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The God of Small Things: Speaking Subalterns

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Abstract: *The Booker Prize winner Arundhati Roy is one of the contemporary intrepid Indo-Anglian writers who dream to change the world by raising voice against the existing injustice, discrimination and convention of the society which try to marginalize human being into nothingness, suppress and control individual's identity in a boundary. Her outstanding novel The God of Small Things (1997) is a tragic resonance of "The subaltern". This term is defined by many critics such as Gramsci and Spivak who limit it only to proletariat and women respectively. This paper attempts to study the novel reflecting Ranajit Guha's definition of "The subaltern" which suggests the subordinated and marginalized condition of a person due to his/her belonging to the periphery of the society. The novel unfolds the tragic story of each subaltern in the context of national, political, cultural issues which appears to be bound in a ribbon of togetherness. Roy depicts an extremely traditional Keralite society, which as the God decides every individual's (small things') fate; gives punishment through death and silences if anyone tries to transcend its laws, customs, and conventions. All the major characters of the novel —both oppressor and oppressed are victims of these grand narratives. Moreover, it can be called a saga of sadness, where love is connected to loss, death, unfulfillment and silence.*

Key Words: *caste, patriarchy, Subaltern, silence, tradition, women.*

Suzanna Arundhati Roy, one of the harbingers of the Renaissance (1980s-1990s) of Indo-Anglian Literature, is best known for her masterpiece *The God of Small Things*. The novel was published in 1997, the year when India celebrated its 50th (1947-1997) anniversary of independence. How much liberty and freedom does an individual enjoy in post-independent India? What is the meaning of independence? Roy raises these thought provoking questions in the novel. The setting of this "semi-autobiographical" ^[1] novel is at Ayemenem, Kerala. In an interview Roy says, "Kerala is the home to four of the world's great religions: Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and Marxism" ^[2]. Patriarchy, religion, culture, colonialism and even Marxism— all these grand narratives are introduced to 'the emancipation and the betterment' of human civilization. But ironically, these are also the agencies that have deprived the individuals for the centuries. All the major characters of the novel are fully or partially deprived by these grand narratives. In her novel, Roy criticizes the traditional values of the caste-ridden, gender biased Keralite community, where "Small man the Mombatti" (p.88) is under the control of "Big Man the Laltain" (p.88). *The God of Small Things* speaks for the subalterns. The term has been adapted to post-colonial studies from the work of the Subaltern Studies group to histories, who aimed to promote a systematic discussion of subaltern themes in South Asian Studies. It is used in *Subaltern Studies* "as a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, and office or in any other way" (Guha 1982; vii)^[3]. Marginalized by the class, caste, race, gender, religion, age, economic condition, the major characters are subalterns in more than one way.

The novel vividly delineates the condition of the untouchable in India, especially in Kerala. In Kerala, untouchability is practised more meticulously than elsewhere in India and it is not restricted to Hindus only but Christians, the established Syrian Christian, practise the rules and customs also. Technically, in Christianity, there is no stratum in human being on the basis of caste; but in India caste is a reality in Christianity. "In the colonial period, many lower castes were converted to Christians by the European Missionaries but the new converts were not allowed to join the Syrian Christian community and they continued to be considered as untouchables even by the Syrian Christians" ^[4]. The Indian Government appointed many Commissions to study the real situation of the Untouchable Christians in India. According to the commissions the change of religion to Christianity had not significantly changed the life of these untouchables. The Mandal commission Report, under the chairmanship of B.P.Mandal (1980), has accepted the reality of caste among Indian Christians. According to the Report, "....Christians in Kerala are divided ... into various ethnic groups on the basis of caste background ... even after the lower caste converts continue to be treated as Harijans [the untouchables] by all sections of society including the Syrian Christians"^[5]. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the father of the Indian constitution raises the question, "Has Christianity been able to save the converts from the sufferings and ignominy which is the misfortune of everyone who is born an Untouchable?"^[5] We find the answer in Roy's novel:

When the British came to Malabar, a number of Paravans and Pulayas (among them Velutha's grandfather, Kelan) converted to Christianity and joined the Anglican church to escape the scourge of Untouchability. As added incentive they were given a little food and money. They were known as the Rice- Christians. It didn't take them long to realize that they had jumped from the frying pan into the fire. They were made to have separate churches, and separate priests... After independence they found they were not entitled to any Government benefits like job reservations, or bank loan at low interest rates because officially, on paper, they were Christians, and therefore casteless. It was little like having to sweep away your footprints without a broom. Or worse, not being *allowed* to leave footprint at all. ^[6] (p.74)

We find the more pathetic and inhuman treatment towards the untouchable in the novel:

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....Paravan's were 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. ^[6] (p.73-74)

In this historical backdrop, the plot of the novel revolves around a love affair between Ammu, an upper class Syrian Christian and Velutha, an untouchable. Being an 'Old World Paravan' (p.76) and knowing the dire consequences one has to face who wants to challenge the rigid social order, Vellya Paapan, father of Velutha, does not dare to raise any questions regarding the social hierarchy. Gramsci's concept of hegemony is highly applicable here in case of Vellya Paapan, who is loyal to his oppressor. His gratitude to Mammachi and her family is 'as wide and deep as a river in spate' (p.76). Velutha, a highly intelligent and an excellent craftsman with "an engineer's mind" (p. 277), does not compile with those age-old traditions, customs, rules and hierarchy. He does not want to follow any man-made border and margin. O.P. Dwivedi comments on him as "Velutha does not sanction this social discrimination. The subaltern in this novel wants to speak but he is beaten to death by Inspector Mathew in police lock-up, thus substantiating the views of Gayatri Spivak expressed in her famous article, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"^[7] Velutha breaks the age-old customs and rules of society, and that is why he is killed to defend the social norms and order. According to Baby Kochamma, Ammu's aunt, Velutha's murder is 'history lesson for future offenders' (p.336). Moreover, she justifies it as a divine retribution: 'As ye sow, so shall ye reap' (p.31).

Ammu, a divorcee with two children, Estha and Rahel, is the female protagonist and the worst sufferer of the novel. She is an archetyped image of a woman marginalized in a patriarchal society. In all the roles that she assumes as a woman — the role of a daughter, wife, divorcee, and mother she becomes a victim of patriarchy, tradition, community, and religion. She is a victim of all laws: the family law, inheritance laws, social laws, 'Love Laws'. Ammu falls in love with an untouchable laborer Velutha and violates the 'Love Law' which her community inherited from, among other things, their Hindu past. "Her transgression of the caste, class and religious boundaries mounts a rebellion of a kind against her marginalization as a woman" ^[8]. Murari Prasad comments on her rebellion, "Ammu's rebellion against maternal and marital conventionality, and finally, her liaison with dark skinned and untouchable Velutha (ironically meaning white) constitutes a violation against a determinate social order, sponsoring the immutable 'love laws'^[9]. She is treated as an outcast, unwanted person in her family which clearly defines her position in the society. She becomes "a symbolic personification of all subalterns, especially women, who challenge power structures of the social order". ^[8]

As a child, Ammu suffers at the hands of her "Anglophile" father, Pappachi who makes a lot of discrimination between the male and the female child. Though her father is an educated and high official in British Empire, he deprives her daughter's right to pursue higher education considering it as 'an unnecessary expense' (p.38), while he sends his son Chacko to Oxford University. Roy condemns this kind of gender discrimination as root level injustice.

