

Section 4. Linguistics

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A FEMINIST STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

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Abstract

Arundhati Roy's work *The God of Small Things* is a book about love and loss. The characters in the work desire love and pursue it, but due to the caste system and the so-called law of love in Indian society at that time, these loves end in tragedy. This paper takes a feminist stylistic perspective on this novel, analyzing the oppression of women in a patriarchal society in terms of lexical, phraseology, and discourse.

Keywords: *feminist stylistic, gender inequality, the God of Small Things*

Introduction

The *God of Small Things* is a post-colonial novel published in 1997 by the acclaimed Indian author Arundhati Roy. The *Financial Times* once called it "A gripping tale of love and loss, moored in anguish but told with compelling wit, eroticism and consummate tenderness". Beginning with the funeral of their cousin Sophie Mol, *The God of Small Things* tells the tortuous childhood experiences of twin siblings Rahel and Estha in a small village in southern India, revealing the secret of the love between their mother Ammu and the carpenter Velutha, and how, in this socially hierarchical environment, the two children were inadvertently induced to participate in the destruction of this poignant love, and paid a heavy price for it. The book draws out the humility and suffering of a family, and even a nation, through the

lives of twins, with a deep, ancient, tearful sadness flowing between the lines. Through a multi-faceted narrative approach, the author clearly outlines two story lines spanning several decades, presenting a family history full of trivial details and full of tragedy.

Feminist Stylistics

Since the rise of feminism in the 1960s, most feminists have argued that women as a group have been oppressed and treated differently from men, and have endured discrimination from individuals and institutions. Western feminist stylistic studies are the product of a combination of feminist theory and several branches of linguistic theory, particularly critical linguistics and critical discourse analysis theory. In order to analyze the hidden gender roles and gender identities in language, Sara Mills published the book *Feminist Stylistics* in

1995, with the aim of drawing attention to the ways in which gender is presented and, hopefully, changing them.

She mainly analyzes the gender differences in the text from the three levels, the first is gender differences at the lexical level, such as the use of male and female personal pronouns, the misuse of generic pronouns and referents, the choice of positive and negative words for men and women, and the taboo words for men and women; the second is gender connotations at the phrase and sentence level, where words are placed in specific contexts to investigate their meanings. The third is gender tendency at the level of discourse, inquiring into the construction of the text through the discourse codes inside and outside the text. For example, the portrayal of male and female characters, the difference in the representation of male and female status, and the narrative style of male and female characters.

Through the analysis of the above three aspects, it shows the oppression and discrimination suffered by women due to the unequal social status, and makes readers re-examine the text from the perspective of gender.

The God of Small Things made a huge impact as a Booker Prize-winning book. However, the current research on it mainly analyzes it from the perspective of post-colonialism (Zhao, 2017), trauma narrative (Feng, 2022; Yu, 2016) and spatial narrative (Li, 2015). However, at present, there are no articles from the perspective of feminist stylistics to deeply explore the power inequality between men and women reflected in the lexical, phrase and discourse of this novel.

Lexical Level of Interpretation

Feminist stylistics argues that masculinity is largely used as the norm in language. For example, the full pronoun he and the full noun man can themselves refer to both males and all humans. But people rarely think of women when they use these terms. Mills (1995) argues that the description of women as someone's wife makes them subordinate to their husband and in a marked position. This narrative is more commonly accepted, and thus women are invariably at a disadvantage compared to men. This is very evident in this article. (The example sentences selected

for this article are all from Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things*, published in 1997, and are therefore followed only by the page numbers.) There are many women who appear in the novel, including Ammu, Rahel, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, Levin's wife Kalyani, and so on. Through the descriptions in the article we can see how the use of vocabulary puts the female characters in a subordinate position.

(1): She was Rahel's baby grandaunt, her grandfather's younger sister. Her name was really *Navomi*, Navomi Ipe, but everybody called her Baby. She became Baby Kochamma when she was old enough to be an aunt (p 2).

