



# **Feminist criticism in the narratives of Arundhati Roy and Mahasweta Devi**

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

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Grado en Estudios Ingleses

Curso 2017/18



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## ABSTRACT

Arundhati Roy and Mahasweta Devi are well-known Indian authors that stand out for their continuous vindication of human rights in favour of the most disadvantaged, which includes feminism and the fight against gender-based discrimination. In their works, both writers narrate stories whose female characters suffer marginalisation, abuse and numerous restrictions due to their condition of women. This portrayal of violence and injustice can be understood as a critic upon the Indian caste system, the patriarchy and the objectification of women. These are precisely the aspects that shall be analysed in this work with the purpose of understanding what these authors denounce in their narrations. In particular, the project shall be focused on Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Devi's *Outcast* and *Breast Stories*.

**Key words:** Indian contemporary narrative, woman, caste system, patriarchy, gender violence, feminism

## RESUMEN

Arundhati Roy y Mahasweta Devi son conocidas autoras indias que destacan por su continua reivindicación de los derechos humanos a favor de los más desfavorecidos, lo cual abarca el feminismo y la lucha contra la discriminación de género. En sus obras, las escritoras narran historias cuyos personajes femeninos sufren marginalización, abuso y numerosas limitaciones por su condición de mujeres. Esta representación de la violencia e injusticia se puede entender como una crítica al sistema de castas indio, al patriarcado y a la objetivación de la mujer, que son, precisamente, los aspectos que se analizarán en este trabajo con el objetivo de entender aquello que las autoras denuncian en sus narraciones. En concreto, el proyecto se centra en *The God of Small Things* de Roy, y *Outcast* y *Breast Stories* de Devi.

**Palabras clave:** narrativa contemporánea india, mujer, sistema de castas, patriarcado, violencia de género, feminismo

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Aim

The present study shall be based on the narratives of two renowned authors in India, Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy. In particular, it shall follow Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* and Devi's collections *Outcast* and *Breast Stories*. These works have been selected because they are appropriate for the purpose of this project, which aims to analyse the feminist criticism that these Indian authors conduct in their stories. To be precise, the study seeks an examination of the deconstruction of the caste system and the patriarchy in India together with the implications of belonging to a patriarchal society, which the authors intend to reflect in their narratives. Furthermore, it attempts to show how both writers portray the unfairness and the difficulties that Indian women must face due to their condition of women.

These writers fight injustice both through the criticism of India's misogyny and through the subversive actions of female characters, which portray social inequality as well as serve as an example to Indian women. Both authors see literature not only as a production of art, but also as a weapon to denounce injustice and make women's voices heard. Thus, their narratives can be framed within feminist theory, since "all feminist activity [...] has as its ultimate goal to change the world by promoting women's equality" (Tyson 2000: 92). As far as I am concerned, it would be gratifying if I could contribute to the feminist cause by making known these writers' work.

Besides, it is another goal to explore feminism outside the West. In the western world, people usually judge developing countries for their unfair treatment towards the most disadvantaged. Although it is undeniable that there exists discrimination, marginalisation and injustice in India, I believe that western activists, writers, researchers, etc. should give Indians the possibility to make their voices heard rather than speak for them. Likewise, western feminists "are finally recognizing the ways in which their policies and practices have reflected their own experiences while ignoring the experiences of women [...] throughout the world" (Tyson 2000: 105), which is why I consider necessary to study Indian feminists and their attitudes towards feminism, since the western way of thinking has usually overshadowed other societies' perspectives on these matters.

## 1.2 Corpus

The short stories present in Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Stories* and *Outcast* originally belonged to different books, but they have been gathered in these collections published in 1997 and 2002 respectively. In the case of *Outcast*, "Chinta" was published in *Ki Boshontey Ki Shorotey* in 1959; "Dhouli" in *Nairitey Megh* in 1979; "Shanichari" and "The Fairytale of Rajabasha" in *Eenter Porey Eent* in 1982. With respect to *Breast Stories*, "Draupadi" appeared in *Agnigarbha* in 1978; "Breast-giver" in *Stanadayini o Onnanno Golpo* in 1979; and "Behind the Bodice" in *Mahasweta Devi-r Panchasti Golpo* in 1996. Regarding Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* was her first novel, published in 1997. As it can be inferred from the publication years, Mahasweta Devi's career began much earlier than Roy's, since one is 35 years older than the other. Nevertheless, their objects of criticism have barely changed during these decades. Besides, both authors have been awarded with important prizes. As Swaminathan evidences, Devi received the Ramon Magsaysay Award in 1997 "for her writing and activism on behalf of tribal communities" (*The New York Times*, 2016 August 2), whereas Roy was awarded the Booker Prize for Fiction in the same year.

These authors are well-known for their work as activists and researchers, so the realities portrayed in their stories should be considered as actual facts rather than fiction, since actual facts were precisely the base to construct their narratives. In the case of Mahasweta Devi, she "gets an empirical understanding of the harsh living of [the] indigenous masses" (Nowshin 2014: 9), which are the centre of her stories and made it possible for her to win the prize previously mentioned. With respect to Arundhati Roy, Navarro Tejero describes her as "multifaceted" and highlights her work as "novelist, nonfiction writer, journalist, activist, feminist, script writer, ideologist, architect, etc." (Navarro Tejero 2009: 13), while Grewal categorizes her as "a global citizen voicing the discourse of human rights in a bold, lyrical, and impassioned way" (Grewal 2009: 144). The selected writers are more than novelists in the sense that they also cover the study fields that give them credit in regard to their literary works.

The three books on which this analysis is based have much in common. They slightly differ, however, in the selection of their main characters. While Arundhati Roy includes in her novel a wide range of characters that belong to diverse castes and social classes, Mahasweta Devi pays no attention to higher castes and fully dedicates her writing to the marginalised.

### 1.3 Methodology

In regards to methodology, this project follows feminist criticism's and gender studies' premises so as to analyse Roy and Devi's narratives. In order to achieve a feminist approach, it should be questioned how "the text is shaped by its [...] representation of patriarchal norms and values and by its embodiment of the ideologies that support or undermine those norms and values" (Tyson 1999: 424). This method can be applied to the writers' works, which, as explained before, focus on the criticism of the discrimination and abuse that suppress contemporary Indian women, mainly due to patriarchy and the caste system. Besides, another important perspective to take into account is the utility of this literature. Feminist narratives "provide a more powerful understanding of the ways in which society works to the disadvantage of women" (Morris 1993: 7), that is, they seek not only to make a critic upon misogyny, but to help society understand its severity.

To express it in a different way, "feminist literary criticism offers strategies for analysing texts to emphasize issues related to gender and sexuality in works written both by men and women" (Benstock, Ferriss & Woods 2002: 153), so this study shall attempt to examine this sort of issues, specifically in the Indian context. Consequently, the approach to make this analysis shall be context-oriented, since the main themes to discuss relate to historical reality as a context. Feminist approaches, which study how literature depicts the situation of women at a certain place and a certain time, "attach a great deal of importance to issues of context" (Nünning 2014: 41). Therefore, it is essential to have an overview of the Indian reality prior to the analysis of the selected works. Feminist and cultural perspectives may overlap in this particular case, since it is difficult to study Indian feminist literature from our western point of view without analysing some of its cultural elements as well.

Apart from that, in our analysis of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Mahasweta Devi's stories in *Outcast* and *Breast Stories*, we shall take three parameters into account in order to make the analysis: caste and class marginalisation, the Indian patriarchal society and gender violence. These concepts are completely connected, since they influence, derive from and draw each other into a vicious circle, which means that almost every element related to these questions can be analysed from any of these perspectives. We would like to separate these parameters into sections to facilitate the analysis, but references between them shall be made.

## 1.4 Indian historical context

India is a complex and diverse land in terms of religion, class and the so-called caste system. Its official name is Republic of India, where democracy was installed after its independence from the British Empire. The Indian National Movement, where prominent personalities such as Mahatma Gandhi or Jawaharlal Nehru worked together to establish the basis of its future democracy, was vital to the Indian Independence Act of 1947 that detached the country from Great Britain.

India's Constitution was written in 1949 and meant the end of colonialism in the subcontinent, even though India remained a member of the Commonwealth and many British laws and customs were adopted. During this period, the Hindu Code Bill was passed, which included the Hindu Marriage Act, the Hindu Succession Act, the Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act and the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act. The Hindu Code Bill is still very relevant today, as it "covered legal issues pertaining to Hindu family law" (Majumbar 2007: 224). All this was meant to improve Indians' social and economic circumstances and, therefore, to make their lives fairer.

