

Subaltern and Gender Issues in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract:

The research article deals with the burning issues like gender inequality and maltreatment towards subalterns in Arundhati Roy's semi autobiographical debut novel, *The God of Small Things*. It highlights feminism, untouchability and negligence towards children's upbringing. Both women and untouchables share the common platform in society and called 'subaltern', and receive a treatment of second sex. They face exploitation and humiliation at the hands of powerful people in the society. The binary oppositions, touchables and untouchables, man and woman, literate and illiterate are boldly projected in the novel.

Key words: Gender, Feminism, Subaltern, Postmodern, Postcolonial etc.

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Arundhati Roy was born on 24th November, 1961 in Shillong, Meghalaya in India. She is one of the most prominent Indian English writers, who have tried their hands at novels, screenplay writing, essays etc. She also is a social activist. She has spent her childhood at Ayemenam in Kerala and incorporated her childhood memories in her debut novel, *The God of Small Things* which she began writing in 1992 and completed in 1996. Rajyashree Khusu Lahiri in one of her research paper describes it as, “a taboo-breaking protest novel,” she also adds, “out of a sense of complacency at having rid the society of discrimination based on caste and gender.”¹

Her *The Cost of Living* (1999) which is a critique of Indian government's nuclear policies. She also has written *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire* (2004), *Algebra of Infinite Justice* (2002), *Strange Case of the Attack on Indian Parliament* (2007) and *The Shape of the Beast* (2008). Arundhati also has worked for T.V. and films. She has written screen plays like *Annie Gives it those Ones* (1989), *Electric Moon* (1992), *The Banyan Tree*, *Damage: A Film with Arundhati Roy* (2002).

Arundhati Roy is also a social activist, environmentalist, a political analyst, a critique of terrorism, and a supporter of minority culture. She works with Medha Patkar and she has donated the Booker Prize money to Narmada Bachao Andolan. She has won many recognitions and prestigious awards for her writings; in 1997 she won the Booker Prize for *The God of Small Things*, in 2002 the Lannan Foundation's Cultural Freedom Award, in 2004 the Sydney Peace Prize, in 2006 Sahitya Akademi Award for her collection of Essays *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* and many more. She is the first Indian woman writer to win the prestigious Man Booker Prize for her novel. K. M. Pandey describes the achievement of the novel:

The God of Small Things is a polysemic novel which can be interpreted at several levels. ... a satire on politics attacking specifically the Communist establishment ... a family saga narrating the story of four generations of a Christian family... a novel having religious overtones ... a protest novel which is subversive and taboo breaking ... a love story with a tragic end
....²

Realistic Portrayal of Subaltern and Gender Discrimination:

Arundhati Roy, as a novelist, is known for her Socio-cultural explorations. As a modernist, she has incorporated many of its devices in her writings. She involved with many modernist ideologies like regionalism, ecofeminism, socio-cultural identity, etc. The modern outlook has brought psychological demoralization, economic depression and intensified reaction to the bourgeois modes of society and economic practices. As the output of her attachment to the modernism, many of its issues are percolated in her philosophy, and writings. Daily Telegraph writes, *'It is rare to find a book that so effectively cuts through the clothes of nationality, caste and religion to reveal the bare bones of humanity.'*³

In the post colonial literature terms like displacement, marginality and multiculturalism are valued, favored and mostly referred. As Arundhati has grown up in the multicultural environment therefore she has developed her themes which are suitable to incorporate her childhood memories. J. P. Tripathi in an article *The God of Small Things: Behind the Veneer of Popularity- The Ephemeral and the Eternal Says*:

*"An admirable aspect of the novel is the continuous exposure of the social, political, racial, religious and Christian hypocrisies."*⁴

The God of Small Things opens abruptly with the fascinating description of Ayemenem, its surroundings and monsoon rain. It opens with Rahel's re-returning to Ayemenem to see her twin brother Estha. The real opening of the novel, a reader can trace, with scene where Ammu accompanying her parents to Ayemenem after her father's retirement from government job; who was an Imperial Entomologist under the British rule and after Independence as a Joint Director of Entomology. He was ill-tempered man and his wife, Mammachi, was submissive, mute and down to earth woman. Her submissiveness leads her to suffer at the hands of her husband. She starts a pickle making business as *'Paradise Pickles and Preserves'* after her husband's retirement.

We learn from the narrative that Ammu's education is also abruptly stopped by her parents whereas her brother has sent to Oxford for higher studies. Her father insists her to learn household duties, rather than college education, which would make her marriage easier. Arundhati Roy describes, *'Pappachi insisted that a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl, so Ammu had no choice but to leave Delhi and move with them.'*⁵ As a result of this she dislikes staying with her parents, and finally convinces them to let her spend a summer with a distant aunt in Calcutta. Just to avoid her returning to Ayemenem, Ammu marries a Bengali-Hindu man who works in a tea estate. Both the children of Pappachi and Mammachi get married and divorced without their parents concern. Ammu later discovers her husband, Baba to be heavy alcoholic, who even starts physically abusing her. In one of the incidents, we learn that he even asks her to satisfy his boss, Mr. Hollick's lust to save his job. Mr. Hollick's temperament has portrayed through the conversation between him and Baba, *"You're a very*

lucky man, you know, wonderful family, beautiful children, such an attractive wife ... An extremely attractive wife..."⁶ He also suggests him to send Ammu to look after him.

