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Original Research Article

"Shame" as Counter-Affective: Queering the Caste Politics in The God of Small Things

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Abstract: Drawing upon Sara Ahmed's cultural politics of emotion and Raymond Williams' structures of feeling, this essay examines how 'shame' functions as political instrument in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997). While classical affect theory, particularly Silvan S. Tomkins, positions shame as self-corrective—triggering introspection and behavioral modification—cultural theorists argue that shame operates relationally as social technology. Ahmed's insight that affects do not merely represent individual interiority but emerge through social relations enables this reading of shame as constructed rather than essential. This paper argues that shaming in Roy's novel serves as regulatory mechanism upholding caste hierarchies in Kerala society, yet Ammu, the divorced Brahmin protagonist who loves an 'untouchable' Paravan man, refuses shame's interpellative force. Rather than self-correction, Ammu engages affective refusal—repudiating shame's moral valence while asserting her cross-caste desire as resistant praxis. Her 'shamelessness' destabilizes both the social instrumentality of shame and the naturalized 'love-laws' governing caste-based matrimonial alliances. This reading contributes to affect studies by demonstrating how marginalized subjects navigate affective governance, revealing shame's failure as disciplinary technology when its target refuses compliance.

Keywords: Shame as Affect, Resistant Politics, South Asian Literature, Arundhati Roy, Caste Transgression.

INTRODUCTION

When Ammu, the single mother of two infants in Arundhati Roy's Booker-winning novel The God of Small Things, went to the local police station to rectify the false accusation lodged against her imprisoned untouchable lover, the police inspector brutishly gave her the answer saying that they don't record the statement of veshyas (whores) having bastard children. An offended (but not ashamed) Ammu leaves the police station, grabbing her awed twin children with over-pouring tears in her eyes, bearing a feeling of defeat as she could not save her Paravan (dalit) lover. This narrative anecdote from Roy's novel presents an encounter between the society vis-à-vis the other/ individual. It foregrounds the hegemonic ethos of the society, which attributes (or attempts to attribute) particular value-ridden affect such as shame in identifying, othering, or/and excluding the individual. The academic inquiry of affect as a powerful catalyst in triggering our corporeal chemistry and emotional transmission (Teresa Brennan), leading us to action, reaction, transformation, restoration, etc, has opened a novel dimension of the so-called affective reading. Critiques like Sara Ahmed, Jacqueline Rose, Teresa Brennan, and Elspeth Probyn *et al*., have contributed to this academic venture by adding the social and political dimension of affect, which is often engineered by conventional agents or society. This paper is particularly interested in a negative affect (Tomkins' category) called 'shame' and attempts to locate its interactive trajectory with the agents ('bodies') affecting or affected by shame. In doing so, this paper argues that shame does not function as a corrective or restorative component in this novel; rather, shame (from Ammu's perspective) is renounced by Ammu in her deadly way to defiantly reinforce the resistant politics, the politics of the hierarchy of caste. Hence, the central thesis of this paper goes in line with Jacqueline Rose's point that "shaming someone can be a political project" (qtd in Cooke 2015, 17), arguing that Ammu abnegated that 'project' being non-compliant to the desired effect of shame. Roy's 1997 debut novel engages postcolonial India's intersection of caste, gender, and sexuality through the lens of forbidden desire. Set in 1960s

Kerala, a state with both communist politics and entrenched casteism, the narrative foregrounds how intimate relations become battlegrounds for social hierarchies. The novel's temporal non-linearity mirrors affective experience: shame, like memory, operates through recursive haunting rather than linear progression.

