human rights in India is the maltreatment of women and children in their work. They also looked at the reasons for child abuse and women's issues throughout India using Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things*.

From all relevant work, it is clear that previous studies have concentrated on different aspects of these novels, such as their narrative strategies, social critique, psychoanalysis, feminist criticism, Marxist criticism, and character development. Nonetheless, a feminist perspective on the representation of female sexuality and the defiance of conventional norms in these texts is evidently absent. This study fills this void by providing a thorough examination of how both pieces defy conventional ideas about female agency, sexuality, and desire.

Research Objectives

The study seeks to evaluate how both texts emphasize the complexity of female sexuality, and deconstruct traditional sexual norms. Additionally, there are two particular goals.

1. To analyze how 'Mrs Dalloway' by Virginia Woolf depicts Clarissa's sexuality and desire in the context of a post-World War I British society.
2. To demonstrate how Ammu's sexual agency and desire are depicted in 'The God of Small Things.'

Research Question

According to the objectives, the researcher has set three research questions.



1. How does Woolf depict female sexuality and desire within the socio-cultural context of post-World War I British society?
2. How does Roy illuminate the concept of sexual agency and desire in the context of post-colonial India?
3. How do the selected novels contribute to the deconstruction of conventional sexual norms?

3. METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out using a qualitative approach that effectively applied Michele Foucault's repressive hypothesis and involved close textual reading. The textbook provided the primary data, and other books, websites, journals, articles, and other sources provided the secondary data. This study compares the depictions of sexuality and desire in both novels an effort to elucidate how both works of literature contribute to a deeper knowledge of postmodern feminist discourse.

Theoretical Framework

The capacity to recognize, express, and compromise one's sexual desires as well as to take the initiative to undertake acts that enable the satisfaction of those needs is known as sexual agency. Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, claims that power has suppressed sexuality for the previous three centuries which is known as the repressive hypothesis. Sex has been criticized as a waste of energy ever since the bourgeoisie emerged. It has therefore been suppressed, muted, and limited to reproductive uses. Foucault claims that the repressive hypothesis has its roots within a particular context of history that observed the beginning of the seventeenth century as a period in which some degree of sexual liberty endured: "During this time, people made a show of their bodies through outward gestures, bold discussions, and explicit transgressions." (Foucault 3). During this time, people were generally open and accepting when talking about and experiencing sexuality. The concept of privacy wasn't a major concern. Foucault suggests that "sexual practices didn't require much secrecy, and people spoke openly about them without hesitation, and actions weren't hidden or concealed" (85). But this period of sexual freedom ended with the development of capitalism. According to Foucault, this transition is like a "twilight" setting over a "bright day," bringing the dull and repetitive nights of the Victorian middle class. (Foucault, 3) He explains that the marital family took control of sexuality and focused on its role in reproduction, carefully restricting it and confining it to the house (Foucault, 3). Therefore, it is believed that sexuality has evolved into a procreative activity that only takes place within couples' chamber. He asserts that perception of sexual suppression in society is how it is commonly seen. A sphere undergoes a form of 'censorship' (Foucault6) According to Foucault, in order to build a repression over people and their sexualities, censorship is perceived in three different ways. He states, "If sexual behaviour is suppressed, it is doomed to be forbidden, non-existent, and silent." (Foucault 6). According to Foucault, social definitions of acceptable sexual behavior led to prohibition. The procreative couple, coincidentally, 'laid down the law' and created the norm because their sexual behaviors served as a 'utilitarian' act (Foucault 3) Consequently, all other sexual practices were considered "sterile" (Foucault 34). It was believed that discussing sex was a private matter that should only be done by a married couple. As stated by Foucault,



regarding sex, 'silence' is the only 'rule' (Foucault 3). 'Non-existence' was last method regarding sexual repression (Foucault 6). Foucault defined "non-existence" as the Victorian society's rejection of the existence of alternate or other sexualities. As a result, sexual orientation that were considered aberrant or deviant were only tolerated in "brothels" and "mental institutions." (Foucault, 4).

