



From Silence to Subversion: Mapping Marginality in “Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*”

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Abstract: In this socially and economically stratified world, gender and class (and Caste also, in the context of India specifically) are the two major divisive forces that have rendered large sections of population powerless and hence marginalized and oppressed. “Arundhati Roy, the first Indian woman author to win the prestigious Booker Prize in 1997 for her novel “*The God of Small Things*”, has a keen eye to observe such issues pervading Indian society”. This study will delve into the nuances of such gender and class discrimination as portrayed by Roy in her novel, highlighting the plight of women and lower castes (may be taken as congruent to economically lower classes also) in India through the characters of Mammachi, Ammu and Velutha. The paper will try to bring forth the fact that patriarchal mindset is not confined in its exercise to men alone, but may take women also into its folds by creating power hierarchies within the gender.

Key words: Gender, class, caste, patriarchy, untouchable

“Published in 1997 as a debut novel, *The God of Small Things* brought a lot of fame to its author Arundhati Roy, and won the Man Booker Prize the same year”. In “*The God of Small Things*,” Roy skillfully fulfils both the duties of the writer and the social activist. By focusing on the story of an Indian family, thus representing the broader Indian macrocosm, Roy successfully brought to the surface the various inequalities suffered by the marginalized sections of Indian society which mainly revolve around the gender and class differences. The theme of oppressiveness of caste and gender is central to the novel. Her angst at the suffocating and crushing effects of patriarchal and social oppression pervades the novel. The novel highlights the predicament of Indian women along with the plight of Dalits, the untouchables. “Dalit is a Hindi word which means oppressed or downtrodden”. In India, the class differences manifest themselves in terms of caste, the people belonging to lowest castes being held as Untouchables, and are generally associated with professions such as leather workers, butchers, launderers, and latrine cleaners. “The word caste is derived from the Portuguese casta, which means breed, race, or kind. Castes are ranked, named, endogamous groups, and membership in a particular caste comes through birth”. There is no mobility in the caste system as in class system. One remains in the same caste in which one is born irrespective of the achievements or talents.

The caste in India as a social phenomenon has been a central organizing principle in despite the fact that the Indian state has enacted a number of legislations to ensure that the practice of caste discrimination is eliminated. In order to escape their predicament, a number of lower caste people in India embraced Christianity, but were still made to have separate churches which showcases their inability to shed their "Untouchable" skins. Comrade Pillai (a communist activist in the novel), while trying to convince Chacko (the co-owner of Paradise Pickles in the novel) of the significance of the (higher caste) workers' resentment of Velutha for having a responsible job in the pickle factory remarks: ' *"He may very well be okay as a person. But other workers are not happy with him. Already they are coming to me with complaints... You see, Comrade, from local standpoint, these caste issues are very deep-rooted....."* (Roy 282), further commenting that *"Change is one thing, Acceptance is another"* (Roy 283). Their conversion rather intensified their plight as they were denied government benefits created for "Untouchables" because officially, on paper, they were Christians now and therefore beyond the purview of caste.

The novel portrays the individuals' efforts to subvert the conditions imposed upon them by a society that relegates them to margins owing to their gender and caste identities. Almost all the characters in the novel are entangled in relationships dominated by cultural and class tensions – the twins' relationship with Sophie Mol, Chacko's relationship with Margaret, Pappachi's relationship with his family, and Ammu's relationship with Velutha – all stumped by the oppressive social and patriarchal forces. On one hand, there are characters like Baby Kochamma and Pappachi attempting to uphold that rigid and vicious social code which gives no space to those who do not confirm to it, while on the other hand, we have Ammu and Velutha – trying to unravel and subvert that very code without caring even for their lives. The fact of them being so severely punished for their transgression is a testimony to the annihilating effects of gender, caste and class discrimination.

The novel unfolds with a description of a hot May in Ayemenem, and the first character, Rahel, is introduced to the readers. Rahel is the twin sister of Estha, a character who is socially displaced, not only at her hometown or, but even after she migrated to the United States with her husband. Rahel is an embodiment of silence, one who observes everything without having power to change it despite the will to do so. She is a silent victim of a disintegrated family and an imposing social order which makes a woman a pariah in case of a failed marriage. Her incapability to connect with the society becomes an impediment in the way of realizing her potential successfully despite all her meticulous efforts – owing to the social and emotional impairment caused by a society unwilling to forgive her mother for her efforts to subvert that oppressive system.