'Shame' as an Affect Category: Classical and Social/Cultural Understanding

Silvan S. Tomkins Affect Imagery Consciousness (2008) maps nine categories of affects onto neurobiological responses, positioning shame-humiliation as negative affect characterized by specific somatic manifestations: lowered eyelids and head, facial blushing, averted gaze, and bodily contraction (351-352). These physical responses signal what Tomkins identifies as 'heightened self-consciousness' and desire to halt communication (352). Shame emerges when individuals perceive violation of core values, requiring self-judgment wherein 'the judge and the offender are one and the same self" (360). This auto-evaluative dimension positions shame as inherently introspective, functioning to restore compliance with existing moral frameworks. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth's introductory discussion in The Affect Theory Reader (2010) outlines affect's epistemological dimension as "bodily sensation distinct from conscious recognition of emotion" (qtd in Cooke, 2015, 10), a visceral state beyond conscious knowing that operates as quasi-unworldly or unheimlich. Affect acts beyond human sensorium, creating states of being that sometimes produce epiphanies.

In Blush: Faces of Shame, Elspeth Probyn gave an intimate account of the 'viscerality of shame' and the corporeality of its affect. Probyn denies to consider shame to be one-dimensional, instead, she deems shame having ties with other affects and functions in complex negotiations and finds it 'productive' as long it is employed for social uses (2005, 15). As an essential component of shame, Probyn argues that it makes us care about things, leading us to question the humanness of our value system (pp. 3, 23). Thus, sociologically speaking, shame inhabits society, and our reaction to shame reflects what we embody as a social being. Probyn links it to Bourdieu's idea of habitus, representing a socially ingrained reaction/ response to affect, such as shame. Bourdieu's idea of shame involves history and tradition as integral to our perception of shame or any affect. E.g. Historically, in India, tying the matrimonial knot of a Brahmin to someone from the scheduled caste is considered to be a shameful and transgressive act, hence, subject to social stigma. In such cases, imposing shame by the social body is meant to regularize the social custom, and the affected body feels the shame for such an act, a shame that 'dares not speak its name'. Probyn considers shame as cheerful as a body in shame 'inaugurates an alternative way of being in the world' (Cooke 2015, 16). Similarly, Tomkins locates the tendency of critical self-evaluation of the body affected by shame.

Silvan S. Tomkins's account, in the compilation of his significant writings titled Affect Imagery Consciousness (2008), of the nine categories of positive and negative affects neuro-biologically mapped different affects and how they trigger our physical/ facial responses/ reflexes. Tomkins slotted shame and humiliation in the same category, calls it shame-humiliation and generally outlines it as "indignity, of defeat, of transgression […], an inner torment, a sickness of the soul" (351). Some physical responses of shame-humiliation include lowering the eyelids, face, and even the upper body, blushing, and covering the face. Generally, these responses indicate a desire to halt communication and signal a 'heightened self-consciousness', argues Tomkins (352). Thus, Shame leads to reduced communication, and the face is the most salient site for shame. Shame or self-contempt occurs when the individual believes he/she has violated some core/ long-held values. There is a question of judgment involved in the detection of such violation, and for the affect of shame, it is the self itself that judges and embodies the feeling of shame. Tomkins argues, '[W]hen the self is ashamed of itself, the judge and the offender are one and the same self. The head hung in shame is experienced as the head and face of the entire self. The individual is ashamed of himself. It is impossible to be ashamed or humiliated this way without self-consciousness.' (360). Shame tacitly endorses the self-evaluation according to the existing value system and functions as a motive for our actions. Thus, individual compliance with taboo occurs following the affect of shame, which ultimately embodies a self-defeating psychology. Baruch Spinoza's two-fold understanding of affectus and affectio hints at the mutuality of affect where affectus refers to the 'force of the affecting body' while the latter refers to the 'impact it leaves on the one affected' (qtd in Berberich 220). Deleuze and Guattari understood affect as the intensities that pass from body to body as an act of exchange of passion what they call 'intensity' (2013, 4). They exemplified the metaphor of sunrays as the external body falling on our skin, causing us to feel 'hot'. Heat is a material perception that interacts with the reacting/acting body, causing the intensity called feeling. This feeling might positively affect some, making them happy/energized and negative on some, bothering them. Depending on the individual perception of the feeling, the sensation of heat thus can act as a stimulus, leading us into farther action and reactions. Like Tomkins, Deleuze also reckons that the face is the primary site for embodying the affect.