Pappachi's bestial treatment of Ammu has affected her psyche so much that she considers marriage as the only possible mode of escape from her ill-tempered father. In an interview Mary Roy, Arundhati Roy's mother, says, "One absolute certainty in India is that women are born to get married. And marriage means getting a dowry. And getting a dowry means staying with your parents. And staying with your parents is to get a social acceptance. Or else your daughter will not get the right bridegroom. This is the biggest hurdle that women face in India" ^[10]. 'Since her father did not have enough money to raise a suitable dowry, no proposals came Ammu's way', (p.38) which leads her to make a mistake. 'She married the wrong man' who turns out to be a full-blown alcoholic and lair. She is very often beaten and bruised by her addicted husband in his intoxicated state. In this case, she is similar to her mother, Mammachi. Both are sufferer and victim of the marriage. Even he asks Ammu to go to his white boss to satisfy his carnal bliss just in order to save his job. So, she runs away from him all along with her two children to Ayemenem, her maternal home.

As a divorcee, she has to face "ostracism" ^[11] by her society and family. In a male dominated society, the codes and moral standards, "the yardsticks" ^[11] by which human beings are judged are stricter for a woman than for a man. Society expects feminine qualities like caring, rearing and nurturing only from a woman. It seems that it is *only* (my emphasis) woman's sacred duty to make a marriage successful. In case of divorce, society blames only woman and makes her guilty considering her responsible for this. Ammu, who has walked out of her marriage, is perceived by the society as aggressive and rebellious. In her paternal house also, she is physically and emotionally tortured by her parents and her brother, Chacko. Ammu and her children are considered as an unwanted botheration and unnecessary burden. This is the condition of any divorcee who comes back to her parental house in the Indian society. Roy is very critical of the apathetic and biased attitude of the society towards a divorcee. Describing Baby Kochamma's, reaction to Ammu's break up from her husband, Roy says: 'Kochamma subscribed whole heartedly to the commonly held view that a married daughter had no position in her parent's home. As for a divorced daughter from a love marriage, words could not describe Kochamma's outrage' (p.45). Her female relatives sympathize with her in a way, making her conscious of the gravity of her crime she has committed in living separated from her husband. 'Within first few months of her return to her parent's home; Ammu quickly learned to recognize and despise the ugly face of sympathy. Old female relations with incipient beards and several wobbling chins made overnight trips to Ayemenem to commiserate with her about her divorce...she fought off the urge to slap them' (p.43). Khurshid Alam describes the situation of a divorcee: "A divorcee has no right to pursue for happiness in life. The only course open to her is to spend a static life, waiting for death. Any attempt on her part to see life independently threatens the existing order" ^[11]. In this society, widow is considered more respectable than a divorcee. A divorcee is considered as a criminal or sinner who has done a grave sin. Still today, in sub-continent divorcees are treated as step daughter by society. She, along with her children, is considered as burden in her own family. It is visible at Sophie Mol's funeral: 'Though Ammu, Estha and Rahel were allowed to attend the funeral, they were made to stand separately, not with the rest of the family. Nobody would look at them' (p.5). "The novel shows the process of creating and labeling Paravans within the high class families — the people who go beyond the unwritten laws of society in pursuit of happiness" ^[11].

Velutha, the "untouchable", offers what is denied to Ammu, another "untouchable within the touchable" ^[11]. Probably that's why, Ammu discovers a companion in Velutha. She feels safe with him, finds comfort in his presence, gets passion, and warm in his arm and knows the real love. Her longing for real love and freedom couple with her resentment against the patriarchal society urged her to transgress the norms and standards laid down by the social institutions like family and marriage, caste and community. She, (as well as her daughter, Rahel) violates the most basic "love laws", the laws that "lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much" (p.31). Bose considers this transgression as "the result of conscious decisions by the emotionally overcharged characters" ^[12]. She firmly believes that it cannot simply be "bodily need" ^[12] but affirms "the political judgment" ^[12]. Dwivedi accuses our patriarchal society: "Indian social fabric is a curse for those advocating or practicing the rituals of modernity, since time immemorial, it has restricted the romantic movements of lovers despite the fact Krishna violated this traditional practice, and so did Vishwamitra and many others. Still we have profound regards for them, but when the same love affair is rehearsed between Ammu and Velutha it becomes hostile towards them. This exposes the dual character of our patriarchal society. Why is it that only man has got the right to (dis)own a woman, to define a protocol for female, and to exploit her femininity? These are vexed issues, which need to be looked at with open minds" ^[7].