The most distinctive feature in India is its ancestral caste system, which is the form of stratification or hierarchy that was installed in India thousands of years ago and still remains in the country as its unbreakable social pyramid. An explanatory remark of its structure is offered by the *BBC*:

At the top of the hierarchy were the Brahmins who were mainly teachers and intellectuals and are believed to have come from Brahmas' head. Then came the Kshatriyas, or the warriors and rulers, supposedly from his arms. The third slot went to the Vaishyas, or the traders, who were created from his thighs. At the bottom of the heap were the Shudras, who came from Brahma's feet and did all the menial jobs. (2017, July 20)

Apart from the mentioned castes, there exists the group of Untouchables, those set aside from the caste system, also called Dalits. Legally, Untouchability was forbidden after the Constitution, but it must be assumed that it still has impact upon the population and Dalits are still harmed, especially considering the recent protests across the country and the continuous complaints in literary and film works.

The implications of the caste system are various. First, inter-caste relationships are not allowed, so marriages can only take place among members of the same caste.

Secondly, members of low castes are condemned to remain in the same caste forever, which means that, no matter what their aspirations are, they cannot decide or change their professions. Thirdly, precautions must be taken when it comes to the biological exchange of fluids, for under no circumstances can Indians from upper castes get in physical contact with others. All this implies, obviously, that those from superior castes will have access to better resources (food, facilities, education, etc.).

The caste system was, in fact, advantageous for the British Empire during colonial times, since it “enabled the British to fit into Hinduism as one more other, another Other” (Doniger 2009: 578), which means that this hierarchy would have been reinforced during this period. However, it is believed that India has begun its change and consequently has become “self-consciously pluralist, less acerbically anti-Western, highly entrepreneurial, more concerned with the cultural and psychological than the material manifestations of inequality” (Washbrook 2007: 351), at least since the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Finally, the last aspect to comment on would be religion, which divides the country mainly in two groups. The dominant religions are Hinduism and Islam, but there are also Christians, Sikhs and Buddhists, among others, to a lesser extent. Many conflicts have risen due to the tension between Hindus and Muslims because, despite there being freedom of belief in India, other religions apart from Hinduism are socially stigmatised. This leads to the impossibility of conversion or intimacy between members of different religions. Furthermore, they even have “separated civil codes [...] with a different personal law for each religious group\*” (Metcalf 2003: 314).

Many elements described and explained above are related to Roy and Devi’s literature, since they are looked upon and criticised in their narratives, as it shall be explored throughout this work. The authors seek to show how these issues are not yet resolved in contemporary India and how this old system together with old ideologies still provokes difficulties for many Indians, especially for women and Untouchables. These incidents happen regardless of the law, which is sometimes ignored by the Indian community.

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\*All references to Metcalf’s work (2003) have been translated from Spanish for this project.

## 2. CASTE AND CLASS MARGINALISATION

The caste system is based on rules that directly affect every single aspect of Indians' lives. Nevertheless, it seems clear that caste rules do not influence men's lives as they alter women's, for they suffer what is called double marginalisation. This means that their fate is not only decided by caste, but their femininity is a cause of their marginalisation as well. In other words, they are undervalued and taken advantage of both for their caste and their condition of women. This happens in every sphere of the caste system, but especially in lower castes, since "women from inferior castes have always been a prey for the upper class" (Metcalf 2003: 325).

The novel *The God of Small Things*, written by the Marxist feminist activist Arundhati Roy, focuses on women and their role in Indian society. She has been regarded as "a voice from the global South purposefully undoing sanctioned ignorances, crossing borders of gender, caste, and class" (Grewal 2009: 143). Although readers find very varied characters in the novel, who belong to different steps of the hierarchy, the family that the novel follows is part of a dominant class. Even though they can be considered wealthy, they also deal with the limitations imposed by the caste system. These limitations are portrayed through its characters, mostly female, and their stories. Furthermore, it is noticeable the inclusion of an English white woman, Margaret Kochamma, and her daughter, Sophie Mol, who provide readers with a contrast between the treatment given to Indian and to English women.

In contrast to Arundhati Roy, Mahasweta Devi mostly chooses marginalized women to develop her stories. In her works, most characters belong to tribal groups and, therefore, are considered as subaltern as Untouchables. Although their tribal origin is already enough tragedy, their stories, which usually involve the acts of men from higher classes, make them become outcasts even inside their own oppressed groups. In other words, Devi speaks "about the marginalized within the communities of the marginalized" (Chattopadhyay 2008: 211). This is where her originality resides: she is able not only to criticise the injustice inside the caste system, but to portray the cruelty between members of the same community, who contribute to enlarge the damage rather than prevent it. What both authors have in common though is their intention to demand social injustice. They also tend to give their characters a subversive and rebellious attitude towards their circumstances and the people provoking their misfortune.

## 2.1 Inter-caste and inter-class relationships

As explained in the Introduction, inter-caste marriages and inter-caste personal relationships are totally forbidden in India as a consequence of the strict caste system. In this sense, it could be discussed that the character that conveys most of the criticism of the Indian hierarchy in *The God of Small Things* is Ammu, the mother of the twins Estha and Rahel. She acted as a rebel against social norms, in particular regarding caste rules, of whose unfairness she was very aware. Her actions made her a victim of social injustice and the system's target, since they were undoubtedly subversive. These actions had an enormous impact on her public image and, therefore, led to her marginalisation. In other words, the caste system did not approve of Ammu's behaviour and expelled her from society, thereby turning her into an outcast.

Ammu rebelled against the system in two occasions, namely, her divorce and her affair with an Untouchable, called Velutha. She constantly defied her family as well. Even though the reasons for her divorce were justifiable, she was rejected when she "returned, unwelcomed, to her parents in Ayemenem" (*TGOST*\*: 42). By leaving her husband, she defied patriarchy and the rigid caste system, all of which provoked her marginalisation and maltreatment. Her rebellious personality was a feature that people around her agreed upon, since they believed that "a woman that they had already damned, now had little left to lose, and could therefore be dangerous" (*TGOST*: 44). However, despite losing respect and trust among the members of her village, she kept her bravery and resistance to oppression:

Ammu quickly learned to recognize and despise the ugly face of sympathy. Old female relations with incipient beards and several wobbling chains made overnight trips to Ayemenem to commiserate with her about her divorce. They squeezed her knee and gloated. She fought off the urge to slap them. (*TGOST*: 43)

This passage includes as well female discrimination in the form of sexual harassment and, consequently, Ammu's sexualisation, which shall be analysed in detail in the following sections. This is an example of how caste rules' violations may lead to many other issues, in this case gender violence, since it provokes the previously mentioned double marginalisation.

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\* *The God of Small Things* shall be shortened *TGOST* in the references from now onwards.

The other cause for Ammu's marginalisation would be her affair with Velutha, a Paravan. Ammu belonged to the Veshya caste, which lies in the middle of the Indian social stratification, whereas Velutha was an Untouchable. As a result, this affair led to the lovers' tragic ending. In the case of Velutha, he was falsely accused of rape and therefore killed. Ammu, on the other hand, got gravely sick because of her precarious life conditions as an outcast. Sadly, their love was sincere and yet they both died due to the system's intransigence.

Through this story, Arundhati Roy is appealing to readers' emotions in order to arouse indignation and anger among non-marginalised people. The narration of Ammu's dream, which Roy uses to depict the frustrations that the caste system creates in Indian women, contains this beautiful passage:

She could have touched his body lightly with her fingers, and felt his smooth skin turn to gooseflesh. [...] She could do easily have done that, but she didn't. He could have touched her too. But he didn't, because [...], in the shadows, there were metal folding chairs arranged in a ring and on the chairs there were people, with slanting rhinestone chins, the bows poised at identical angles. (*TGOST*: 205, 206)

Here it is metaphorically depicted the impossibility of their love due to the severe traditional laws that govern Indian society, which, once broken, banish their offenders forever. Nevertheless, Ammu was brave enough in two occasions to follow her feelings rather than norms, serving as a good example for Indian female readers.