Both Tomkins and Probyn have linearity in their understanding of shame as self-corrective. However, cultural theorists Raymond Williams, Sara Ahmed and Jacqueline Rose have a similar vein in understanding affect's social and cultural facets. As an antecedent to the 'affective turn' in literature, Marxist Raymond Williams' notion of 'structure of feeling' brought out the idea that feeling is not merely an innocent reflex-based biology category rather, there is a hegemonic presence that helps us to understand the popular response to feeling (qtd in Cooke 2015, 13). Therefore, a 'structure of feeling' critically looks at the appropriation of auto-perceived reaction to any affect such as shame. Such

critical investigation is what Cooke calls the 'social dimension of feelings'. In her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed affirms the relational status of affect and argues that our subjectivity shapes and is shaped by others (15). She elaborated her discussion with a striking query whether justice is simply a feeling and feelings are always just. Such a query provokes an intersectional understanding of affect and also rallies around the question of the social construction of affect. Philosopher Martha Nussbaum sees shame as a social tool to 'discriminate and stigmatize' (17). Endorsing Nussbaum's conception of shame, Jacqueline Rose points out: 'shaming can be a political project', and refusing to feel ashamed can be considered moral and political defiance (17). Celebrations of Gay parades in a heterosexual context can be an example. Shame, likewise, can be appropriated as a political weapon of counter-affirmation. This essay considers the political and social dimension of shame as affect and, by placing shame within the intersection of the individual, family, and society, investigates the functionality of shame and the reaction to shame.

Having established shame's dual ontology as both biological affect and cultural instrument, this analysis now examines how these frameworks illuminate resistant politics in Roy's novel. If shame functions hegemonically to regulate social transgression, the critical question becomes: what happens when subjects refuse shame's disciplinary force? Ammu's cross-caste desire offers precisely this test case, revealing affective governance's dependence on subject compliance.

'Shameless' Ammu: Reversing the Politics of Stigma

In Arundhati Roy's novel The God of Small Things, Ammu, a divorced mother with two children, indulges her love for the Paravan (untouchable scheduled caste) called Velutha. Her existence in the heart of a phallocentric nexus consisting of her colonial-minded father, anglophile brother, ex-husband, ex-husband's sexploitative British boss, her patriarchally programmed mother, class-conscious and untouchable-hater aunt, the hypocritical communist leader Comrade Pillai and the whole body-politic, the society at large. Ammu is now a divorced woman, a single Brahmin (converted as Syrian Christian) mother of two kids, a lover of an 'untouchable' Paravan, a downtrodden caste which is not allowed contact of any kind, physical or psychological, with the people from the upper castes. Within a strictly regulated caste-conscious social context, Ammu is entitled to a stigmatized social status as the beloved of a dalit and a divorcee from a self-determined marriage. She is someone for whom her family is ashamed and embarrassed. Her family reckons her cross-caste affair should also make her ashamed of what she is and what she has done. To understand shame in the context of Roy's novel, we need to consider a few queries: what are the social catalysts of the idea of shame in the novel; who are the agents or external stimuli functioning to impose the shame on Ammu; and last but not least, how Ammu reacts/ interacts with the shame, i.e. does she comply with the values inherent to this shaming or she rather upturns the horizon of expectations of the bodies who inflected shame on her. In doing so, we also need to notice the resistant sign that Ammu's reaction to shame implies.