Ammu has to pay a lot for her clandestine relationship with Velutha. She is branded 'Veshya', when she tries to acquit Velutha of charges of murder. She is driven out of her parental house, denied of her rights of inheritance, separated from her children, and reduced to ashes by meeting a tragic death in the Bharat lodge in Alepy and a 'Receipt No. Q49⁸⁶⁷³' (p.163). Thus, as Mohit Kumar Roy puts it, Ammu is "...humiliated and cornered by her father, ill-treated and betrayed by her husband, insulted by the police and rendered destitute by her brother" (p.54) ^[13]. Quaderi and Islam call her "as a subaltern/ woman resists oppressive and repressive social and political structures. She does not succeed in bringing about any tangible change but puts up a brave

fight for realizing her dreams. Although she may not consciously have worked for other subalterns, her actions contribute to the emancipation of different kinds of subalterns and there lies her exceptionality”^[8].

Soshamma, known as Mammachi, wife of Pappachi and mother of Ammu and Chacko, becomes “an instrument of patriarchal domination”. She not only submits herself to patriarchal social norms but also accepts it as ideal and standard for her family and society. Simone De Beauvoir argued in her most famous work, *The Second Sex* (published in French in 1949; English translation, 1984) that men are able to mystify women^[14]. This mystification and stereotyping, she argued, are instrumental in creating patriarchy. She further said that women, in turn, accept this stereotype, and that’s how become the instruments of their own oppression. Although both her children are divorcees, Mammachi does not resist her tyrannical and manipulative son. She is concerned to his ‘Man’s Needs’ (p.168) while she is tyrannical to her daughter’s affair. Mammachi’s complaint against Velutha assists his murder in the hands of the police. She hates the untouchable as a successor of age-old practice, and gives priority family ‘reputation’ to personal happiness. So, the question arises whether Mammachi is a subaltern or not?

Given the oppressive patriarchal structures the novel shows a woman’s social and economic agency is not welcomed, but condemned and undervalued. Pappachi is jealous to Mammachi as she gets attention from others and prosperity in her pickles and jams business. In revenge, he beats her with a brass flower every night. Though Pappachi is an educated person, and behaves like a decent man, he shows his male ego and bourgeois mentality with his wife, at home. Mammachi represents the women in different societies of the world who are being tortured, physically and psychologically, every day, after marriage, by their husbands, irrespective of higher class and lower class and never speak out.

Chacko, Mammachi’s son, becomes ‘Her Man’ (p.168), “Her only love” (p.168) when he stops Pappachi’s beating. But she is marginalized by her own son. He takes away the pickle factory, **Paradise Pickles & Preserves**, from her; as if as a kind of reward of his saving Mammachi from her husband’s beating. Chacko replaces her and reclaims the role of the patriarch as it belongs only to the men in the family. Mammachi is made ‘a sleeping partner’ (p.57). Amitabh Roy comments: “Thus, despite his professed Marxism, Chacko follows Manu and the tradition in asserting the son’s domination over mother in old. Mammachi submits to it as such ideas are familiar to her”^[15]. “Marginalized by her son in old age and facing an economically disadvantaged position, Mammachi is a subaltern in more than one way”^[8].

Navomi Ipe, daughter of Reverend John Ipe, is known as Baby Kochamma. She is responsible for poisoning the minds of Mammachi and Chacko, filing a false case misrepresenting the relationship between Ammu and Velutha, tricking Estha and Rahel, Ammu’s children, to give false statement against Velutha, separating the twins by returning Estha to his father and forcing Ammu to leave the house to die alone. Although, she is responsible for Ammu-Velutha and Rahel-Estha’s suffering but she is also a victim of gender and race.