Regarding this love story, another interesting aspect to comment on is the way Ammu's family and Velutha's father behaved when the affair was discovered. Velutha's father is described as "an old Paravan, who had seen the Walking Backwards days, torn between Loyalty and Love" (*TGOST*: 242). In fact, it was him who revealed the affair to Ammu's family, because his condition of Paravan and, therefore, his loyalty to the Kochammas were stronger than his love for Velutha. In the case of her family, neither Baby Kochamma nor Mammachi, Ammu's closest relatives, were supportive in any sense. Ammu's relatives did not care about her; they cared about her image for it could damage theirs:

Baby Kochamma misrepresented the relationship between Ammu and Velutha, not for Ammu's sake, but to contain the scandal and salvage the family reputation. (*TGOST*: 245)

They did not hesitate to ruin a man's life if only their position remained the same, since this man was for them no more than "a pariah dog" (*TGOST*: 269). By criticising the families' reaction, Arundhati Roy proves how social status dominates people's lives. It seems clear that the caste system develops cruelty, selfishness and hatred among Indians. However, I am not completely sure if the fault was entirely Mammachi and Baby Kochamma's. After all, they were looking after the family and its reputation, for they lived in a world where one's public image was extremely important in order to survive in society and avoid marginalisation.

In *Outcast*, Mahasweta Devi depicts the opposite circumstance, that is, an Untouchable woman that establishes a romantic relationship with a man of higher rank. This is equally forbidden and punished. In the short story "Dhouli", Dhouli was a young widow, who had an affair with Misrilal. Dhouli transgressed two social norms of main importance. She maintained an inter-caste relationship, and, as a widow, she did not behave properly, for widows are disqualified to marry again and, therefore, to attract men. This transgression can be implied when the narrator explains that widows "were not supposed to look in a mirror" (*Outcast*: 7). It is again a love story, because Misrilal states that he does not care about "things like caste and Untouchability" (*Outcast*: 12). Nevertheless, his family and the members of their village clearly differed and decided to let Dhouli starve to pay for her imprudence. What is more, it seemed to be a frequent custom, since Dhouli confessed that she was not "the first *dusad* girl the Misras have ruined" (*Outcast*: 3). On top of that, it appears to be a common belief in India that "it's always the fault of the woman" (*Outcast*: 14).

There is a noticeable difference between Ammu's and Dhouli's story though. Ammu belonged to a superior caste than her lover and yet they were both blamed for the transgression that they had committed. However, Misrilal did not recognise his fault. In fact, it was Dhouli who was severely damaged and hurt after the affair, because she was forced to survive by prostituting herself, whereas he was allowed to get married to another upper-class woman. This is an example of how women's acts have negative consequences for them while non-Untouchable men may remain unpunished. Both stories prove that, "when a woman rebels, she may suffer every kind of violence [...], since men do not accept that she has any right\*" (Andrade Cunha 2014: 92). In sum, women are always discriminated and maltreated, regardless of their caste.

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\*All references to Andrade Cunha's work (2014) have been translated from Spanish for this project.

## 2.2 Abuse of authorial power

Apart from personal relationships, the abuse of power against women by authorial figures is portrayed in the books through the stories. For authorial figures, it is meant above all military forces and policemen, but it can refer to any person from a higher rank than the rank of female characters in the books. There are several examples of this type of abuse in Roy's narrative as much as in Devi's collections.

To begin with, Ammu visited a police station at the beginning of *The God of Small Things*, where the policeman on duty treated her in an abusive manner. He intimidated her by insulting and sexually humiliating her:

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. [...] Then he tapped her breasts with his baton. Gently. Tap tap. (TGOST: 9)

The policeman remarked her condition of Veshya –due to her divorce– in contrast to his own caste, which would be the Kshatriya, formed by those in charge of law and order. He stated his superiority and then used it to scare her. This is another case of double marginalisation, since the way to constrain her included sexual harassment apart from caste discrimination. Later on in the novel, readers discover that this event is not isolated from the whole story. Ammu was at the police station to admit the truth about her affair –explained in the previous section–, but the policeman, aware of that, tried to prevent her from confessing with the purpose of “instil order into a world gone wrong” (TGOST: 246). The policeman would not allow her to confess, so that people would not consider the possibility of an inter-caste relationship. That way, the caste wheel would keep going. In other words, as this policeman immediately realized, “Ammu's potential to initiate a transcaste sexual revolution endangers men whom the system and its gender hierarchy privilege” (Froula 2009: 41).

In this case, the policeman had a reason to act like this –a questionable reason, but some reason after all. However, policemen do seek to hurt women for their own benefit sometimes, especially women from lower castes. Ammu remembered specifically the case of prostitutes: “They did that in Kottayam to prostitutes whom they'd caught in the bazaar –branded them so that everybody would know them for

what they were. *Veshyas*” (*TGOST*: 154). This evidences that the caste system gives power to Kshatriyas and they tend to use it unfairly against Veshyas and Untouchables.

Mahasweta Devi provides with a more radical view on authorial abuse, since she focuses above all on the exploitation of women who are completely in the hands of men from superior castes and classes. “Shanichari” in *Outcast* as well as “Draupadi” and “Behind the bodice” in *Breast Stories* are examples of her attempt to portray the atrocities made by the military forces and the police. It has been defended that “Devi’s writing stands out as a powerful tool that subverts the authority of upper caste in tribal society” (Nowshin 2014: 9), referring particularly to the authorities that would take advantage of vulnerable tribal girls. The next explanatory passage belongs to the short story “Shanichari”:

The BMP took the young girls into the forest and raped them. Imagine the scene. Familiar to you, no doubt, from innumerable story books - [...] girls who look as if they have been exquisitely carved out of black stone. Only the bestial howls of the BMP would have been left out of such a picture-book scene. (*Outcast*: 48)

In the previous passage, Devi is directly appealing to readers with the intention of creating a link between them and the abused girls. According to the writer, these terrible events are usually described in story books, but readers tend to consider these subaltern women as voiceless “Others” and, therefore, the reading does not produce any attachment or empathy on the part of readers (*Outcast*: 48). I would suggest that Devi is here making a critique not only on those who actively provoke injustice, but on those who perpetuate it by ignoring the truth, that is, on readers from upper-classes or from the 1<sup>st</sup> world that also regard them as sub-human and think of them as commodities.

With respect to “Behind the bodice”, the main character is a woman, called Gangor, who was condemned to a life of extreme poverty and needed to sell her body in order to sustain her family. Her activities were totally rejected by the authorities that would punish her for them. It is again a case of double marginalisation, because she was penalized for an action that implies her sexual exploitation, as if being compelled to such activities were not enough misfortune:

Women have to be careful in Shiva’s world. [...] The police came here because of the girl so many times... so many times... when the girl doesn’t understand the police are men too, they will craze if you tease them. (*Breast Stories*: 133)

Another feature specifically portrayed in these stories is the cruel system of bounded labour that enslaves both men and women from tribal groups. It is a system where men and women do not willingly offer themselves to work, but “flesh traders [are] known to visit such rural fairs” and “manage to smuggle out a few women” (*Outcast*: 9). To put it another way, people are taken from their homes and literally enslaved. After this process, they start to be called Rejas and lose every right to property or independence. They are forced to work for companies that own them.

In “Shanichari”, it is described how women end up being enslaved. In the short story, this happens as a direct consequence of the abuses by the military. After traumatising episodes of rape, a woman, called Gohuman Bibi, would appear “like a veritable goddess” and deceive the abused girls, so that they would “work in the brick kilns” (*Outcast*: 48). Those girls would accept, believing her promises of protection, which were actually a fraud. It is possible to interpret this story as a critique on “the helplessness of a vulnerable society where [girls] become a prey of *dalal*, and victimized by paramilitary forces and slave in brick kilns” (Dubay 2015: 95).

In relation to bounded labour, double discrimination affects women once again, as it entails their undervaluing for being members of subaltern groups as well as their sexual abuse at the place of work. In “Shanichari” and “The Fairytale of Rajabasha”, both main characters, Shanichari and Josmina, are sexually abused by their owners, with the consequence of their pregnancy. What most tormented them was bearing a child whose father did not belong to their same tribe, since caste and tribal rules are severe in the matter of parenthood and do not approve of an alien child. The child would immediately become a Diku and would consequently be an outcast since birth. Regarding the mother, “society made such a girl *jatietka*” (*Outcast*: 78). In some occasions, women would even be forced to have an abortion as an attempt to avoid their marginalisation.