To put the novel in an Indian theological context, we need to understand the scripted laws which largely determine the Indian social fabric and contribute to the construction of a collective unconscious vis-à-vis love, marriage and kinship. *Manusmriti* (The Laws of Manu), the guiding text of Hindu law, outlines a woman's subjective status, saying, "A woman, at no stage in her life, is fit to be independent – the father should guard her until she is married, the husband during her adult life, and the son in her old age." (Section 1, Verse 9.3) while revered Hindu epic, Ramcharitmanas portrays women as 'spoilt' the moment she is given freedom. Regarding love-marriage, while Manusmriti unwillingly sanctions women from marrying someone from the upper caste (anuloma vivah, a form of hypergamy), however, in terms of loving or marrying a man from a lower caste, Manusmriti is even more restrictive and punitive, 'A woman is not liable for punishment if she has sex with a man from the 'higher castes'. But she is due for harsh punishment for having sex with a man from a 'lower caste' (Verse 8.365). A Brahmin woman marrying someone from a lower caste is termed as pratiloma vivah (same as hypogamy). The punitive face of hypogamy is reflected in Indian socioscape, where a woman going beyond her sanctions in love and marriage falls prey to social victimization and stigmatization. Consequently, for a woman to look beneath her caste is shameful, while the upward mobility for an untouchable man is audacious, yet possible. Hence, we are dealing with a woman who is bearing a speck of shame on her.

Shame, for Ammu, is restrictive and regulatory in the way of her freedom, her body politics. For her, it is neither self-evaluative nor even introspective; rather, shame castes a self-indulgent impact upon her. She is not comfortable in keeping her love closeted. Consequently, she is shamed by society at large as she fails to live up to the ideal that a woman of upper caste should be compliant with when the question of love, lovemaking and marriage arises. Sara Ahmed argues that affect shame requires a 'witness', which leads to the intimacy of the feeling (2004, 108). Ammu keeps her so-called shameful act of loving an untouchable assertively disclosed. She and the society, both are aware of the mutual knowledge of the affair, yet none prefers to talk about it reminding us of Oscar Wilde's gross indecency trial of homosexuality where his affair was termed as "the love that dare not speak its name". So, we understand that shame endorses a sense of concealment following a foreclosure of our pleasure. Etymologically 'shame' derives from the Indo-European verb for to 'cover' which semantically associates the word 'shame' with others connotations such as 'hide' 'custody', 'hut' and 'house' the terms which underline a common semantic thread implying reduction of self-exposure (qtd in Ahmed 2004, 104). However, Ammu negates the shame not by her revocation of love for Velutha; rather she superimposes her self-approval

for her inter-caste love affair making it more evident to the community. Instead of retracting herself, she makes her love evident and promises of perpetuation of her love and lovemaking. On the night when they desperately met each other and let loose their biological id (Ch. 21), Ammu promised to return to see and love Velutha saying naaley, meaning tomorrow. Such persisting and optimistic promise weakens the social politics of shaming and strengthens the individual politics of re-appropriating or resisting the shame. Her libidinal indulgence disengages her from the repressive control of the society. She considers her desire to be something worth 'dying for', not something to be apart from. Her own personal struggle against the collective shaming becomes her political site alluding to the rallying slogan of the second wave of feminism. (italic is mine). Critique Brinda Bose in her essay 'In Desire and in Death: "Eroticism as Politics in Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things"' argues that Ammu's non-compliance with the oppressive superego is manifested through her social and sexual transgression, her 'politics of desire' becomes linked to her 'politics of voice' against the oppressive demarcation by the government and the society (2007, 128). Bose's emphasis on Ammu's 'rage' instead of shamelessness in upturning the ethnic/ caste-politics also incorporates the essence of this paper.

Ammu's aunt, Baby Kochama attempts to cleanse their family image by accusing Velutha as the transgressor. Her manipulated statement to the police attempting to criminalize so-called 'sex-crazed' Velutha with the stigma of attempted rape on Ammu is an example of how shame is diverted to another body to quarantine the social reputation of the self and thus affect the other body (with pain and punishment) upon which it is re-channelled. Not only does shame, but her feelings of fear and hatred for untouchables also provoke her into a vengeance-ridden drive into an attempt at criminalization of love. In The Cultural Politics of Emotion, Sara Ahmed makes a contextualized claim that hate and fear are instrumental in collectivizing an imaginary other (2004, 42-43). Baby Kochama tries to absolve Ammu's so-called sin of loving Velutha by ensuring that Velutha remains behind bars, thus quarantining their family reputation. One's shame is to be thus redeemed by another's life or death.

