

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*: Unraveling the Nexus Among Gender, Class and Caste

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Abstract

This paper argues that in *The God of Small Things* Arundhati Roy enables a reconceptualization of politics which brings to the fore the complex intersection of sometimes conflicting, sometimes mutually reinforcing, systems of social stratification based on caste, class and patriarchy, and their devastating consequences for human relationships. Critically located at the juncture where the ideologies of gender, class and caste intersect, *The God of Small Things* unfolds a tragedy which engulfs and consumes the lives of Ammu and her twins, Rahel and Astha, and the untouchable Velutha. Rightly perceived to be an attack on patriarchy, the novel refuses to look at patriarchy in isolation, but sees it in relation to the issues of class and caste. Roy expands the realm of politics by blurring the boundaries between the personal and the political. In the process she exposes official, documented History and suggests that such History rests on and empowers itself at the expense of subaltern discourses that have been marginalized.

Keywords: patriarchy, class, caste, gender, transgression, sexuality, untouchability

With its publication in 1997, *The God of Small Things* was hailed as the next big book after *Midnight's Children*. In *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing, 1947-97*, Salman Rushdie himself greets Roy's arrival into the world of letters with the assertion that *The God of Small Things* "is full of ambition and sparkle, and written in a highly wrought and utterly personal style" (xxiii). Even a critic like Aijaz Ahmad, who is otherwise highly critical of her, praises her and her style as a great linguistic *tour de force*: "she is the first Indian writer in English where a marvellous stylistic resource becomes available for provincial, vernacular culture without any effect of exoticism or estrangement, and without the book reading as translation" (108). The novel has, however, its share of controversies as well, ranging from Roy's location (as an English-language writer and the fabulous amount of advance that she received), to the novel's reception (its popularity in the West), to its explicit statements (criticism of the CPI[M]), to its themes (e.g., the liberatory potential of sexuality and desire). Especially incisive has been the critique of Ahmad who while accusing Roy of indulging in apoliticism of typical liberal cosmopolitan elites complains that "in its deep structure this discourse of Pleasure is also profoundly political, precisely in the sense that in depicting the erotic as Truth it also dismisses the actually constituted field of politics as either irrelevant or a zone of bad faith" (104).

The contention of my paper is that far from dismissing the field of politics as

irrelevant, Roy expands the realm of politics by blurring the boundaries between the personal and the political. In the process she exposes official, documented History and suggests that such History rests on and empowers itself at the expense of subaltern discourses that have been marginalized. She is one of those postcolonial women writers who, according to Ketu H. Katrak, “explore the personal dimensions of history rather than overt concerns with political leadership and nation-states.... This does not make women writers’ concerns any less political; rather, from a feminist standpoint of *recognizing the personal, even the intimate and bodily as part of a broader sociopolitical context, post-colonial women writers enable a reconceptualization of politics*” (234; emphasis mine). This paper argues that in “recognizing the personal, even the intimate and bodily” Roy enables a reconceptualization of politics which brings to the fore the complex intersection of sometimes conflicting, sometimes mutually reinforcing, systems of social stratification based on caste, class and patriarchy, and their devastating consequences for human relationships.

Critically located at the juncture where the ideologies of gender, class and caste intersect, *The God of Small Things* unfolds a tragedy which engulfs and consumes the lives of Ammu and her twins, Rahel and Astha, and the untouchable Velutha. Rightly perceived to be an attack on patriarchy, the novel refuses to look at patriarchy in isolation, but sees it in relation to the issues of class and caste. If patriarchy as a mechanism reproduces and perpetuates unequal power relations on the basis of gender, then class and caste reproduce and perpetuate unequal power relations on the basis of economic control and birth. The three are not mutually exclusive, but in a network of interdependent relations, they work together to ensure the hegemony of the upper-caste-upper-class patriarchal society. *The God of Small Things* effectively probes the linkages among patriarchy, class and caste, and its impact on the oppressed.