Ammu, Rahel's mother and the central female character in the novel is a divorcee, an enigma she can never escape. However, her sufferings start much earlier in life owing to her gender identity. She was denied education as education was a privilege to be enjoyed only by males as is evident by the example of her own brother. According to her father, education was unnecessary for a female. Seeking divorce from her abusive husband furthered her marginal position at home and in the society at large as it made her looked down upon even by her own family. Even her brother Chacko who is a kind of an elite leftist marginalizes her. She is also cornered by the family structure and inheritance laws customarily prevalent among the Syrian Christian community in Kerala. She, however, stands against such oppressive and unjust social structures and challenges the institution of

marriage too that seems to be rather a disciplinary institution working towards silencing and controlling the one who dares not to confirm.

The character of Ammu as it emerges in the novel is not only an outcome of her being a divorcee. Her violent father and a resigned, submissive mother have a great role in shaping her fate and personality: *“Ammu had endured cold winter nights in Delhi hiding in mehndi hedge around their house (in case people from Good Families saw them) because Pappachi had come back from work out of sorts, and beaten her and Mammachi and driven them out of their home.”* (Roy 186). They cannot even disclose their suffering and plight to anyone in order to protect and maintain a good image of an upper caste family. Rather, they were *“made to suffer the envy of friends and relations for having such a wonderful husband and father”* (Roy 186), in spite of being *“beaten”* and *“humiliated”*. In the words of Pumla Dineo Gqola, *“in the allocation of shame, it is the brutalized who are expected to protect the abusive father and his publicly performed identity.”* (Gqola 25). This shows that one cannot escape the effects of inevitable hierarchies such as gender, and class, despite being a member of the upper class/caste society.

“As she grew older, Ammu learned to live with this cold calculating cruelty. She developed a lofty sense of injustice and the mulish, reckless streak that develops in Someone Small who has been bullied all their lives by Someone Big.” (Roy 187). Ammu’s family shows her the ugly and invincible face of patriarchy and the outcome of unconditional female submission at its worst, thus forcing her to resist and to try to subvert it. Ammu and her children are repeatedly rejected by their own kith and kin which compels Ammu to seek emotional refuge in Velutha - a low caste or ‘untouchable’ carpenter, in whose character, and her children to seek a fatherly figure in him.

Ammu and Velutha’s relationship holds particular significance because their affair amounts both to be a sin, as it is extra-marital, and a crime, as it is inter-caste. Velutha is a Paravan, *“the lowest kind of the Untouchable outcastes”*. He lived with his father and brother in a small hut near the Ayemenem house, a place where his father has been working for many years. Velutha – the ‘god of small things’ – was a gifted craftsman from who could make intricate little boxes and other minute toys out of dried palm reeds. He used to bring them to Ammu *“on his palm . . . so she wouldn’t have to touch him to take them”* (Roy 81), as they, the paravans, *“were not allowed to touch anything that Touchables touched”* (Roy 80). Their status in the society can be understood by the account given by Mammachi to the twins, Estha and Rahel, who

“could remember a time, in her girlhood, when Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan's footprint. In Mammachi's time, Paravans, like other Untouchables, were not allowed to walk on public roads, not allowed to cover their upper bodies, not allowed to carry umbrellas. They had to put their hands over their mouths when they spoke, to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed.” (Roy 80)

In spite of being an intelligent and skillful person, indispensable for the Ipe family as according to Chacko *“he practically runs the factory”*, Velutha is nothing but an untouchable for the upper caste people. Even though Mammachi acknowledges his talent as she *“often said that if only he hadn’t been a Paravan, he might have become an engineer”* (Roy 81), he is not welcomed in the house *“except when she needed something mended or installed”* (Roy 83). Velutha, one of the main

characters in the novel, is the most oppressed and downtrodden in many ways though he is a man because gender is not the only limiting factor in the novel.