Bounded labour represents the most radical commodification of women, like Josmina in “The Fairytale of Rajabasha” expresses when she realizes that she “was just fresh meat; dark, *jungle* flesh which he had paid for” (*Outcast*: 73). This was aggravated by their powerless condition of tribal women, considered “Others”, sub-human and ultimately worthless. Therefore, it seems understandable that Devi selects this issue as the main theme of most stories.

### 2.3 Women against women

So far, it has been discussed how society in general marginalises women, but it would be convenient to point out that women can and do hurt each other sometimes. Rather than support and understand their shared condition of women, they are inexorably divided by the caste system, which they profoundly respect. In *The God of Small Things*, this is mostly represented by Mammachi and Baby Kochamma, Ammu's mother and aunt, respectively.

To begin with, Mammachi indirectly supported prostitution. This can be implied when the narrator describes "the separate entrance that Mammachi had installed for Chacko to pursue his 'Men's Needs' discreetly" (*TGOSM*: 226). As a fortunate woman, Mammachi considered that prostitutes were compelled to these activities, since they needed the money, perhaps to maintain young children and old parents, or husbands who spent it all in toddy bars (*TGOSM*: 161). In this sense, she acted in a judgemental manner and simply regarded these women as subaltern, ignoring their unfair situation.

It was not only strangers that Mammachi and Baby Kochamma undervalued, but their family had to accept their criticisms as well, especially Ammu and the twins. Baby Kochamma disliked the twins for being "Half-Hindu Hybrids" (*TGOSM*: 44) in contrast to the other members of the family, who were Syrian Christian and "enjoyed a caste status equal to Brahmins" (Valiyaparambathand 2005: 252). It has been defended that Estha and Rahel became outcasts inside their own family because "Ammu's unconventional movements across these unforgiving boundaries corrupt and draw them into her placelessness" (Froula 2009: 39). Besides, her relatives resented Ammu for the rejection of her own fate, the "wretched Man-less woman" (*TGOSM*: 45). In fact, it was Ammu that they blamed for the consequences of her affair. As the narrator describes, "Mammachi's rage [...] was re-directed into a cold contempt for her daughter and what she had done" (*TGOSM*: 244).

Regarding Baby Kochamma's ideology, it could be argued that she was a bit hypocritical, considering that, during her youth, she displayed "a stubborn single mindedness" when she "defied her father's wishes" (*TGOSM*: 25). It appears that time had distanced her from her teenage subversive personality at the same time that patriarchy and the caste system had dominated and ruined her ideals.

Baby Kochamma and Mammachi also despised the English Margaret Kochamma, whose origin they envied just as much as they detested it. Margaret was

Chacko's ex-wife, that is, Mammachi's ex-daughter-in-law. Mammachi constantly tried to sabotage her, namely, she would secretly leave her money to show her gratitude for "the favors Mammachi imagined she bestowed on her son" (*TGOSM*: 161), so that she had "the satisfaction of regarding Margaret Kochamma as just another whore" (*TGOSM*: 161), even though all this settlement was just a performance for her. Ammu did not seem to accept her either, as she once referred to Margaret as being just like their "conquerors" (*TGOSM*: 52). However, Margaret's origin caused contempt and admiration at the same time. In the case of her ex-husband, Chacko, it is stated that "anybody could see that Chacko was a proud and happy man to have had a wife like Margaret. White" (*TGOSM*: 136). Nevertheless, her value still depended on race, not in her personal value, which entails that she was not loved for her own qualities, but for being English and white, and therefore being an outsider to the caste system. In this respect, Chacko explains that "they were a *family* of Anglophiles" (*TGOSM*: 51).

Margaret Kochamma, for being English, in contrast to Ammu, was given the freedom and respect that women generally deserve, at least in appearance, despite her divorce. Prashant Jadvah points out that "Ammu and Margaret share the common pain of divorcee but Ammu enjoys little freedom than Margaret due to their cultural and philosophical differences" (Jadvah 2017: 458). As previously stated, Ammu was unwelcomed when she returned to Ayemenem after her divorce. In contrast, the Kochammas put so much care into the preparations to welcome Margaret and Sophie Mol, even though they were ex-family. This proves how the English continue to be considered superior in India, including women. In fact, "Roy contrasts the demonized twins to the gleaming white Englishness of Sophie Mol" (Froula 2009: 42).

Moving on to Devi's narrative, readers find a very impoverished girl, who gets robbed by her own neighbours, in "Chinta" from *Outcast*:

I also realized that her fellowmates were keen to lend her a little money in exchange for her utensils. They said, She has some fine bell metal bowls and glasses. It's unlikely that she'll ever be able to claim them back. I realized that this was just another opportunity for exploitation. (*Outcast*: 87)

This represents the lack of sympathy among Indians that, instead of supporting each other, take advantage of others' misfortune. Devi addresses this problem as part of her critique on the marginalisation of the marginalised.

### 3. INDIAN PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY

Apart from the Indian caste system, patriarchy is also an established practice in the country. Patriarchy is present in “any culture that privileges men by promoting traditional gender roles” (Tyson 2000: 85). This, together with the caste system, clearly has a negative impact on women’s lifestyle, since women are clearly oppressed by the system that condemns them to depend either on fathers or husbands. As Navarro Tejero explains, “not even with the intervention of the Indian National Movement and Mahatma Gandhi, the old premise that the essential place of the woman is at the house was questioned<sup>\*</sup>” (Navarro Tejero 2001: 49, 50). Although caste issues are predominant, much injustice and unfairness is produced by people’s patriarchal vision of the world, which takes freedom away from women and takes for granted women’s immutable role in the traditional family. An important approach of feminism is the ‘feminist critique’ of male assumptions (Culler 2000: 126), where men and women tend to assume certain roles and fixed positions.

Arundhati Roy’s work also serves as a vindication of the female position in the family. “The major concern of *The God of Small Things* is to unveil the prevalent patriarchal dominance in Indian society”, states Sahidul Islam (Islam 2015: 56). Roy achieves that by presenting the reader diverse characters in several situations, which show the different faces of patriarchy, mostly negative. Likewise, Devi’s stories “are examples of eclipsed system of wrenching women within patriarchy” (Dubey 2015: 92). Patriarchy is such a cruel system that “in every domain where patriarchy reigns, woman is *other*” (Tyson 2000: 92). Even when women live in their own regions, they must bear with the fact that they will always be considered Others by men. Men shall never give them credit for their value, because their womanhood invalidates everything for them. In fact, the process of ‘othering’ women means that they “will be subjected to become the ‘object’ of naivety and exploitation” (Nowshin 2014: 15), which is precisely what happens with many of Roy and Devi’s characters.

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<sup>\*</sup>All references to Navarro Tejero’s work (2001) have been translated from Spanish for this project.

### 3.1 Women's dependence on male relatives

The main aspect that characterizes patriarchy is the importance of marriage. In India, women's lives completely depend on their husbands. Everything that they can become and achieve is highly influenced by their choice when selecting a man to marry. What is more, this leads to the fact that "social impositions [...] regarding their love destiny provoke great misfortunes and are the cause of all kinds of traumas and tragedies\*" (Sánchez Dueñas 2008: 21), which is precisely what happened to Ammu in *The God of Small Things*: "She had had one chance. She made a mistake. She married the wrong man" (*TGOSM*: 38). She had married him in spite of being Hindu, not Christian, so that she could escape from her parents in Ayemenem. Then, he proved to be an alcoholic and an abuser. After realizing that, she only had two options: to continue to live under his dominance or to divorce him and become an outcast. Patriarchy is a system that always blames women, so each option was equally harmful for Ammu, whose life was ruined and, according to her, "had been lived" (*TGOSM*: 38).

Her mother's marriage, Mammachi's, bears a strong resemblance to Ammu's, since she had also married a violent and possessive man. The difference between mother and daughter resides in Mammachi's acceptance of marital rules. Prashant Jadhav describes her husband as being "ill-tempered" and describes her as "submissive, mute and down to earth". In the end, Mammachi's personality became so weak by his maltreatment that she would even mourn his death. In the novel, it is explained that it was not love that she felt, but she "was used to having him slouching around the pickle factory, and was used to being beaten from time to time" (*TGOSM*: 49). Andrade Cunha explains that "a man's violence against women in marital relationships displays the intention to make them do his will" (Andrade Cunha 2014: 91). Therein resides patriarchy's power. Since it has been categorically settled in India for centuries, women believe in its importance and its relevance in society. They accept the system and resign to it, even though it appears to be obvious how harmful it is for them.