Although narrated from within the bourgeois perspective, *The God of Small Things* sets out to subvert and challenge its assumptions by exposing its patriarchal, class and casteist character. Anuradha Dingwaney Needham claims that the novel is “defined by, and help define, the contemporary ‘historical-political conjuncture’ that locates the motors of social, disciplinary, and epistemological transformation in the inherently or potentially resistant properties of the oppressed subaltern subject” (372). In telling the story of her mother Ammu and her twin brother Estha, Rahel also tells the story of the untouchable Velutha and how their lives got intertwined to cause a tragedy whose ravages are felt even long after both Ammu and Velthua are dead. In a society which denies women and untouchables any rights to autonomy and self-fulfillment, Ammu and Velutha are rebels who seek to gain some control over their lives. Their struggle not only brings them together but also pits them in confrontation with the society which reacts by destroying their lives – one cruelly ostracized and abandoned to die and the other brutally murdered.

Roy is said to have remarked that her book is not about history but about biology and transgression. Surely, the book is about biology and transgression, but deeply rooted in history, as transgression is always committed in the realm of history. Transgression involves crossing over from the domain of licit to illicit. This licit/illicit, legitimate/illegitimate dichotomy is the result of interplay of social and

historical forces. This dichotomy, though a social construct, is privileged, through an elaborate system of obfuscation and disguise, to appear as universal and normative/natural and through this dichotomy, the ruling elite continues its hegemony in the name of social order and stability. And apparently this social stability is threatened by Ammu and Velutha:

Perhaps, Ammu, Estha and she were the worst transgressors. But it wasn't just them. *It was the others too*. They all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tampered with the laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much.... It was a time when the unthinkable became thinkable and the impossible really happened. (31; emphasis mine)

Others have also broken the law of the society but since they belong to the ruling elite group, the society looks askance at their transgression. Brinda Bose says, "Society and government make rules and define boundaries; many of these are continuously transgressed. But there are some who are allowed to transgress more than others, and there are some rules that are (acceptably) transgressed more often" (65).

The story of Ammu is that of a rebel who refuses to submit meekly to her fate, as a woman. As a child, she has been exposed to the cruelty of her vicious and hypocritical father who would pose as an adoring husband by day and behave as a monster by night. Not just content with beating her mother Mammachi up, he would even mercilessly thrash Ammu and would have no qualms while turning them out of the house even on cold wintry nights of Delhi. The violence and cruelty is not only physical but mental and psychological as well. In an effort to demonstrate his complete domination over Ammu and to cruelly remind her of her helplessness and powerlessness, Pappaachi makes her watch while he deliberately shreds her favorite gumboots to small rubber strips with a pair of shears. In fact, family is the site where the patriarchal authority is enforced and acutely felt, and, paradoxically, violence against women is most often committed within the four walls of home where they are made to suffer in silence. The responsibility for the preservation of the pure, unsullied and heterosexual family space lies with the woman and the honor of an Indian woman is contingent upon her ability to suffer in silence and maintain this space. Her role assumes an unrivalled sanctity even as her life requires the utmost control. While Mammachi submits with resignation to her fate, this cruelty of Pappaachi, instead of fostering a submissive spirit in Ammu, makes her rebellious.

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. She did exactly nothing to avoid quarrels and confrontations. In fact, it could be argued that she sought them out, perhaps even enjoyed them. (81-82)

As is a woman's lot, Ammu's deprivations are endless. For a woman, chained to a life of domesticity, which does not require higher intelligence or imagination, education is considered an unnecessary expense. It becomes a male prerogative. While her brother Chacko is sent to Oxford, she is denied even ordinary college

education. The desired meet of a daughter is to become a wife through marriage and eventually a mother, but there is no hope of a decent marriage for Ammu as her father has not raised suitable dowry for her. In a desperate bid to escape her fate, she agrees to marry a young Bengali who she meets at a party, not because she has fallen in love with him but because “she just weighed the odds and accepted. She thought that anything, anyone at all, would be better than returning to Ayemenem” (39).