(2): The Loss of Sophie Mol stepped softly around the Ayemenem House like a quiet thing in socks. It hid in books and food. In Mammachi's violin case. In the scabs of the sores on Chacko's shins that he constantly worried. In his slack, *womanish* legs (p 15).

(3): Though Ammu did as much work in the factory as Chacko, whenever he was dealing with food inspectors or sanitary engineers, he always referred to it as *my* Factory, *my* pineapples, *my* pickles. Legally this was the case, because Ammu, as a daughter, had no claim to the Property (p 57).

(4): They looked cheerful in the photographs, Lenin and *his wife*. As though they had a new refrigerator in their drawing room, and a down payment on a DDA flat (p 131).

(5): They were all there the deaf amoomas, the cantankerous, arthritic ap-poopans, the pining *wives*, scheming uncles, children with the runs. The fiancées to be reassessed. The teacher's husband still waiting for his Saudi visa. The teacher's husband's *sisters* waiting for their dowries. The wire-bender's pregnant *wife* (p 138).

Example 1 is the only place in the entire article to introduce the baby Kochamma's real name, she has her own name Navomi Ipe, but no one called her so, everyone called her baby, and she herself is accustomed to this situation, and did not ask others must be called his real name, indicating that this character actually does not have a strong sense of self. The key word in example 2 is "womanish". Chuck is the adult male in the family, and he is obese. The passage describes Chuck's obese and flabby calves, but the author intriguingly chooses the word "womanish". It seems to make the

flabby calves the preserve of women, but it has nothing to do with men and women, but with excessive obesity. But it is this choice of wording that further illustrates the important impact of lexical choice. This simple word can be seen in the fact that perhaps the words associated with women in this novel can have a certain negative undertone. Example 3 reveals the current situation of Indian society at that time. The husband Ammu married was not a good one, but after Ammu married, she still needed to take her husband's surname, and could only choose to change back to her father's surname after divorce, with no autonomy for the woman. In feudal China, women were also required to take their husband's surname after they married, which fully reflects the current situation of Indian society where women were dependent on men for survival. Example 4 This dialogue occurs when Pillai introduces Rahel to others. Pillai introduces Rahel not in terms of Rahel herself, but must place her in a subordinate position, whose "granddaughter" Rachael is. Instead of being an independent individual. Examples 5 illustrate that women many times do not even have their own names. They usually appear as the wife, sister or fiancée of some man, etc. Men, on the other hand, appear mostly independently. Feminist stylistics holds that women are generally considered to be variations on the male norm and are usually specifically marked. Yuan (2019) argues that it seems that to outsiders, women were more of an appendage of men and did not even have the possibility to exist by their own names, from which the absolute dominance of men over women at that time can be seen.

In this novel, female characters are generally looked down upon and made subordinate to male characters. The saddest thing is that it is not only men who cause oppression to women, but there is even oppression among women. Baby Kochamma was once a brave rebel, but after her failed courtship, she gradually accepted her fate. When she learned that Ammu actually dared to have sex with the untouchable Velutha, she immediately hated them and wanted to kill Velutha. Although Ammu has a certain sense of rebellion, she does not succeed in getting together with her beloved one under the social system of male superiority and female inferiority in India at that time.

Phraseology Level of Interpretation

Feminist stylistics often use Halliday's systemic theory of language and transitivity in their analysis of texts (Zhang, 2016). In his book *Language Function and Literary Style*, Halliday mentions that there are three kinds of meta-functions of language: conceptual, interpersonal, and discourse functions (Halliday, 1971). Among them, the conceptual function refers to the function of language to express people's experiences in the real world. The tangent is a semantic system that expresses the conceptual function. It serves to divide what people see, hear, and do in the real world into several processes and to specify the "participants" and "environmental components" associated with each process (Hu et al., 1989). Sara Mills (1995) argues that material selection involves "the extent to which the character is a passive victim of the environment, or the extent to which the character actively controls the environment, makes decisions, and takes action". By drawing on functional stylistic theories of object analysis, feminism can not only understand women's actions, internal thoughts, and the environment involved in the language process, but also provide insight into how women are oppressed and discriminated against. Therefore, in this paper, we will analyze three fragments of the text and their materiality at the level of material processes to reveal the power relations between men and women.