Pappachi's terrible behaviour did not only damage Mammachi, but their children as well. I would even argue that it was her father's temperament that made Ammu so subversive, being the origin of many of her tragedies. Besides, it is told that Ammu

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\*All references to Sánchez Dueñas's work (2008) have been translated from Spanish for this project.

married her husband as an attempt to escape her parents, possibly due to her father's violent attitude. This is how their life is described in the novel:

In her growing years, Ammu had watched her father weave his hideous web. [...] He worked hard on his public profile as sophisticated, generous, moral man. But alone with his wife and children he turned into a monstrous suspicious bully, with a streak of vicious cunning. They were beaten, humiliated and then made to suffer the envy of friends and relations for having such a wonderful husband and father.

(*TGOSM*: 171, 172)

It seems clear that Ammu's divorce was her attempt not to undergo the same traumas again. Furthermore, she would not want her children to experience such a torment, like she did. In order to avoid this, she was forced to defy patriarchy, even though she would suffer the consequences, above all her marginalisation. Nevertheless, that would give her children a chance to have a different life.

Likewise, it is not advisable either to remain unmarried in such a traditional patriarchal society. In fact, unmarried women, like Baby Kochamma, were regarded as "wretched Man-less" (*TGOSM*: 45). This character in *The God of Small Things* is a representation of this estate. As a young woman, she decided only to marry one man, Father Mulligan, who was an Irish priest, but her love was never reciprocal and, therefore, her dreamy marriage never took place. Baby Kochamma even converted into Roman Catholicism with the intention of getting close to him. She betrayed her relatives, who had been Syrian Catholics for decades, all for Father Mulligan, and yet he never showed any interest in her. This story proves that Indian women are willing to do anything in order to achieve marriage, since it is the only goal that they can allow themselves to have.

It is convenient to remark that her unmarried estate did not suppose Baby Kochamma's independence. Rather than that, her closest male relative had to be responsible for her needs and protection as well as control her actions. She lived dependent on her father, then her brother and finally her nephew Chacko. This lack of independence is also portrayed through Ammu's dilemma when she must state her last name after the divorce. As she reflects, "choosing between her husband's name and her father's name didn't give a woman much of a choice." (*TGOST*: 37)

However tragic marriage has been portrayed so far, women would sometimes willingly and happily devote to their husbands. They would even sacrifice themselves

for them. It is the case of Josmina in “The Fairytale of Rajabasha” from *Outcast*, who could not bear the idea of becoming an outcast after giving birth to a Diku –concept that was previously explained in relation to bounded labour, sexual abuse and unwanted pregnancy–, which would, consequently, make her husband an outcast as well. As a result, she left him, so that he could forget her and remarry, proving her sincere love. This reflects the cruelty of this severe system.

Another important issue is the whole question of inheritance, which did not only affect daughters, but also wives. In *The God of Small Things*, Chacko received the ownership rights of their factory after Pappachi’s death, despite Mammachi’s work and efforts to raise it and maintain it. In Prashant Jadhav’s words, “Chacko takes over the business as if a widowed woman, Mammachi could not run a business independently by herself” (Jadhav 2017: 458). This, again, displays the injustice caused by patriarchy, as this system confers all powers to men, which entails the power over women in every circumstance. What is more, “many women, including those who were educated and politically conscious, held back from making claims to property because of a belief [...] in women’s lesser rights” (Majumbar 2007: 223).

Mahasweta Devi depicts more precarious situations. She narrates the fate of women who, for different reasons, do not have the possibility to rely on male relatives. These women end up helpless and vulnerable, since their properties are confiscated, as they are disqualified to have possessions. This is the case of the widowed Dhoulī in *Outcast*, who was not allowed to work the land due to her lack of male relatives that would control her. Even when “Dhoulī’s mother had pleaded”, because otherwise they would “starve to death” (*Outcast*: 6), all she received was refusal and denial on the part of her neighbours and co-workers. Thus, their options were limited. Since women cannot remarry in India, her only alternative was to sexually exploit her own body, which leads to the fact that “the absence of any economic or property rights for women had bred a slave mentality among women all through society” (Majumdar 2007: 321). It seems clear that this is another case of double marginalisation, for it does not only involve the submission of women to men, but also the sexual abuse of helpless women.

In “Chinta” from *Outcast*, a similar situation is represented. The story follows a divorcee, Chinta, who belongs to the Brahmin group. This is quite peculiar in Devi’s narrative, for this writer barely portrays characters from upper caste. However, she selects a Brahmin to prove how every woman suffers misogyny in India, regardless of

their caste. Chinta, due to her divorce, lost all her properties and suffered from extreme poverty:

Some of my in-laws said, ‘You’re a young widow. Give us custody of your land.’ I didn’t agree. They turned against me. It was a terrible time, Ma. I was so young then –men began to prowl around my house after dark. I would hold on to Gopal, bar the door and call God’s name. A terrible time!’ (*Outcast*: 90)

Sánchez Dueñas states that young women are regarded as “human objects of value for family profit” (Sánchez Dueñas 2008: 21), which implies that, once they are no longer available for marriage, these women are no longer valued, not even inside their families. Dhoulí and Chinta suffered the abandonment and the cruelty of a patriarchal society that does not care for women, but for what they can offer to men, either in a sexual –through prostitution– or marital way. In the next chapter, it shall be explained precisely how patriarchy encourages women to practice prostitution, since this is the only activity that guarantees them a certain independence and profit. By portraying this tragic reality, Devi is making a strong critic on “the cruellest aspects of socio-political and economic conditions” and the “feudal system [that] doubly marginalizes women in their own community and forces to leave the place to whore anywhere else” (Dubey 2015: 94).

### **3.2 Women’s duties and responsibilities**

Once married, women’s duties are quite simple. They are expected to be in charge of the housework, so these women who have different aspirations are not allowed to fulfil their desires. This is the case of Mammachi in *The God of Small Things*, whose dream of becoming a professional violinist finished as soon as her teacher confessed to Pappachi that “his wife was exceptionally talented and in his opinion, potentially concert class” (*TGOSM*: 49). Broadly speaking, men cannot bear the possibility of women being qualified for any profession, for they feel that this would make them inferior to them. In fact, after Pappachi’s retirement and Mammachi’s acquisition of the factory, he would try to “create the impression that Mammachi neglected him”, so that he “succeeded in further corroding Ayemenem’s view of working wives” (*TGOSM*: 47).

These duties are taught to women since childhood. As a young woman, Baby Kochamma was said to have a “stubborn single-mindedness (which in a young girl in those days was considered as bad as a physical deformity)” (*TGOSM*: 25). Indeed, individuality was condemned in the case of girls and women, who had to resemble her male references rather than develop her personalities and expand their thoughts. This is closely related to women’s difficulty to access higher education. Families repress and restrict girls’ studies, like it happened to Ammu, who could not continue her education, in contrast to Chacko, because “a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl” (*TGOSM*: 38), at least according to Pappachi. In fact, Roy’s narrator states that “there was little for a young girl to do in Ayemenem other than to wait for marriage proposals while she helped her mother with the housework” (*TGOSM*: 38).

It is not easy either for those women who have the opportunity to work. Their effort would never be acknowledged, their success never recognised. Men would own every single property, so their work would always be considered more valuable and effective than women’s, even when it consisted of the same tasks:

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. (*TGOSM*: 58)

Regarding Chacko’s marriage, he appears to act in a gentler manner than his father, Pappachi. Chacko fell in love with the English Margaret for her “self-sufficiency” (*TGOSM*: 233), which was a peculiar feature if compared to Indian girls, who lacked independence due to their poor education. Chacko was curious about Margaret’s customs and impressed for her singularity. What is more, “he encouraged their differences in opinion, and inwardly rejoiced at her occasional outbursts of exasperation at his decadence” (*TGOSM*: 233). To put it another way, he fell in love with her because she seemed so exotic and unique. Nevertheless, he had been educated according to Indian traditions and, therefore, behaved like any Indian man, following what patriarchy dictated:

A year into the marriage, and the charm of Chacko’s studently sloth wore off for Margaret Kochamma. It no longer amused her that while she went to work, the flat remained in the same filthy mess that she had left it in. That it was impossible for him

to even consider making the bed, or washing clothes or dishes. That he didn't apologize for the cigarette burns in the new sofa. That he seemed incapable of buttoning up his shirt, knotting his tie *and* tying his shoelaces before presenting himself for a job interview. (*TGOSM*: 234)

Roy describes how Indian husbands typically behave at home, which clearly shocked and irritated Margaret Kochamma that, as English, had a very different notion of marital duties. This led to their divorce. The novel provides readers with a very clear contrast between English and Indian housewives when, later on, Chacko's mother is portrayed as the devoted women that he thought that he deserved: "She fed him, she sewed for him, she saw to it that there were fresh flowers in his room every day. Chacko needed his mother's adoration. In fact, he *demand*ed it" (*TGOSM*: 236). Mammachi's patience and her caring personality towards her son are quite remarkable, especially after the abuse and all the pain that her husband had inflicted her. What seems unfair though is the fact that she would not share her virtues with Ammu, who she treated with indifference and even contempt.