Even a worse fate awaits her as a wife. Instead of being treated with respect due to her as a person, she is first flaunted as a conquest in parties and then treated as a commodity which can be traded and exchanged at will. Her husband, an assistant manager at a tea estate in Assam is an alcoholic who alternates between a state of violence and that of utter helplessness and wretchedness. An irresponsible wretch with no conscience, he has no qualms in using her as bait to serve his ends. In order to save his job, he proposes to send her off to John Hollick, the manager of the tea estate. Met with a stubborn refusal from her, he indulges in violence followed by post drunken badgering. “When his bouts of violence began to include children... Ammu left her husband and returned, unwelcomed, to her parents in Ayemenem. To everything that she had fled from only a few years ago. Except that now she had two young children. And no more dreams” (42). So, now, at the age of twenty-seven, divorced and burdened with twin children, Estha and Rahel, Ammu is made to feel and suffer the ignominy of living on charity in her own parental home. After all, a woman, after marriage, has no place in her parents’ home: she has no right to parental property. She is not allowed any measure of economic independence; she is always at the mercy of father/husband/brother/son. Even when Ammu works as much as her brother Chacko does in the pickles factory owned by the family, Chacko claims, “What’s yours is mine and what’s mine is also mine” (57) and this claim reveals the attitude of the patriarchal society. Therefore, “in the pit of her stomach [Ammu] carried the cold knowledge that for her, life had been lived. She had had one chance. She made a mistake. She married the wrong man” (38). The only chance a woman had of living out her dreams and aspirations is marriage and having lost that chance, Ammu can now only live on the charity of brother. But there is something wild and untamed in her character which rebels against the impositions of the patriarchal society:

Occasionally when Ammu listened to songs that she loved on the radio, something stirred inside her. A liquid ache spread under her skin, and she walked out of the world like a witch, to a better, happier pace. On days like this, there was something restless and untamed about her. As though she had temporarily set aside the morality of her motherhood and divorcehood. Even her walk changed from a safe mother-walk to another wilder sort of walk.... What was it that gave Ammu this Unsafe Edge? This air of unpredictability? It was what she had battling inside her. An unmixable mix. The infinite tenderness of motherhood and the reckless rage of a suicide bomber. It was this that grew inside her, and eventually led her to love by night the man her children loved by day. (44-45)

It is this “wildness”, “unpredictability” and “Unsafe Edge” in her character which, in the utter defiance of the society and in search of freedom and emotional release and fulfillment makes her commit the ultimate transgression and seek solace

in the arms of the untouchable Paravan, Velutha. Commenting upon the erotic fate of women, Simone de Beauvoir says in *The Second Sex*, "... two essential consequences follow: first she has no right to any sexual activity apart from marriage; sexual intercourse thus becoming an institution, desire and gratification are subordinated to the interest of society for both sexes; but man, being transcended towards the universal as worker and citizen, can enjoy contingent pleasures before marriage and extramaritally" (454-55). It is this hypocritical attitude of the patriarchal society which while overlooking and condoning the sexual dalliance and escapades of Chacko comes down heavily upon Ammu for committing sexual transgression. According to Brinda Bose, "Women's transgressions are generally more easily condemned, as are those to do with the 'Love Laws'. When women seek to transgress the rules that govern love and desire, the penalty is death. Knowing this, to desire (sexually) what one cannot have may be seen as indulging in a death-wish" (66). There also seems to be contradiction in the attitude of the patriarchal society – while it treats women as an object of sexual gratification for men on the one hand, on the other it denies the very presence of sexuality in women for their own sake.