Mammachi, the second most important female character and mother of Ammu and Chacko in the novel, is also a physically, emotionally, and psychologically abused woman who went through domestic violence and trauma but could never speak out. She was repeatedly beaten and abused by her husband, Pappachi, becoming a victim of his anger and a vent for his frustration caused by his failure in the outside world. Her music lessons were stopped by her husband because her music teacher happened to praise her talent before Papachi, generating a fear in him to be surpassed by his wife. However, she does not turn rebellious against such acts of repression and marginalization like her daughter Ammu and remains one of the novel's steadfast characters. She rather tried to get assimilated with the prevalent patriarchal values. However, Mammachi's strategy of adopting patriarchal authority could not help her with respect to her son Chacko who took away her pickle-factory. Chacko displaces her, reclaiming his patriarchal authority impressing the fact that it is only men who could have it. Mammachi is marginalized to be just a sleeping partner as Chacko captured the business started and established by her, a proclaimed "Marxist" engaging in a capitalist enterprise, thus exposing his hypocrisy. Amitabh Roy comments: "Thus, despite his professed Marxism, Chacko follows Manu and the tradition in asserting the son's domination over mother in old age. Mammachi submits to it as such ideas are so familiar to her." (Roy 2005) Velutha and Ammu, both subalterns – defined as such on account of their class, caste, gender and social positions – are the only rebels who challenge such systems at the cost of their lives.

Roy's novel also portrays the way women themselves become complicit in reinforcing the patriarchal norms, as is made evident through the character of Baby Kochamma, "*ex-nun, and incumbent baby grand aunt*": *'Baby Kochamma resented Ammu, because she saw her quarreling with a fate that she, Baby Kochamma herself, felt she had graciously accepted. The fate of the wretched Man-less woman...She subscribed wholeheartedly to the commonly held view that a married daughter had no position in her parents' home. As for a divorced daughter - according to Baby Kochamma, she had no position anywhere at all.'* (Roy 53) The female is treated just as an appendix to her husband or family, having no identity of her own.

Thus, the caste system and patriarchal values are endorsed by women also in the relative hierarchy within the gender. In Roy's novel, though women suffer as victims to a patriarchal, conservative society, they do not reject it or rather become active perpetrators like Mammachi and Baby Kochamma. They, without any hesitation, submit to patriarchal social norms as pointed out by Antonio Navarro-Tejero in her article titled, "*Power Relationships in The God of Small Things*": "The first generation of women in the novel give extreme importance to patriarchal social norms, indeed they succumb to them...."

The complicity of women became explicit the moment Ammu's and Velutha's relationship is exposed. Mammachi openly demonstrates her patriarchal side as she harshly condemns Ammu for having an affair with Velutha, though she has never confronted her son Chacko for his illicit relationships or rather makes arrangements for the same by ensuring a separate entrance to Chacko's room for his female visitors. She even gives them money secretly, treating them as whores instead of as lovers. When confronted by Baby Kochamma about the female visitors, Mammachi even

defends Chacko citing his “Mans Needs” (174). However, Mammachi’s does not keep the same liberal and forgiving attitude towards her daughter. That Ammu has “*defiled generations of breeding*” on account of her relationship with a Paravan is an “unbearable” thing to her. Ammu’s affair having the effect of denigrating the family name, while Chacko’s ‘Man’s needs’ being justified despite having lower caste female visitors exposes the double standards of the society with respect to the two genders. The same act by one being acceptable while by other being unacceptable subscribes to the different expectations placed by society and culture on men and women, reflecting that men are less accountable to them than women..

In order to expose the local and global inequalities, Arundhati Roy focuses on the actions of Comrade Pillai and Chacko, the two subscribed members of the Communist Party. They are complicit in the marginalization of a subaltern like Velutha, making him suffer on account of his caste and class identity. They both manipulate Velutha for their own gain, but when he gets into a relationship with Ammu, emotionally and sexually, as an act of personal rebellion against the restrictions of caste, class and gender, they kept aside the declared principles of Communist ideology. Chacko cannot withstand the loss of familial “honour” and Comrade Pillai betrays Velutha, a fellow comrade, by refusing to stand for him. Chacko is not conscious of the class and caste differences while sexually abusing the female workers of pickle-factory. He rather takes advantage of their position of subalternity since they are helpless to protest against their exploitation at the hands of a wealthy upper-class man. Chacko is entitled to have his ‘man’s needs’ and get away with it without any consequences, a privilege not available to Velutha because he is a ‘Paravan’.