The youngest generation in *The God of Small Things*, formed by Estha and Rahel, displayed different values and ways of acting. In the first place, it is important to point out that it is quite rare in the Indian culture when men decide to "help" women with their housework. This is the case of Estha, whose decision caused the "initial embarrassment of his father and stepmother" (*TGOSM*: 12). Roy even remarks that, "when he wanted something, he got up and helped himself" (*TGOSM*: 13), such are men's laziness and slackness at home. Then, in the case of Rahel, it is noticeable that she was allowed to receive a college education and move abroad. She married an American man and got divorced some years later, just like her mother, but it did not cause such commotion when she returned to Ayemenem as a divorcee, maybe because her ex-husband was an outsider.

Both Estha and Rahel defy patriarchy in their own way, just like Ammu and Baby Kochamma did before them. As Sahidul Islam explains, "these characters try to convey message to the supporters of patriarchal society that they are no longer ready to abide by the dictations of patriarchal authority" (Islam 2015: 56), even though they were aware that their subversive personalities would bring them misfortune. In fact, "their powerful violation makes scapegoats and exiles of Ammu, Rahel, and Estha, and sends them forever past the boundaries of society" (Froula 2009: 44).

## 4. FEMALE SEXUALISATION & GENDER VIOLENCE

For centuries, women have been the object of male violence and sexualisation, which implies that they have been valued according to their beauty and their bodies have been used to satisfy men's sexual desires, often against their will. In India, especially members of lower castes have to accept men's wishes in order to survive and to overcome their lack of wealth. Both Roy and Devi's narratives dedicate part of their stories to episodes of harassment, rape and sexual abuse and exploitation. They show how some men, unable to control themselves, would use anyone that they considered inferior, children or women, to satisfy their needs, which is the reason why sex as a trauma and a torment needs to be analysed together with caste issues and patriarchal suppression.

During the last several decades, the study of "the violence against [women] for the simple fact of belonging to the female sex\*" has led to the conclusion that this type of violence is part of the structure of modern societies, being present in the social, cultural, political and economic fields (Radl Philipp 2014: 12). This would refer to the so-called gender violence, which affects every woman around the world, to a greater or a lesser extent. What is more, "violence against women is a global concern that is related to power, privileges and the control by men, encouraged by ignorance" (Andrade Cunha 2014: 91). Moreover, it appears that governments have failed to protect women, since, broadly speaking, law tends not to be observed and there are no immediate consequences for those who break the few laws that speak in favour of equality and respect for every gender.

Apart from violence itself, this chapter also explores the notion of exploitation of the female body. Spivak remarks the treatment of "women as agents in any theory of production" (Spivak 1996-a: 57), in the sense that women are seen as machines of production –referring to childbirth– rather than human beings. However, apart from agents, I dare say that women are even sometimes considered the product itself, which leads to their commodification. This idea is supported by some of the stories by Devi and Roy, where women are literally used to make a profit, either in the form of prostitution or in the form of exploitation of their reproductive system.

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\*All references to Radl Philipp's work (2014) have been translated from Spanish for this project.

#### 4.1 Exploitation of the female body

The exploitation of women's bodies is a common practice around the world, especially in developing countries like India. It entails very different activities, some of which shall be analysed in this section in relation to Devi's and Roy's works. The authors are very aware of its severity in their country, as it is for many women their own exploitation –sometimes willingly, but most often forced– the only opportunity to make a living. It is believed that “women's sexual exploitation is the most acutely form of violence against women” (Radl Philipp 2014: 60), which would explain why these writers try to contribute to its eradication.

In *The God of Small Things*, Ammu's divorce is of key importance to her story. Her husband, who had trouble at work, was suggested by his boss “that Ammu be sent to his bungalow to be looked after” (*TGOSM*: 41), as a way to solve his problems, as a promise of stability. It seems very obvious that the verb ‘look after’ was a euphemism, for Ammu was being treated as an object, as a commodity to satisfy this man's sexual needs in exchange for favours for her husband. This proposal was terribly humiliating, so it provoked an outburst of rage on her part that led to their divorce. It is noticeable that, even though her husband and, therefore, Ammu belonged to the Zamindars, Ammu's dignity was not taken into account. This derives the conclusion, once again, that the commodification of women's bodies is inherent to society, regardless of their social status or class. It is their condition of women itself that undervalues them.

Ammu's brother would act in a very similar manner like his brother-in-law, since he would “call pretty women who worked in the factory to his room, and on the pretext of lecturing them [...], flirt with them outrageously” (*TGOSM*: 62). This proves that Ammu's objectification was not an isolated incident, but a recurrent episode between men in positions of power and unprotected women. Furthermore, Chacko would not only flirt with his employees, but he would also hire prostitutes. By doing so, he was supporting prostitution and commodifying women. This corresponds with the way he called them: “the objects of his Needs” (*TGOSM*: 160, 161). Chacko's activities may seem particularly unfair if it is taken into account that, “although [he] engages in sexual deliances with lower caste Factory workers, for Ammu, both gender and her realizing of illicit desire eclipse the risk he might pose to Ayemenem's social order” (Foula 2009: 40). This involves, again, restrictions upon women just for being women.

Regarding sexuality, hypocrisy –or at least contradictory positions– is very clear in *The God of Small Things*. Traditional norms dictate that men have a right to enjoy sex, for it is in their nature to be passionate, but women must conceal their desires and behave properly. Thus, since childhood, sex and sexuality are taboos for girls. In this respect, a witty story is provided at the beginning of the novel. Rahel, after having dared ask whether breasts do or do not hurt, drew the conclusion that “breasts were not acknowledged” and “weren’t supposed to exist” (*TGOSM*: 18), at least in the Christian institution where she studied. Even so, Mammachi supported prostitution and encouraged Chacko’s sexual desire, but she would not allow her daughter to feel the same impulses as his son: “Her tolerance of “Men’s Needs,” as far as her son was concerned, became the fuel for her unmanageable fury at her daughter” (*TGOSM*: 244).

With respect to *Outcast*, the scholar Nowshin remarks that “female sexuality is always being used as the repressive tool that exemplifies in Devi’s stories” (Nowshin 2014: 13). In this sense, women are fully restrained, since they are not permitted to feel sexual desire for anyone rather than their husbands. Chinta in *Outcast* experienced rejection by her neighbours due to her sexuality:

Chinta had to now spend 200 rupees as penance for having sinned. She had to feast the people of her village on rice and *pithey*. She also had to forsake her two girls. Only if she passed all these tests would she be accepted back by her community. (*Outcast*: 91)

In *Breast Stories*, the exploitation of women’s bodies appears in even more evident circumstances than in *The God of Small Things*. The short story “Behind the bodice” is based upon the relationship between a wealthy man and an impoverished woman, called Upin and Gangor, respectively. Upin was a photographer who used Gangor’s breasts as objects for his photographs. Eventually, he became obsessed with them, “he cannot forget those *mammal projections*” (*Breast Stories*: 126), because “Gangor’s developed breasts [were] natural, not manufactured” (*Breast Stories*: 135). This obsession proves that certain men, who get used to commodify and objectify a woman’s body, forget that it is not just an object, but a person, and that is not their possession, but someone else’s, who they must respect.

With regards to “Breast-giver” from *Breast Stories*, it bears a strong resemblance to “Behind the bodice”, in the sense that both stories concern women’s breasts turned into objects to fulfil certain needs. In “Behind the bodice”, the need was

that of the man obsessed with female sensuality, whereas the main character of “Breast-giver”, called Jashoda, is forced to use her body so as to earn a living. It is explained in the narration that “Jashoda’s good fortune was her ability to bear children. All [the] misfortune happened to her as soon as that vanished” (*Breast Stories*: 56). This makes reference to her career. She worked as a wet-nurse during her youth years, but then when she got old and fell ill due to breast cancer, she was fired and abandoned.