The God of Small Things portrays not only the oppression of women in a patriarchal society, but also exposes another dimension of the mechanism of patriarchy in which women themselves are made accomplices and instruments of oppression for women. Patriarchy ensures that women are divided from each other, enmeshed not in a simple polarity with men but in a complex and contradictory web of relationship and loyalties. This largely happens due to lack of self-esteem or rather because of self-hatred which makes a woman not only despise herself, but also others. And this is very clearly brought out in the portrayal of Baby-Kochamma. It is this self-hatred that makes Kochamma resent the brief moments of happiness of Ammu and the twins and prompts her to hurt them:

Baby Kochamma, Ex-nun, and incumbent baby grand aunt. In the way that the unfortunate sometimes dislike the unfortunate, Baby Kochamma disliked the twins for she considered them doomed, fatherless waifs.... 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. Baby Kochamma 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.... She subscribed wholeheartedly to the commonly held view that a married daughter had no position in her parents' home. As for *divorced* daughter – according to Baby Kochamma, she had no position anywhere at all. And as for a *divorced* daughter from a *love* marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochamma's outrage. As for a *divorced* daughter from an *intercommunity love* marriage – Baby Kochamma chose to remain quiveringly silent on the subject. (45-46; emphasis in the original)

But as I have said in the beginning that *The God of Small Things* is an exploration of the intersection of gender with other categories like class and caste, so it does not remain only the story of Ammu and her two-egged twins, but it also becomes the story of Velutha. Velutha has in common with Ammu, a spirit of rebellion and defiance against the restrictions imposed upon him by the society. He

emerges as the symbol of struggle against the tyranny of the caste system which, in order to keep the untouchables under a state of permanent bondage and servility, conspires to impose upon them a series of crippling restrictions, the worst of them being the practice of untouchability. The ruling upper-caste-upper-class patriarchal society first denies the 'humane' qualities to the untouchables and this denial of humane qualities justifies imposition of a series of restrictions of them, and gives the upper-caste-upper-class patriarchal society the right to control and discipline them. These restrictions have the effect of denying them even the possibility of becoming 'humane' persons, should they desire to become one. Pointing to the use of the metaphor of footprints, Pranav Jani claims, "*The God of Small Things* provides a history of caste oppression in Kerala, maintained across the Hindu/Christian divide. The novel describes how the big institutions of caste, church, and state joined hands to render Dalits invisible and untouchable. Employing a third-person narrator that freely substitutes itself for Rahel's consciousness throughout, the text explains that Dalits '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'" (54).

So firmly has this caste system been entrenched in our society that their attempt to escape the scourge of untouchability by accepting Christianity has been circumvented. By branding them Rice-Christians and making them have separate churches, with separate service and separate priests, they are once again condemned to the same life of untouchability from which they had sought an escape. Worst of it all, after independence, they were even denied government benefits like reservation in jobs because as Christians they are supposed to be casteless. As Sara Upstone says, "The Paravans' Christianity unable to remove the stigma of their birth, in fact, makes them doubly denied, 'casteless' so without their heritage, yet treated as if still belonging to their caste" (74).

A descendent of one-such Rice Christian, Velutha, as a child, is endowed with precocity and intelligence which only upper caste people are supposed to be capable of. On the prompting of Mammachi, he is sent to an "Untouchable" school founded by her father-in-law Punnayan Kunju. Here again, the politics of education and the hypocrisy of the upper castes are exposed. Since education is a means of empowerment, it should be denied to the untouchables. However, in a so-called democratic society it is imperative that the untouchables, as its members, be extended the benefit of education. In order to overcome this dilemma, separate schools for untouchables are set up where while they are made literate, the real and effective education is denied to them. It is a massive conspiracy in which the upper castes see to it that in the name of education, these untouchables are provided only rudimentary and shoddy education. This serves two purposes – on the one hand, this system shows the magnanimity and concern of the upper caste elite for the untouchables, on the other it shows the futility of such a gesture towards these people as they are shown to be unworthy of it. Since this reinforces and lends further confirmation to the belief that the untouchables are less than human beings and are beyond reform, it justifies their discriminatory practices.