(6): Pappachi would not help her with the pickle-making because he did not consider pickle-making a suitable job for a high ranking ex-Government official. He had always been a jealous man, so he greatly resented the attention his wife was suddenly getting. He *slouched* about the compound in his immaculately tailored suits, *weaving* sullen circles around mounds of red chilies and freshly powdered yellow turmeric, *watching* Mammachi supervise the buying, the weighing, the salting and drying, of limes and tender mangoes. Every night he *beat* her with a brass flower vase. The beatings weren't new. What was new was only the frequency with which they took place. One night Pappachi *broke* the bow of Mammachi's violin and *threw* it in the river (p 29).

(7): On one such night, Ammu, aged nine, *hiding* with her mother in the hedge, *watched*

Pappachi's natty silhouette in the lit windows as he flitted from room to room. Not content with *having beaten* his wife and daughter (Chacko was away at school), he *tore down* curtains, *kicked* furniture and *smashed* a table lamp. An hour after the lights went out, disdaining Mammachi's frightened pleading, little Ammu *crept* back into the house through a ventilator to rescue her new gumboots that she loved more than anything else. She *put* them in a paper bag and *crept* back into the drawing room when the lights were suddenly switched on. Pappachi had been *sitting* in his mahogany rocking chair all along, *rocking* himself silently in the dark. When he *caught* her, he didn't *say* a word. He *flogged* her with his ivory-handled riding crop (the one that he had held across his lap in his studio photograph). Ammu didn't *cry*. When he finished *beating* her he made her bring him Mammachi's pinking shears from her sewing cupboard (p 181).

(8): "Ammukutty... what is it –" She *went* to him and laid the length of her body against his. He just *stood* there. He didn't *touch* her. He was *shivering*. Partly with cold. Partly terror. Partly aching desire. Despite his fear his body was prepared to take the bait. It wanted her. Urgently. His wetness wet her. She *put her arms around him*.

He tried to be rational. What's the worst thing that can happen?

I could lose everything. My job. My family. My livelihood. Everything. She could hear the wild hammering of his heart. She *held* him till it calmed down. She *unbuttoned* her shirt. They stood there. Skin to skin. Her brownness against his blackness. Her softness against his hardness. Her nut-brown breasts (that wouldn't support a toothbrush) against his smooth ebony chest. She *smelled* the river on him. His Particular Paravan smell that so disgusted Baby Kochamma. Ammu *put out* her tongue and *tasted* it, in the hollow of his throat. On the lobe of his ear. She *pulled* his head down toward her and kissed his mouth. A cloudy kiss. A kiss that demanded a kiss-back. He *kissed* her back (p. 334).

Example 6 is mainly a description of how Pappachi got along with Mammachi when he was still alive. There are six material processes in this example. A material process is the process of doing something. The materi-