Her death is very tragic, because she realized in the end that all her efforts were actually another form of exploitation. In fact, her objectification led to her solitude, as she reflects prior to her death: “Jashoda thought, after all, she had suckled the world, could she then die alone?” (*Breast Stories*: 68). Through this story, Mahasweta Devi is displaying “how a subaltern woman’s reproductive body is employed to create economic value” (Nowshin 2014: 16). Thus, both narrations in *Breast Stories* exemplify how women are tools in patriarchal societies, where they have no value at all beyond what their bodies can offer, usually in terms of sexuality.

Prostitution is represented from a closer perspective in Devi’s stories than in Roy’s novel. In *Outcast* and *Breast Stories*, the women that practice this activity are the main characters, for whom prostitution is their only choice to survive. This is strictly related to the patriarchal system, for prostitution can be understood as an alternative way of life for those women who cannot rely on male relatives. Indeed, its base is the same as marriage, because it is still men who provide for women in return of their submission. However, prostitution may also be addressed as a subversive attitude, in the sense that it can as well fulfil women’s desire of being economically independent, like it is depicted in “Dhouli”:

How simple to sell one’s body in a loveless exchange for salt, corn, *maroa*. If she had known it was that easy, she would have done it much earlier. [...] Dhouli had learnt to survive, had bested his attempt at vengeance. (*Outcast*: 29)

In fact, prostitution might even be preferable for women like Dhouli, for it could guarantee their economic stability and allow them to be part of a community. Dhouli refused a proposal to be maintained and protected by her brother-in-law, since she considered that “the collective strength of that society was far more powerful than an individual’s strength” (*Outcast*: 33), even though that meant the commodification of her own body. Nevertheless, as it can be expected, women not always turned “willingly”

into prostitutes. Women from low castes or tribes are usually forced to become prostitutes whenever others regarded them as qualified –attractive– for such activity. This is the case of Shanichari, who was made a bounded slave by day and a sexual slave at night:

At the end of the day, when you're too tired to keep your eyes open, the head *mastaan* will call out your name in the daily auction. Today you go to him, tomorrow the driver, the day after the *munshi*. (*Outcast*: 52)

Prostitution is a severe consequence of the objectification of women, whose value is reduced to the pleasure that they can offer to men. I would say that objectification is, likewise, the result of the caste system and patriarchy, since men enjoy certain privileges that give them the superiority and the power to treat women like their objects of desire and pleasure.

There is barely any mention to pornography either in *The God of Small Things* or in *Outcast* and *Breast Stories*. The only mention appears at the beginning of the novel, when Roy, in her description of Kerala, provides with a reference to porn magazines: “cheap soft-porn magazines about fictitious South Indian sex-finds were clipped with clothes pegs to ropes that hung from the ceiling” (*TGOST*: 15). It has been maintained that the objectification of women present in pornography is not only a form of violence itself, but “also leads directly to sexual harassment, battery, and rape” (Benstock, Ferriss & Woods 2002: 181), so, following this premise, the normalization of porn magazines in the village that Roy describes seems coherent with all the previous examples of sexual violence in India.

It can be observed in this section that “sexual exploitation of [women] appears in multiple forms”, being examples of this the supposedly free exercise of prostitution, the forced exercise of prostitution, the subjugation to different forms of sexual abuse or sexual harassment at the workplace (Radl Philipp 2014: 47, 48). Many of these acts are described and, above all, criticised in Roy and Devi’s narratives, which makes them a vindication of women’s sexual freedom and a claim for respect. Furthermore, the authors, by portraying these situations, denounce men’s selfish acts that promote inequality and maltreatment towards women, who are constantly commodified for their benefit.

## 4.2 Gender violence

Gender violence takes place when men are entitled to believe that they are in their right to conduct their violence against women. In other chapters of this work, it has been analysed the violence motivated by caste or patriarchal rules, but this chapter is meant to describe the aspects related to violence itself, without any (apparent) motivation for it, that are portrayed in the narratives. This is the so-called gender violence, which could be explained as “violence based on vertical definitions of gender that establish certain interrelations characterized by the exercise of power and dominance of one gender against the other” (Radl Philipp 2014: 13).

A very sad and uncomfortable scene in *The God of Small Things* is found in the middle of the novel. I would say that, to the eyes of men, children resemble women, because adult men can take advantage of them in the same way. Maybe children are even easier to handle, for they are innocent and naive. In the novel, Rahel’s innocence tragically led him to his trauma with the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man at the theatre. This man knew how to earn his trust by providing him with his favourite drink and then he made Estha masturbate him, even though the child did not even know what was happening (*TGOST*: 98, 99). Through this tragic event, Roy proves how some men can be so cruel and selfish when they feel sexual impulses.

It is not only in India that women are maltreated. Indian women in occidental societies are maltreated by white people too, as Roy depicts when an American drunk man yelled at Rahel: “Black bitch! Suck my dick!” (*TGOSM*: 179). Once again, this is a case of double marginalisation, since the bully uses her race and her gender as an excuse to bother her. In the same context, Rahel had to suffer constant harassment, because “pimps propositioned her with more lucrative job offers” (*TGOSM*: 21). It seems that attractive young women cannot avoid having contact with some men, who stand out for their inability to manage their uncontrollable obsession with sex.

Violence is more frequently represented in Devi’s work, who describes with much rawness the aggressive attitudes of men towards women. As previously discussed, authorial figures abuse their power in order to assault women as well as many other men from upper caste and class. In this respect, I would like to provide with an example of the numerous scenes portrayed in Devi’s stories that convey her criticism of female abuse. This passage belongs to “The Fairytale of Rajabasha”:

The *malik* came to the hut and stripped Josmina naked. Baby Masidas watched in fear as his mother was abused. Arrey, this hut is here just for this –ha ha ha. We have an efficient system. Come on, put on your clothes. Seen how virile I am? (*Outcast*: 71)

Furthermore, it is noticeable the presence of the term ‘gang rape’ in “Behind the bodice”, for it is very briefly mentioned, as it was a common practice: “*gang rape... biting and tearing gang rape... police... a court case... again a gang rape in the lockup...*” (*Breast Stories*: 137). Devi has proved that she does not hesitate when it comes to expressing certain concepts that may provoke discomfort among readers.

The last story to comment on is “Draupadi” from *Breast Stories*. It has certain episodes similar to “Shanichari” from *Outcast*, but there is a main difference: its main character. The story is set during the war between Pakistan and Bangladesh, a historical period in which soldiers indiscriminately raped women from the tribes. This is another case of double marginalisation, for soldiers were able to take advantage of women because they were outcasts, even though the real cause was their desire for sex. Men objectify women that are socially inferior to them, so that they feel free to attack them and rejoice. The impressive aspect of the story, in comparison to others, is its main character, Draupadi, who conveys an incredible strength through her actions. She defied the caste system, the patriarchy and, above all, men’s confidence, by showing no fear or shame in her body. On the contrary, that body that men had previously used and objectified became a tool to intimidate them. They were vulnerable to Draupadi’s bravery, since what they had to dominate her was precisely her fear and submission:

Draupadi stands before him, naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds. [...] Draupadi’s black body comes even closer. [...] Draupadi wipes the blood on her palm and says in a voice that is as terrifying, sky splitting and sharp as her ululation, What’s the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you cloth me again? Are you a man? (*Breast Stories*: 33)

In “Draupadi”, the breast represents “an erotic object transformed into an object of torture and revenge” (Spivak 1997-b: 7). This seems to me the most powerful and claiming image in the different short stories analysed in this study, since it turns the object of desire into a sign of harm, torture and pain, which is in fact what undergoes the process of rape, even though men tend to idealize it in order not to accept their fault.

## 5. INDIA TODAY: REAL FACTS BEHIND FICTION

*The God of Small Things* was first published in 1997 and Devi's short stories were written between the 50s and the 90s, but the objects of their criticism are still relevant. Unfortunately, many circumstances described in the narratives take place in contemporary India, making these works significant even today. In order to prove the veracity of the situations portrayed in the stories, I collected very recent pieces of news from different newspapers that share crucial elements criticised by Roy and Devi. Likewise, this chapter provides us with a better understanding of the severity of the facts that are commonly described in Indian literature.