Baby Kochamma falls in love with the Roman Catholic priest, Father Mulligan. To win his love she converts to the Roman Catholic faith. Her doomed love is not heeded or taken seriously since, in the first place, as a woman she is not in the position of a subject to express her love and secondly, she belongs to colonized and ‘inferior’ race. Unlike Ammu, she does not try to break the social law and order. She ‘resented Ammu, because she saw her quarrelling with a fate that she, Baby Kochamma herself, felt she had graciously accepted. The fate of the wretched Man-less woman. The sad, Father Mulligan –less Baby Kochamma’ (p.45). Defying her family she becomes a Roman catholic, just to get close to father Mulligan. In a colonial era, transcending age-old tradition, religion and family lineage, by a woman, just for love, is not a simple enterprise. We can consider her as a predecessor of Ammu in breaking rules, crossing into forbidden territory. Al-Quaderi and Islam opine:

While it is true that Baby Kochamma does not emblemize any kind of rebellion against the social order, her love for Father Mulligan does not lead to definite changes in her life, many of which are subversion of the established social order. For example, despite her verbal and actual conformity she transgresses the borders of religion, community and caste. Her conversion to Roman Catholicism is not just a change of denomination but implies a rejection of her own history, the history of Syrian Christians. Her life changing admiration and love for Father Mulligan, continuing even after his death, implies a subversion of the ‘Love law’ coming down from pre-colonial times which prescribed marriage, and only marriage, for women. In this case we have to remember that celibacy for women was not option for the Syrian Christian community.^[8]

Spivak's influential notion of the subaltern notes the power of patriarchy and colonialism where the native woman, because of her within these two structures, cannot enunciate^[16]. She argues, the subaltern cannot speak, and is hence 'spoken for'. She remains within the discourse of patriarchy and colonialism. As a colonized woman, she cannot express her love to colonizer, and remains unmarried suppressing her all desire and dream and silencing herself.

In this complex fabric of social customs and traditions, Roy locates the tale of two dizygotic twins, Estha and Rahel. Al-Quaderi and Islam call them "subalterns in the sense of being rootless economically, financially, in terms of family, lineage and culture"^[8]. They further state "Being deprived of a 'normal' nuclear family, fatherly love and a stable economic base, these two children have to fall back upon each other most of the time"^[8]. They are the children of 'intercommunity love marriage', where both the parents belong to different religions (father is a Hindu and mother a Syrian Christian); ethnic communities (their father being a Bengali and mother, a Keralite) and they get divorced when they were only two-year old. When their father's 'drunken violence... begun to include the children . . . Ammu left her husband and returned, unwelcomed to her parents in Ayemenem' (p.42). In their grandfather's house, they were treated as "unwanted". "In the way the unfortunate sometimes dislike the co-unfortunate, Baby Kochamma disliked the twins, for she considered them doomed, fatherless waifs. Worse still, they were Half- Hindu Hybrids, whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian would ever marry. She was keen for them to realize that they (like herself) lived on sufferance in the Ayemenem House, Their maternal grandmother's house, where they really had no right to be" (p. 45).

Ammu-Velutha's clandestine love affair not only destroyed their life but also shatters Estha-Rahel's childhood—Estha is sent back to his father; Ammu dies and Rahel remains alone in Ayemenem. 'The single Siamese soul' (p. 41) twins face the trauma of separation. All these things bring 'abnormal' change in their behavior and nature: they cannot cope up with the world. Estha 'had stopped talking' (p.10). He becomes silent. Rahel has a hard time in school and is expelled three times. The first time, she is caught outside her Headmistress's garden gate decorating a knob of fresh cow dung with small flowers. Later, she is expelled from Nazareth Convent after repeated complaints from senior girls. The second is for smoking. The third time 'for setting fire to her Headmistress's false bun which, under duress, Rahel confessed to having stolen' (p.17).

In each of the school she went to, the teachers noted that she:

- (a) Was an extremely polite child.
- (b) Had no friends.