Michel Foucault ultimately demonstrates that sexuality is a construct created by discourse. His approach encourages to examine sexual experiences and sexuality-related ideas. His analysis is very helpful to demonstrate Ammu's and Clarissa's experiences of sexuality and to question the beliefs about sexuality of respective society.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Female Sexuality in Mrs Dalloway

Clarissa is utterly unaffected by the suffering and hunger of the working women despite being a -victim of repression. Clarissa belongs to upper-class because she has a servant named Lucy. As mentioned throughout the novel, Clarissa and her husband are not compatible because of Clarissa's own sexuality and their lack of affection for one another. Even at 52, Clarissa is still unsure about her decision to wed Richard Dalloway when the story comes to conclude. Foucault identifies that society supports heterosexuality because society considers the only function of sex is 'reproduction.' (Foucault 3) Marriage has forced Clarissa and Sally to repress their sexuality; they both feared marriage as children and spoke of it "always as a catastrophe" because they knew it would "part them." "The two had a kiss thirty-four years prior to Mrs. Dalloway, which Clarissa recalls as one of her happiest memories. She also confesses that she feels the same way about her female friend just like 'men' feel women. (Woolf 34) It is not accepted in society because this feeling is a sign of bisexuality or homosexuality. Throughout the novel, there are hints of this behavior in passing. For example, when Clarissa is thinking about "falling in love with women," (Woolf, 8) she recalls Sally and wonders if their relationship was truly romantic. She is never really sure how deep her feelings are, though, because her mother's refusal to discuss homosexuality and the fact that it was illegally made her feel this way. Relative to her younger self, Sally is late, and her entry is modest with no dramatic flourish. Recalling their passionate kiss, which she regarded as one of the greatest experiences of her existence, makes Clarissa's heartbeat accelerate. Sally has undergone a substantial transformation after her marriage which Clarissa noticed. She has settled into a more traditional lifestyle as she is the wife of a wealthy man with a huge family. Clarissa is taken aback by Sally's change because she had always viewed Sally as a beacon of independence and resistance to social mores. Sally's adjustments throughout time and as a result of social pressures are reflected in her more reserved appearance and manner. Sally's attitude still has a tinge of her previous audacity despite these modifications, as seen by her open discussion with Clarissa. Her presence makes remorse in Clarissa, serving as a reminder of her decisions and the life she may have had. Clarissa reflects on the routes she may have pursued and how society's expectations have affected her life. A lot of Clarissa's time is devoted to nostalgically remembering her time spent with Sally. This relationship was very significant to her during her adolescence. But it never developed and she remained silent regarding her sexuality. Foucault explains that this is because 'silence rules' the matter of sexuality. Sally



kissing her, is the most vivid memory she can recall. In real life, Clarissa and Sally's friend Peter interrupt this memory exactly as it did in the past. Peter is paying a visit to Mrs. Dalloway, who gave proposal of marriage years prior. She rejected Peter because she didn't feel anything for him, but she also probably had a lot to do with her attraction to Sally and women in general. Moreover, Clarissa is angry about Elizabeth and Miss Kilman's relationship not because her daughter is in a lesbian relationship. It is because she never got the chance to enjoy her own sexuality when she was younger due to societal sexual expectations.

Clarissa's erotic attraction to Sally and other women proves to be too powerful, as she asserts that their bond is something that "can only exist between women." (Woolf 30) Woolf adheres to the conventional romance plot while subtly addressing female desire and homosexuality. By depicting Sally and Clarissa kissing, Woolf defies the conventional Woolf breaks with the traditional heterosexual romance trio among Clarissa, Peter, and Richard. This is the moment when feminine desire and sexuality are presented. Through her love for Peter and her recollections of kissing Sally Seaton, Woolf uses marriage and sexuality as different subjects. Woolf explores the pressures society places on women to fit into certain positions in marriage through Clarissa's marriage to Richard Dalloway. Rather than being motivated by passion or love, Clarissa's desire to marry Richard was motivated by her need for security and social approval. The portrayal of Clarissa as a formidable female protagonist who subverts the conventional notion that the sexual orientation of females is "monogamous and heterosexual" means that sexuality is socially constructed, as suggested by Foucault.

4.2 Female Sexuality in 'The God of Small Things'

Roy deals with many facets of love and sexuality in her novel. The intimacy between Ammu and Velutha is an example of an expression of deep and passionate love. Ammu is a divorcee who married the twin's father, Baba, to escape Ayemenem and the violent abuse by her father Pappachi. She filed for divorce from her alcoholic spouse after he began to abuse her and their kids. She later has an affair with an untouchable, Velutha, who worked for her family and the affair has fatal consequences. When Velutha was taken to the police station, Ammu went to visit him and she told Inspector Thomas Mathew that "she wanted to make a statement and that there had been a horrible misunderstanding" (Roy7) However, the Kottayam Police called them illegitimate offspring or veshyas and refused to accept any statements from them. (Roy8) This commentary definitely reflects their relationship is not allowed in the society which results in repression. But Ammu is not the victim of repression.