al process usually consists of an actor and a target, and can reflect the actor's control and influence on the objective world. Of these six material processes, two of the actions are used to describe Pappachi's own state, two to describe Pappachi's beating of Mammachi, and two to describe Pappachi's breaking of Mammachi's violin. The target of Pappachi's material processes, other than his own state, is Mammachi and Mammachi's beloved objects. Pappachi is a respectable government official on the outside, but he comes home and beats his wife wantonly. We know from the novel that Mammachi is actually a very capable woman who plays the violin very well and runs a factory all by herself. But this is also the root cause of her beatings by Pappachi's. Her excellence challenged Pappachi's self-esteem and authority as a man. Example 7 is a description of the current situation of Ammu and Pappachi's life at home. This has a total of 16 material processes, of which Ammu emits 6 actions and Pappachi emits 8 actions. Mammachi is not the only one at home who suffers beatings from Pappachi; little nine-year-old Ammu is also not immune. Ammu's actions all happened when she tried to take out her rubber boots after the beating. She had to sneak into the house and was caught by Pappachi, who rightfully beat up Ammu again, and not only that, but also cut up Ammu's beloved rubber boots. From these two descriptions we can see Pappachi's absolute leadership in this household. He can beat his wife and children at will and dispose of their belongings at will. This reflects the low status of women in India and the hardships of their lives. The Pappachi family was a Brahmin class, and the living conditions of women in even lower caste families were only more difficult. But the situation in Example 8 is a little different, because Example 8 depicts the relationship between Ammu and Velutha. There are 12 material processes in this example, of which Ammu dominates 8 actions, while Velutha dominates only 4 actions. We can see that Ammu is clearly dominant during the relationship between Ammu and Velutha. But the reason for this was not the sudden improvement in the status of women in India, but the deep-rooted caste system in India, where Velutha's status as a Dalit was extremely low.

From the phraseology level interpretation we can see that although women may also dominate the action in the novel, this dominance is also limited by caste. In general, this reflects the lack of control of women over their surroundings and events in the context of a patriarchal society, where women are always bound to domestic chores and live under the shadow of male violence.

Discourse Level of Interpretation

Mills (1995) notes that male characters tend to be depicted in costume and body parts, while female characters are depicted with sexual connotations. In the depiction of male characters, the point of view is face-to-face contact with the male, while female characters are described as objects of gaze, especially the male gaze. The descriptions of males and females in *The God of Small Things* fit this point, so this paper selects six fragments of this novel that describe the appearance of women and men as examples.

(9): “It’s a little too late for all this, don’t you think?” he said. He spoke the coarse Kottayam dialect of Malayalam. He stared at Ammu’s breasts as he spoke. He said the police knew all they needed to know and that the Kottayam Police didn’t take statements from veshyas or their illegitimate children. Ammu said she’d see about that. Inspector Thomas Mathew came around his desk and approached Ammu with his baton. “If I were you,” he said, “I’d go home quietly.” Then he tapped her breasts with his baton. Gently. Tap tap. As though he was choosing mangoes from a basket. Pointing out the ones that he wanted packed and delivered. Inspector Thomas Mathew seemed to know whom he could pick on and whom he couldn’t. Policemen have that instinct (p. 7).

(10): On other days she had deep dimples when she smiled. She had a delicate, chiseled face, black eyebrows angled like a soaring seagull’s wings, a small straight nose and luminous, nut-brown skin. On that sky-blue December day, her wild, curly hair had escaped in wisps in the car wind. Her shoulders in her sleeveless sari blouse shone as though they had been polished with a high-wax shoulder polish. Sometimes she was the most beautiful woman that Estha and Rahel had ever seen. And sometimes she wasn’t (p. 45).

(11): She was a lush, beautiful woman with golden-brown skin and huge eyes. Her long frizzy hair was damp and hung loose down her back, plaited only at the very end. It had wet the back of her tight, deep-red blouse and stained it a tighter, deeper red. From where the sleeves ended, her soft arm-flesh swelled and dropped over her dimpled elbows in a sumptuous bulge. Her white mundu and kavath were crisp and ironed. She smelled of sandalwood and the crushed green gram that she used instead of soap. For the first time in years, Chacko watched her without the faintest stirring of sexual desire. He had a wife (Ex-wife, Chacko!) at home. With arm freckles and back freckles. With a blue dress and legs underneath (p. 270).

(12): He was a small man, but well built. Pleasant-looking. He wore old-fashioned spectacles that made him look earnest and completely belied his easygoing charm and juvenile but totally disarming sense of humor. He was twenty-five and had already been working on the tea estates for six years (p. 39).