It appeared to be a civil, solitary form of corruption... It was, they whispered to each other, **as though she didn't know how to be a girl.**^[6] (p.17)

When she finishes schooling, she gets admission into a mediocre college of Architecture in Delhi. 'It wasn't the outcome of any serious interest in Architecture. Nor even, in fact, of a superficial one. She just happened to take the entrance exam, and happened to get through' (p.17). It seems that Rahel is not serious regarding anything, not even marriage. She does not get married out of love or infatuation. 'Rahel drifted into marriage like a passenger drifts towards an unoccupied chair in an airport lounge. With a Sitting Down sense' (p.18). In every society, marriage is considered as sacred and important step, which leads to form family, an elementary element of a society. She is careless regarding this also. While doing her doctoral thesis on *Energy Efficiency in Vernacular Architecture*, Rahel was married to Larry McCaslin. He finds emptiness in her eyes. 'They behaved as though they belonged to someone else' (p. 19). 'He couldn't be expected to understand ...the emptiness in one twin was only a version of the quietness in the other. That the two things fitted together. Like stacked spoons. Like familiar lover's bodies' (p.20). Thus Rahel refuses to be co-opted by any apparatus of society: school, marriage, expected traditional behavior of a girl. Al-Quaderi and Islam comment on Rahel:

Being, marginalized because of her religion/ community, gender, class and age, she fits the category of the subaltern and her acts of non-conformity can be considered as acts of resistance through which she wants to bring about some kind of change. The most important act by Rahel is that of consummating her incestuous love for twin brother, Estha, which though an act of personal self-assertion, is also deeply political, challenging indigenous/ local inequalities in post-colonial India.^[8]

Roy gains access to the 'small voice' of the subaltern child through Rahel and critiques Indians' fascination of the White. She describes the grand preparations to welcome Sophie Mol, Rahel's cousin half-British, which throws light to the peripheral position of the twins in the family. Baby Kochamma, grandaunt of all three children, makes sure that the twins do not speak in Malayalam (the family's native language) but only in English in order to be at their best fluency when they welcome their more privileged half-British cousin. If the twins are caught speaking in Malayalam, they are punished to write 'I will always speak in English, I will speak in English, a hundred times each' (p.36). It seems like the negation of own culture/ Eastern culture and tries to uphold other's culture/ Western culture as standard. Dwivedi quotes Roy stating in this regard that: "Fifty years after independence, India is still struggling with the legacy of colonialism; still flinching from the cultural insult (and...) we are still caught up in the business of "disproving" the white world's definition to us" (Roy in Dwivedi)^[7]. Moreover, Sophie, being Chacko's daughter, holds a special position in the patriarchal framework of the household; she is the only heiress of Ayemenem and **Paradise Pickle & Preserves** and everything that the Ipe family owns. Even Kochu Maria, the cook, considers she is better than the marginalized twins. She reminds Rahel about Sophie's future role as her employer, thereby underscoring Rahel's inaccessibility to the family fortune and her peripheral identity: 'When she (Sophie) grows up, she'll be our kochamma, and she'll raise our salaries....' (p.175). Even in loss, the white child of the family patriarch is more precious than the brown ones of the divorcee.

Even, Chacko, who asserts all the power in Ayemenem house, is a subaltern when he stays in England. His relationship with an English woman can be studied through subaltern point of view. Though Chacko gets higher education from Oxford, Margaret's parents did not approve their marriage because of his being Indian. What Chacko loved most about her was her 'self-sufficiency' (p.245) which is very common to an English lady. Because of his eastern background this becomes a matter of admiration. Eastern women are considered as dependent (economically and in taking decision), timid, family-oriented. That's why when the independent Margaret, the only woman he loves in his life, wants to break up with him he 'had not exhibited any of the usual symptoms of grief and heartbreak' (p.249) rather he does it with pride "as though he admired her for having divorced him" (p.249).

In fine, we can say that Roy presents a pessimistic picture of the society and expresses her disillusionment with the social conditions of the postcolonial world which still control the individual with the pre-colonial rules and regulations; norms and customs. Here the victims are the agents of other victims.

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