Even when it promotes injustice, the unbreakable Indian caste system remains the same, despite being legally forbidden. Today, Roy's characters Ammu and Velutha as well as Devi's characters Dhouli, Shanichari, Josmina or Draupadi would still face the limitations imposed by the caste system. Nevertheless, Indians have been prompted to rebel and numerous protests have risen over the last decades, seeking the removal of such a radical hierarchy. Last April, the Supreme Court approved a controversial law against the Dalits, who face "discrimination, segregation and violence" (*Deutsche Welle* 2018, April 3), which is, obviously, detrimental for the population. In this respect, another topical issue is the abuse of authorial power. As Mohanty assures, "the police imposed a curfew and blocked internet services in some places" (*Independent* 2018, April 2) in order to fight the riots. What is more, eight persons were killed, while dozens injured, and more than 450 people arrested. It seems clear that Indians try to overcome the restrictions of the caste system, but the authorities are not willing to accept changes and let their privileges go.

Last year, an Australian organisation released a report where it was established that the estimated number of modern slaves in India ranged between 14m and 18m people, despite the Indian Government's efforts to hide such atrocious results. Modern slavery includes activities such as "trafficking, debt bondage, child labour and a range of other exploitative practices affecting vulnerable populations" (*The Guardian* 2017, October 5), all of which suggests that the situation of bounded labour that Devi criticised has not changed. In fact, the description of modern slavery reminds us of the narrations in the short stories "Shanichari" or "The Fairytale of Rajabasha".

On the other hand, prostitution is a problematic activity. It is sometimes even promoted by the police and is often related to human trafficking. Burke states that “most [incidents] involve women, often from very poor backgrounds, being seized forcibly or misled into lives of harsh domestic labour or sex work within India” (*The Guardian* 2013, February 7). This seems very similar to Devi’s short stories “Dhouli” and “Shanichari” from *Outcast* as well as it has been mentioned in *The God of Small Things* in numerous times. By taking advantage of women’s unfavourable situation, human traffickers and slave traders make profit, while they condemn innocent people to prostitution and forced work.

Nowadays, gender violence is manifested in several ways. To begin with, rape against women and girls is, sadly, a common practice. Such is the number of rapes in the country that there has recently been protests against the passive attitude of the Supreme Court regarding these crimes, which, on top of that, are not committed by conflicting men, but by politicians and other influential members of society. This type of rapes was described in detail in Devi’s “Shanichari” from *Outcast* and, above all, in “Draupadi” from *Breast Stories*. Moreover, Michael Safi denounces in his article the gang-rape promoted by a politician (*The Guardian* 2018, April 13), being this precisely the term that appears in “Chinta” from *Outcast* in relation to the rapes encouraged and conducted by authorial figures.

Acid attacks are other terrible crimes that are committed in frequent occasions against women. According to *The Guardian* (2017, July 2), approximately 300 acid attacks were reported in 2015, although it is estimated that many other attacks would not be reported. The article explains that these attacks are incited by “revenge for spurned marriage proposals, or are linked to property disputes.” This proves how unfree and limited Indian women are with respect to marriage and inheritance. There are laws that guarantee their patrimony and their freedom of marriage, and yet, as Majumdar remarks, “the effort to change popular behaviour through legal reform proved to be much harder than lawmakers imagined” (Majumdar 2007: 225). The whole question of inheritance and property is explored in *The God of Small Things* with regards to the family factory as well as in Devi’s “Dhouli” and “Chinta” from *Outcast*.

Regarding marriage, Kavita Das evidences that arranged marriages are still a predominant tendency in India, where the traditional women’s roles of wife and mother have not been abandoned (*The Washington Post* 2017, May 2). In fact, she maintains that a high percentage of women share the belief that they should not dedicate to their

work after marriage. This reminds us of *The God of Small Things*, both when Mammachi and Ammu were not allowed to work in the family factory and when the narrator claimed that Rahel's active working life was seen as rare in Ayemenem. What is more, the article asserts that women feel pressured to get married, since, "despite the major changes and modernization India has undergone in the 70 years since its independence, cultural norms toward marriage haven't changed much" (*The Washington Post* 2017, May 2), which assimilates to Ammu's rushed marriage.

These pieces of news show that, even though it is not their fault, women tend to suffer the consequences of a destabilised and unethical society. This is, precisely, the object of criticism in the narratives of Arundhati Roy and Mahasweta Devi. What I find alarming and disturbing is that many of the aspects that have been mentioned in this chapter appear in their stories, even when they were written some decades ago, for this implies that India has not evolved and women's precarious conditions remain the same. However, there are also optimistic views on contemporary India. Ian Jack is convinced that the new generations in the subcontinent will make a change, combining "the cultural values of the traditional Asian family with the life goals of the American teenager" (*The Guardian* 2018, January 13). Thus, India may start to assimilate to western societies, for better or worse, which would, hopefully, entail the improvement of people's life conditions.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

This study provides with a description of some current situations in India that must be denounced and prevented, which are specifically portrayed in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* as well as Devi's *Outcast* and *Breast Stories*. These are narratives that seek to denounce injustice in the Asian subcontinent, especially in relation to women's abuse and discrimination. The authors stand out for their continuous vindication of human rights in their country and, therefore, their works serve to convey their feminist message of inconformity and protest. The selection of characters is of main importance as well, since it is they who portray the unfair and precarious situations that actual women must face in order to survive.

Even though, as explained in the Introduction, the Hindu Code Bill, which includes certain laws that protect the most disadvantaged, was passed in the 1950s, Indians have not adapted to these laws, preventing unfair situations from changing. In other words, "women and Dalits gain new powers but are still in many cases shackled to ancient, repressive forms" (Doniger 2009: 626), so it seems irrefutable that works like Roy's and Devi's are still necessary in order to keep fighting misogyny in India and all over the world. Despite the efforts that activists such as Roy and Devi have made, common people would not adjust to a new system where they should let their privileges go so as to establish an egalitarian society with an equalitarian treatment to all citizens.

On the other hand, this project proves how women around the world receive unfair treatment, especially compared to men, even in the case where both men and women belong to the same group. In fact, as Nowshin states, "not every woman belongs to the upper class or faces the fate of misery, still every single woman has the same tragedy to endure but many of them have similarities" (Nowshin 2014: 4), which leads to the conclusion that all women suffer from the tragedy of being women in a misogynist world, regardless of their origin. The varied situations explained throughout this work are diverse and have different consequences, but they all share the same premise: most of the victims are women. Even though the problems addressed are related to different circumstances (caste limitations, marginalisation, bounded labour, patriarchy and marriage, lack of freedom and independence, sexual violence and exploitation, etc.), they all affect particularly women and their basic rights.

In relation to the last argument, it is convenient to point out that it is not part of our conclusion the fallacy that all women are vulnerable and all men are savage. Neither all women are innocent victims nor all men are cruel abusers, but, sadly, in most of the situations portrayed, women and men have in fact these roles, so it is possible to conclude that, even though not all men are evil, they do enjoy many more privileges than women. Furthermore, the final chapter of this work proves that Devi and Roy provide with correct and precise information, as many of the elements criticised in their narratives frequently appear in different newspapers that can be taken for truthful. Therefore, the representation of stereotypical Indian men and women in their narratives is not completely fictional, but on the contrary it is quite accurate.

Another relevant aspect to comment on is the 1<sup>st</sup> world's belief that there is no feminism in developing countries, for they are seen as barbaric or underdeveloped. In this sense, Roy and Devi prove that there are movements against injustice, but economical, authorial and social power prevents things from changing. What is more, "the 'totalising' tendencies of earlier feminist theorising was challenged from within feminism by marginalised, colonised and indigenous women" (Brooks 1997: 34), since they considered that their problems had not been properly taken into account. Therefore, it can be assumed that this belief has nothing to do with a lack of feminism in developing countries, but in the lack of accuracy in western feminism when addressing their particular issues. There are activists in India who fight for justice and equality, only not from a western point of view, being Roy and Devi very good examples of that. As far as I am concerned, I believe that people from the 1<sup>st</sup> world should prompt Indian women –and other women around the world– to talk and defend themselves rather than criticise and judge them for their different perspectives on feminism.

Finally, it could be noted that the authors present different styles of writing. Roy tends to tell her stories in a more literary manner, whereas Devi's writing reminds us of the documentary style. However, both authors convey similar feminist messages, as has been explained throughout this work, and seek similar goals, which, I believe, have been achieved. In fact, both writers have been awarded numerous prizes that prove their value, their worth and their relevance in contemporary India.

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