However, Ammu's desensitised perception of shame nullifies the embodied taboo of such socially engineered shame as she goes to the police station to 'set the record straight' and speak in favour of Velutha. Roy utters, "It didn't occur to her [Baby Kochama] that Ammu would later invite shame upon herself". (italic is mine) Ammu, already a social deviant for her alleged love for an untouchable, has been socially declassed from her so-called elite status. Society's phallogocentric grudge against the defiant Ammu is nakedly displayed when she goes to the local police station to make a statement for Velutha's innocence in the case where he was accused of being involved in the killing of Sophie Mol. Inspector Thomas Mathew's lewd male gaze at Ammu's breasts, his calling her a veshya (colloquial term for prostitutes) and her children illegitimate- all vouch for a very hierarchical class/ caste-conscious patriarchal mindset. Even the inspector's tapping Ammu's breasts with his baton turns Ammu into an expendable bare life, alluding to Giorgio Agamben. Later, the inspector's revelation that his brutish gesture was a "premeditated gesture, calculated to humiliate and terrorize her" (Roy 1997, 12) adds a corporeal dimension to humiliation. The body becomes a site for inscribing fear and shame. However, while returning from the police station, her teardrop-soaked outcry saying, "He is dead. […] I've killed him", only underscores her agony of legal defeatism, not that of physical defilement. She was crying because justice was denied to Velutha.

Baby Kochama's classification of women's place in their parents' home is very much informed by the tradition and 'commonly held view' about love, marriage and social status. In Roy's narration, "She subscribed […] that a married daughter had no position in her parents' home. As for a divorced daughter- according to Baby Kochama, she had no position anywhere. And as for a divorced daughter from a love marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochama's outrage. As for a divorced daughter from a[n] intercommunity love marriage- Baba Kochama chose to remain quiveringly silent on the subject." (45) Ammu falls into almost all the above-mentioned categories as outcast from her parents' home—a woman who initially arranges her own marriage and then gets divorced and then gets involved in an intercommunity love, and subsequently, physical consummation, if not marriage. Thus, in society's eyes, she does not deserve even to exist and tacitly calls for an annihilation. Ammu's daring departure from the regulatory social mechanism of the so-called 'love-laws' that "lay down who should be loved and how" (31) reserves no place for her in society and turns her into a transgressor, a bad example for society. However, Ammu, a single mother with two children, falls in love with an untouchable and continues to stay at her parents' and defies the commonly held view that "children need a Baba (father)" (149). Roy's observation that her tender motherhood and the 'reckless rage of a suicide bomber' (44) give her an unmixable mix discards any hint of shame in the turn-ups of her life. For Ammu, shame is not crucial to any reconciliation or the healing of any past wounds, as Ahmed considers it one of the collective functions of shame (2004, 101). She didn't expose her shame in failing to live up to the social ideal; instead, she was angrily resilient in listening to her and meeting the man she loves at night, whom her children meet in the day. She did not go for the potential 'restorative' remedy of the feeling of shame; instead, Ammu, despite being an 'other' in the eyes of the society, refused to restore the lost ideals nor looked for a channel to enter into the society. She inhabited her outsider status as her politics of defiance. Ammu even subconsciously indulges in her repressed fantasy of being with an amorous Paravan, an untouchable. One afternoon (Ch. 11), while she was being flattered in her dream by the intimate moves of a one-armed man loving (a symbolic emblem of Velutha) her, Rahel and Estha thought she was having an 'afternoon-mare' which she negates and claims that it was a

happy dream, not a 'mare'. Her happiness here stands in denial of any hint of shame, an affect which she renounces as an intruder.