(13): In the only photograph they had seen of him (which Ammu allowed them to look at once), he was wearing a white shirt and glasses. He looked like a handsome, studious cricketer. With one arm he held Estha on his shoulders. Estha was smiling, with his chin resting on his father’s head. Rahel was held against his body with his other arm. She looked grumpy and bad-tempered, with her baby legs dangling. Someone had painted rosy blobs onto their cheeks (p. 84).

(14): It was the summer of his final year at Oxford. He was alone. His rumpled shirt was buttoned up wrong. His shoelaces were untied. His hair, carefully brushed and slicked down in front, stood up in a stiff halo of quills at the back. He looked like an untidy, beatified porcupine. He was tall, and underneath the mess of clothes (inappropriate tie, shabby coat) Margaret Kochamma could see that he was well-built. He had an amused air about him, and a way of narrowing his eyes as though he was trying to read a faraway sign and had forgotten to bring his glasses. His ears stuck out on either side of his head like teapot handles. There was something contradictory about his athletic build and his disheveled appearance. The only sign that a

fat man lurked inside him was his shining, happy cheeks (p. 241).

Of the six examples above, the first three are descriptions of female appearance in the book, while the last three are descriptions of male figures in the book. In Example 9, Ammu went to the police station, but was belittled by the police and had to baton Amu on the breast, even more than once. The description in Example 10 illustrates that Ammu is a very beautiful woman, but this description is full of sexual connotations, fully describing Ammu's beautiful face, silky skin and beautiful shoulders. It shows that Amu is very attractive to men. Example 11 shows Chacko's examination of Lenin's wife, Kalyani, as Chacko stares at someone else's wife's hair, tight blouse, and the flesh on her arms. The latter also mentions that this is the first time Chacko has not had sexual urges towards her, indicating that Chuck used to have sexual urges towards Kalyani on a regular basis. The last three examples of Rahel's father and Chacko's descriptions are much more ordinary, with the author just routinely describing their dress, body type and condition without the slightest hint of sexual innuendo. The depiction of men in this way is basically a face-to-face, holistic portrayal, which not only does not have any sexual connotation, but also shows a strong sense of male manhood. Therefore, in the depiction of the discourse, women are also in a position of dependence on men and their individuality is very weak (Hu, 2014).

Although the women in the novel play important roles and contribute much to their families, they still cannot escape being sexually harassed and gazed at by men. Moreover, the women in the novel, after being oppressed, except for Ammu who bravely resists, Mammachi and Baby Kochamma instead begin to persecute women. Mammachi refers to the women workers who had sex with her son as prostitutes, and even opened a back door for Chacko to hang out with these women. Even Chacko's ex-wife is not spared, and Mammachi sees any woman who approaches her son as an enemy. She secretly stuffs money into Margaret's clothes as a way to comfort herself that Margaret is also a prostitute. It is a tragedy that women live

in such a low-pressure and abusive environment for a long time.

Conclusion

The above analysis reveals that the interpretation of *The God of Small Things* with the help of feminist stylistic theory can reveal more objectively the phenomenon of sexism in the novel and the oppression of women in the male-dominated society. In terms of lexical, the use of positive and negative words reflects the sexism and inequality between men and women in the language; the use of appellatives reflects the subordinate status of women in society, and women are not even allowed to have their own names in many cases, and are forced to become the appendages of men.

At the phraseology level, the analysis of objectivity reveals the unequal power relationship between male and female characters, with men in a dominant position and women in a passive and vulnerable position. At the level of discourse, the novel portrays two different kinds of women, those who have adapted to the suffocating environment like Mammachi and Baby Kochamma and become the defenders of the patriarchal system in turn, and those new women with the spirit of resistance who fail to escape the domination of the patriarchal society and achieve their own liberation. Like Ammu in the book, she bravely falls in love with the "untouchable" Velutha and has sex with him. However, due to the social environment at that time, Amu is not destined to be happy, so at the end of the article, Velutha dies quite tragically and Amu also dies alone of illness. From these three levels of analysis, we can see the oppression of women by men and the difficult situation of women in a society where men are superior to women.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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