Velutha not only finishes high school, but also becomes an accomplished carpenter with a distinct sensibility for German design, having been trained under a

Bavarian missionary, John Klein. “Apart from his carpentry skills, Velutha had a way with machines. Mammachi (with an impenetrable Touchable logic) often said that if only he hadn’t been a Paravan, he might have become an engineer” (76). It is because of his caste that he is denied the opportunity of higher studies and of becoming an engineer. Others resent even his becoming a carpenter: as “Paravans were not meant to be carpenters” (77). Therefore, in a clever move, Mammachi hires him as a carpenter for the factory, but pays him less than she would to a Touchable carpenter, as she knows that nobody else would hire him as a carpenter and this would also keep the murmurs of protest down. “Mammachi didn’t encourage him to enter the house (except when she needed something mended or installed). She thought that he ought to be grateful that he was allowed on the factory premises at all, and allowed to touch things that Touchables touched. She said that it was a big step for a Paravan” (77).

It is against this iniquitous and invidious social order that Velutha rebels; he leaves Aymenem and joins the Naxalite movement. In fact, right since the beginning he is shown to have a rebellious and independent spirit: “Vellya Paapen feared for his younger son. He couldn’t say what it was that frightened him. It was nothing that he had said. Or done. It was not what he said, but the way he said it. Not what he did, but the way he did it... Vellya Paapen thought that in a Paravan they could (and would, and indeed, should) be construed as insolence” (76). When he returns to Aymenem after four years, his sense of having been wronged has been further heightened and sharpened and “Vellya Paapen feared for him now more than ever. But this time he held his peace. He said nothing” (77).

It is only logical that both, Ammu and Velutha who have suffered under the tyranny of the feudal casteist society should come together in their fight against this unjust order. This happens on the night of the great family reunion that takes place in the Ayemenem house. At the time of the family reunion, Ammu feels left out and utterly humiliated, and it is in this moment of forlornness that she discovers in Velutha an ally and soul mate in whose arms she can seek release of her pent up emotions and anguish. However, this union, at best, is a fragile one since they as individuals are pitted against the vastly superior forces of feudal patriarchal establishment and it is the awareness of their powerlessness and helplessness that makes them look no further than tomorrow. After each meeting, they only promise to meet again, “Naaley (tomorrow).” When their liaison is discovered, the society acts swiftly and ruthlessly, putting down rebellion with a firm hand, by brutally killing Velutha and condemning Ammu to a lonely life away from her own children and thus abandoning her to die. Arundhati Roy’s severe indictment of the society comes out very clearly in her portrayal of the brutal and callous treatment of Ammu and Velutha at the hands of police:

Later, when the real story reached Inspector Thomas Mathew, the fact that the Paravan had taken from the Touchable Kingdom had been snatched but *given*, concerned him deeply. So after Sophie Mol’s funeral, when Ammu went to him with the twins to tell him that a mistake had been made and he tapped her breasts with his baton, it was not a policeman’s spontaneous brutishness on his part. He knew exactly what he was doing. It was a premeditated gesture,

calculated to humiliate and terrorize her. An attempt to instill order into a world gone wrong. (259-60)

And again,

If they hurt Velutha more than they intended to, it was only because any kinship, any connection between themselves and him, any implication that if nothing else, at least biologically he was a fellow creature – had been severed long ago. They were not arresting a man, they were exorcizing fear. They had no instrument to calibrate how much or how permanently they had damaged him.... [T]he posse of Touchable Policemen acted with economy, not frenzy. Efficiency, not anarchy. Responsibility, not hysteria. After all, they were not battling an epidemic. They were merely inoculating a community against an outbreak. (309)

Velutha is killed, not simply as most critics imply, because he becomes a lover of Ammu, a Touchable, nor simply because he, himself, is an Untouchable, but rather because he is also a transgressive worker and a politically transgressive (perhaps Naxilite) Untouchable. According to L. Chris Fox, “On one level, Velutha dies for his deliberately chosen ‘sin’ but, symbolically, he, too, dies for (because of) the sins of the world, one of which, *The God of Small Things* implies, is the caste system” (50). The murder is repeatedly represented as the result of the collusion between history, the state, tradition, and ruling elites of all sorts. A complex hierarchy of perpetrators and victims is constructed, with Velutha positioned at the extreme end of powerlessness by virtue of his caste and class. Roy problematizes caste in a manner that assumes that the Love Laws are, in fact, purity laws where “physical crossing of the social barrier is treated as a dangerous pollution” (Douglas 139).