These alleged Marxists do not empathize with the subalterns in the novel. Chacko’s attitude towards Rahel and Estha, marginalized because of their mother’s actions, is also unsympathetic. Neither him nor Comrade Pillai advocate for equal rights of different castes or genders, far from mounting an attack against these hierarchical systems. Ammu and the others are victimized and are made to suffer because the Communism in their context fails to assert itself as a resisting force against such inequalities as it “*never overtly questioned the traditional values of a caste-ridden, extremely traditional community. The Marxists worked from within the communal divides, never challenging them, never appearing not to.*” (Roy 73)

Khurshid Alam in his article “*Untouchables*” in *The God of Small Things*” placing Ammu in relation with Velutha states the role of Ammu as he says:

“Roy expresses her disillusionment with the social conditions of the postcolonial world in which the untouchables of the past still face a hostile society that does not let them live as free and independent individuals. Velutha, the God of small things, the outcast can never co-exist peacefully with the “touchable” communities for as long as the stigma of untouchability is attached to him and countless others like him. Ammu, another “untouchable” within the “touchable” cannot pursue happiness because doing so threatens the existing order, and the society takes every possible step to stop change.” (2014)

Anita Singh describes the novel as “a discourse of the marginalized and subordinated” as it “crystallizes the issues of atrocities against . . . all those dispossessed of an identity or a speaking voice.” Singh concludes: “The book becomes the voice of all those who are relegated to the margins

of society” (2003). O. P. Dwivedi in an article entitled “The Subaltern and the Text: Reading Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*”, utilizes the concept of “the subaltern” by going back to Ranajit Guha. In the Preface to *Subaltern Studies*, Vol.1, Ranajit Guha proppses a working definition of “subaltern”. “The word “subaltern”... stands for the meaning as given in the Concise Oxford Dictionary, that, is of inferior rank. It will be used as a name for the general attitude of subordination in South Asian Society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way,...” (1999).

Ammu’s roles as a divorced woman, as a single mother, as an educated woman denied of her inheritance rights [“She, as a daughter, has no claim to any property, no locus standi..”(Navarro-Tejero)], and as a sexually conscious person deprived of the freedom to choose what she likes and penalized for exercising such a right, place her in the realm of other subalterns – whether of caste, class or gender. She represents those aspiring for freedom and equality. Ammu, longing to take control of her life which is suppressed by the prevalent social order, is pitted against a system where her “Marxist” brother has all the right to exploit the poor women labourers, financially and sexually, without any repercussions. She witnesses characters like her mother, appropriated by the very system that subjugates them. She can see the helplessness of Velutha who is accused of the accidental drowning of Sophie Mol. Her father turns a blind eye to the fact that her Bengali Hindu husband from whom she sought divorce tried to prostitute her as a bargain to help himself by pleasing his white boss. She is symbolic of all subalterns who dare challenge the oppressive power structures of any kind. Ammu’s marginality results in her children being further marginalized. They are “Half-Hindu Hybrids whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian would even marry” in the eyes of Baby Kochamma (Roy 52).

Almost all the characters in “*The God of Small Things*” are trapped within a rigidly predetermined social order, but the female characters have their sufferings doubled as their gender makes them doubly marginalized in addition to their social class. The plight of female is twice as enigmatic as she is silenced both under the colonial power and the power of masculinity within local patriarchal traditions as Sunaina Singh emphasizes, “in India a woman’s life is governed by tradition and family customs. A good woman is one who is a good daughter, wife and mother. To be good means to be of a sacrificing, self-abnegating, meek and quiet nature” (1999). However, for Ramesh Kumar Gupta, the “new woman” is today challenging the traditional notions of “Angel in the house”: “The new woman is essentially a woman of awareness and consciousness of her low position in the family and society” (2015). Thus, women attempting to gain control of their lives in diverse ways is a constant theme of the novel.

Ammu’s children Estha and Rahel are subalterns as they are rootless – economically, culturally and financially – having a disrupted family, lineage and culture as they are ‘hybrid’. Deprived of a “normal” stable family, in the absence of fatherly love and protection economic security, they have nothing to fall back on except each. Entangled in the situation far beyond their working, and punished for the sins not of their doing, they struggle to secure a safe environment for their survival, longing for the unconditional love of a parent and the promise of a future which can belong to them. Their efforts to safeguard themselves and their childhood against a system indifferent to them are put to rest one day, a day after which futures are no more sought after as all hopes for recovery die down.

The characters in “*The God of Small Things*” are constantly in clash with the societal forces of class, caste and gender, and their reaction against such forces come up in the form of social and cultural transgressions. Their fruitless efforts to subvert these forces is perhaps a deliberate act to reject and challenge the system where they are required to struggle as the marginalized and oppressed victims. They are in a continuous struggle to seek a way out of the confinements imposed upon them to redefine their lives as free individuals. They might be the worst sufferers but they don’t suffer in silence. They rather try to effect a change through resistance by committing transgressions as acts of defiance. They interrogate, explicitly or implicitly, the oppressive structures of caste, class and gender.

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