Ammu was a woman deprived of male love. She felt desired and cherished by Velutha. She was a sexually active woman and found solace and comfort in Velutha's arms and this fact was what felt most abhorrent to Mammachi. The love shared between Ammu and Velutha was spiritual and transcended the bounds of "love laws". An upper-class woman cannot have a romantic relationship with a Paravan, a sexual norm created by Indian Bourgeoisie society. However, Mammachi and Baby Kochamma were revolting for Ammu's sexual interest, which means, society tries to repress female sexuality. Mammachi imagined Ammu, completely nude, having sex in the mud with a man who was nothing more than a dirty coolie. She had a clear, detailed vision of it: The harsh black hand of a Paravan on her daughter's breast. His lips meeting hers. He jerked his ebony hips between her opened legs. The sound of their respiration. His distinct Paravan smell. Mammachi thought, almost puked, like animal. (Roy) The love of



Ammu with Velutha was given the form of lust by Mammachi. Mammachi, here, acted as the mouthpiece of the bourgeoisie society. She was not unique in her thoughts. The idea of sex with a Paravan was not expected in the post-colonial Indian society. Mammachi's thoughts are a reflection of this fact. Ammu's sexual act with a Paravan was an issue but an even more significant issue was the idea that a woman could have sexual desires and that too a 'divorcee'. The concept of a woman seeking pleasure and sexual gratification was not only alien but also abhorrent and unacceptable to the world. The fact that mere idea of Ammu and Velutha having sex could make Mammachi nauseous, While the sexual activities of Chacko with his parade of girlfriends are just the fulfillment of basic needs as Mammachi asserts that Chacko is unable to resist having "a man's needs." (Roy 168) It is a comment on a woman's sexuality as viewed by the society and the level of prejudice it held. This shows that sexuality is not the same for all. When sexuality is related to males, it's his basic need and if it's related to females, it is viewed as a perverse human need because of the societal norm.

Ammu, the new woman, is shown tearing down all the barriers of patriarchy and society by falling in love with a Dalit, a member of the lower class. Ammu's relationship with Velutha led to Velutha's death. The love between Ammu and Velutha was pure and poignant. Though Ammu is a divorcee, she reclaims her sexual agency, and desire for sexuality and challenges the societal norms or the patriarchal mindset that a higher-class woman or a divorcee woman cannot make a sexual relationship with a Paravan.

5. RESULT

Clarissa defies social repression by privately admitting what she wants whereas Ammu defies it through bravery. They illustrate how people regardless of circumstances can still affirm their sexuality and question the standards.

Clarissa Dalloway belongs to post-WWI England, which is one marked by Victorian values such as repressed sexuality and closed discussions. She experiences sexual repression, as she cannot fully embrace or express her feelings for Sally due to societal norms. The way Clarissa remembers and thinks back on her kiss with Sally indicates that she treasures these times even in a society that forces people to repress homosexuality. Since she is unable to publicly voice her desires, this could be interpreted as an act of rebellion on her part.

Ammu exists within the rigid structures of Indian society, which includes strict taboos around sexuality, caste, and gender roles. Her affair with Velutha, an untouchable, is a direct challenge to these taboos. Ammu faces severe societal and familial consequences for her sexual desires. The violence and ostracism she experiences are forms of social repression aimed at controlling her sexuality. Ammu's relationship with Velutha, despite knowing the consequences, is a powerful act of defiance against societal sexual norms. Ammu rejects the societal exploitation and repression of female sexuality in her context. The internal and external struggles of these women about the repressive structures surrounding female sexuality support the idea that repression doesn't silence sexuality but rather makes it a focal point of social discourse.



6. CONCLUSION

Social structures such as marriage, the caste system, cultural conventions, and so on are ways in which society, whether it be British or Indian, continuously threatens, disregards, and suppresses feminine sexuality. Through Foucault's theory of 'repressive hypothesis', the research investigates how the respective society forces the female to shape their sexual desire. Woolf has technically allowed us to look into Clarissa's psyche and experience her longing, and her relationship with Sally which defies societal sexual expectations. With the character Ammu, Roy introduces a lady who confronts the confluence of class, caste, and sexuality in a conservative society. Ammu faces ostracism and punishment for her forbidden love which reflects the complex web of power structures that control female desire. Ultimately, this research depicts two different societies where females are forced to suppress their sexual desire. Moreover, this research demonstrates the significance of these novels in the context of postmodern feminist literature and their contribution to the ongoing discourse on women's liberation and sexual autonomy.

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