Another important dimension of *The God of Small Things* is Roy’s refusal to look at the image of women solely as being oppressed in simplistic patriarchal terms. Women when seen in terms of class and caste ideologies and relations appear in a situation of relative power over others. Within the patriarchal system, the women have been oppressed and oppressive, submissive and subversive, victims and agents, allies and enemies, both of men and one other. Thus, while oppressed and subjugated by the patriarchy, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma and Kalyani are cast as oppressors or at least shown to be complicit with the upper-caste-upper-class males in oppressing the untouchables. Mammachi who finds herself powerless and helpless in the face of brutal assaults of her husband everyday and submits meekly to cruel treatment, can be seen in a position of authority and power with respect to the Paravans. A dispenser of favors and punishments, she could get a glass eye made for Vellya Paapen and get his son admitted to a school, and could also, if she wills, not only dismiss them from employment but also threaten to deprive them of their life. “‘Out!’ she had screamed eventually. ‘If I find you on my property tomorrow, I’ll have you castrated like the pariah dog that you are! I’ll have you killed!’” (284).

This dual role of the oppressed and oppressor is brought out very clearly in the portrayal of Kalyani in the scene where the conversation between her husband K.N.M. Pillai and the factory mudalali Chacko takes place: “[Pillai] had the easy authority of the Man of the House. He smiled and nodded a greeting to Chacko, but

did not acknowledge the presence of his wife or his mother..., Comrade Pillai took off his shirt, rolled it into a ball and wiped his armpits with it. When he finished. Kalyani took it from him and held it as though it was a gift. A bouquet of flowers” (272). Thus, she is shown as mere slaving for her husband and her sole duty is to act according to the desires and wishes of her husband. However, in her relation to the Paravans, she assumes the role of an oppressor. The scene at Pillai’s home where the conversation between Pillai and Chacko regarding Veltuha takes place is revealing:

‘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.’ Kalyani put a steel tumbler of steaming hot coffee on the table for her husband. ‘See her, for example. Mistress of this house. Even she will never allow Paravans and all that into her house. Never, Even I cannot persuade her. My own wife. Of course inside the house she is Boss.’ He turned to her with an affectionate, naughty smile. ‘Allay edi, Kalyani?’ Kalyani looked down and smiled, coyly and acknowledging her bigotry. ‘You see?’ Comrade Pillai said triumphantly. (278)

Commenting on the episode, Kalpana Wilson points out, “Comrade Pillai’s ideas about fighting gender oppression are as slippery as his posturing against caste oppression. This is best expressed in his relations with his wife and mother, whom he simply ignores when he comes home, except to toss his sweaty shirt to his wife to wash. The scene in which Comrade Pillai’s wife, upon her husband’s prodding, ‘coyly acknowledg[es] her bigotry’ is simply brilliant in displaying how caste and gender oppression are intertwined” (68).

At the core of Roy’s critique is a social and cultural system that not only stifles individual freedom and social mobility but also, and above all, represses the expressions of the body and the discourses of desire. In order to fight this invidious system, she emphasizes on the need for transforming power relations which extend beyond those of gender to include those of class and caste since this transformation cannot be effected without such an alliance, however difficult and painful the contradictions of this alliance have been. Roy’s critique, seen in this context, emerges not from the apolitical or liberal perspective typically held by cosmopolitan elites since the 1980s, but from “subaltern-centered” politics that challenge official, ruling class narratives and histories, including those couched in leftist discourse (Jani 50).

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