Socially constructed shame reduces Ammu's territoriality and confines her body. She, who is hated to be in love with someone who is convicted of the death of Chacko's daughter, is locked and later locks herself in her bedroom. Chacko's hatred-mingled blast, saying, "Get out of my house before I break every bone in your body!" or his dismissive order, "Pack your things and go" (225-226) implies Ammu's spatial vulnerability at the History House. However, she does not manifest a guilt-ridden apologetic response. Her resilient and unyielding nature has linked her to her own politics of voice against a genealogy of social convention, rules, and laws. Despite complying with shame, she employed her 'rage', which gave her the 'unsafe edge of a suicide bomber'. Instead of being ashamed of her love, she subtly voices her rage against the shaming power nexus and counters an automated perception of shame in its restorative and repressive instrumentality.

CONCLUSION

Stripping shame off the inherited neuro-biological essentialism, Arundhati Roy responds to the necessity of an alternative social and political reading of shame in her novel. Addressing the cultural construction of and our accustomed comfort zone regarding shame, Roy, through her powerful female character Ammu, de-stigmatizes shame and, therefore, unveils both the politics of shame and resistant politics of shamelessness. Locating the narrative within the Indian context, her The God of Small Things voices against the streamlining of shame (or shaming) as a naturalized tool for social, ethnic and gender authoritarianism. Ammu questions the taken-for-granted moral component of an act that causes shame, and thus, she de-essentializes ethical consideration that shame ensues. The study of affect (such as shame) as an epistemological paradigm opens up an intercultural dialogue, leading to a critical understanding of the local cultural politics centring on the exploitation of shame.

The paradigmatic shift in understanding resistance to shame as cultural politics leads us to consider justice more critically. As radical feminist praxis, Ammu's re-appropriation of shame as assertion of subjecthood destabilizes phallocentric and casteist hierarchies. Her "shameless" erotics (borrowing Tim Edwards' coinage) showcases Spinozist potentia—the power to repudiate social authority.

Ammu queers the social and religious metanarrative of matrimonial alliance through what queer theorists term 'sexual-racial formations' (Alexander 2005): her erotic attachment to Velutha simultaneously transgresses caste boundaries and heteronormative marriage scripts that structure brahminical kinship. Her refusal to privatize or domesticate desire—insisting instead on its public acknowledgment—queers conventional respectability politics demanding discretion around transgressive sexuality. The intercaste, extramarital nature of her attachment destabilizes not merely caste hierarchies but what Lee Edelman (2004) identifies as "reproductive futurism" embedded in brahminical systems, wherein proper marriage ensures caste purity across generations.

Ammu's shamelessness thus operates as queer methodology: rejecting normative frameworks of redemption or restoration, she inhabits social death as resistant praxis. Her willingness to live as outcast, her assertion that loving Velutha constitutes something 'worth dying for' rather than renouncing (Roy 1997, 221), positions her outside rehabilitative logic. In this sense, her counter-affective stance models what José Esteban Muñoz might recognize as 'disidentification'—neither assimilating to dominant norms nor purely oppositional, but strategically working within and against regulatory regimes. She foregrounds her cultural politics through her desire and, ultimately, her social and biological death.

This reading contributes to affect studies by demonstrating shame's political elasticity: while hegemonic formations deploy shame as regulatory technology, resistant subjects can refuse its interpellative force. Ammu's case reveals that shame requires compliance; without the subject's recognition of transgression, shaming fails as disciplinary mechanism. Her counter-affective stance—neither denying the shaming act nor internalizing its moral valence—models what we might term 'affective refusal': the strategic rejection of prescribed emotional responses to maintain political agency. Roy's novel thus offers not merely representation of resistance but theorization of how marginalized subjects navigate affective governance in postcolonial contexts where caste, gender, and sexuality intersect as mutually constitutive systems of domination.

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