All the incidents in the novel are seen through the eyes of the twins. They describe that Ammu's humiliation increases day-by-day when she divorces Baba and come to live with her parents in the Ayemenem house. She becomes an intruder because nobody in the family welcomes her and the children but on the other hand Chacko, the son of the family has been welcomed very warmly; though both of them share a common pain of divorce. Ammu's children are considered as doomed, fatherless waifs; because they were Half- Hindu, hybrids who, according to Baby Kochamma, have no self-respect and Syrian Christians would never marry them. The birth of dizygotic twins, Estha and Rahel and Sophie Mol's death become significant incidents in the novel. These incidents play role of catalyst agents and make everyone suffer in the course of life. Worst were the conditions for Paravans in the society, Roy describes the conditions of Paravan, '*Pappachi would not allow Paravans into the house. Nobody would. They were not allowed to touch anything that Touchables touched.*'⁷ she also describes, '*Mammachi told Estha and Rahel that she 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*'.⁸

The caste and religion has significant importance in social-cultural practices in India. Therefore, the inter-caste marriages rarely happen in the societies. Though, most of thinkers accept that nowadays conditions are more moderated with the help of law and order, but people don't prefer inter-caste marriages. If anybody takes this bold step be castrated and humiliated; sometimes even killed under the sophisticated title of '*Honour Killing*'. Many artistic creations reveal the truth and hypocrisy in the society. Even, recently released movie, *Sairat* boldly projects the issues of love and inter-caste marriages. The narrative of *The God of Small Things* describes that Ammu has married a Hindu man and later divorced him when find him alcoholic. Later, she willingly breaks the so called sacred laws of love and sex while sleeping with Paravan, Velutha. Readers can view this as a rebel against denial of her rights and the practices of love making in the society. She challenges all the traditional laws. Roy describes the love laws;

*'the Love Laws ... The laws that lay down who should be loved, and how.
And how much.
However, for practical purposes, in a hopelessly practical world...*'⁹

On the one hand Ammu's inter-caste marriage and divorce is condemned by the Ayemenam family members and on the other hand Chacko's love marriage and his divorce with Margaret have not given much significance. Even Chacko's daughter Sophie Mol receives heartfelt welcome from the family. After divorce Chacko returns to India and starts working as a lecturer at the Madras Christian College. The death of Pappachi provides him full access to the parental assets. He returns to Ayemenem and takes over his mother's business of pickle, *Paradise Pickles and Preserves*. Most of the events denote that when a woman becomes a widow

or a divorcee she loses every power in her life once she loses her husband's protection. Chacko takes over the business as if a widowed woman, Mammachi could not run a business independently by herself. Even, Mammachi has tolerated Chacko's libertine relationships with the beautiful women workers in the factory. She has accepted his masculine authorities by calling it as 'man's needs'. She describes it as:

'He can't help having a Man's Needs'.¹⁰

Neither Mammachi nor anybody in the family seems ready to consider Ammu's needs and comforts. Even nobody cares of her children, their education and development. On the other hand everyone tries to fulfill all the needs of Chacko, Margaret and Sophie. In Indian societies it is accepted since ages that the males in the family heir the wealth and property. Ammu is also a separatee and needs to be considered as an individual with her female instincts. Male and female have their dreams and desires, sometimes, emotional and sometimes even sexual. The individuals need to be accepted with whatever they are. The western philosophy denotes equality and justice for all. Therefore, Chacko as an anglophile enjoys his freedom but he seems not ready to accept Ammu's presence in the family. Even female characters like Mammachi and Baby Kochamma try to suppress and humiliate Ammu for Chacko's betterment. It seems that Ammu and Velutha are claiming the equality and freedom for them. Though, nowadays Indian constitution has provided the rights to women to claim parental property, but Ammu considers freedom and equality is worth. Some provisions are made by government and the constitution for the upliftment of the dalits and downtrodden.

Margaret and Chacko enjoy their freedom wherever they go. Margaret, after divorcing Chacko, remarries Joe to fulfill her desires. Even, after her second marriage she keeps herself in touch with her first husband, Chacko. She visits India after the accidental death of her second husband to find some solace in the company of her first husband. Both, Ammu and Margaret share the common pain of divorcee but Ammu enjoys little freedom than Margaret due to their cultural and philosophical differences. Even inspector Mathew's behavior toward Ammu projects the realistic status of widows and divorcees in the Indian society. Their morality is always questioned by everyone. Arundhati Roy describes police inspector's behavior:

He stared at Ammu's breasts as he spoke. He said the police knew all they needed to know and that the Kottayam Police didn't take statements from veshyas or their illegitimate children. Ammu said she'd see about that. Inspector Thomas Mathew came around his desk and approached Ammu with his baton.¹¹

The God of Small Things is a novel of desires. We learn from the narrative that every character in the novel longs for something. The prime concern is for love. Chacko has desires for Margaret whereas Ammu is deeply fallen in love with Velutha. Novami, Pappachi's sister, known as Baby Kochamma; lives in the Ayemenem house, had fallen in love with Father Mulligan, a young Irish priest, who came to study Hindu scriptures. Her love for him remained

the never fulfilling desire for her. The inter-caste and inter-cultural love affairs and marriages is one of the most fascinating issues in *The God of Small Things*.

It seems that most of the characters who have cross cultural, inter-caste love affairs realize and accept the social norms of whom to love and how much. But, Ammu is rebellious who don't want to suppress her feelings for Velutha and sleeps with him. Baby, is shown in the novel, gets delighted in the misfortune of others. She manipulates love affair of Ammu and Velutha. She even convinces twins to put charges of Sophie's murder on Velutha. This mind game brings calamity down upon Ammu, Velutha and her twins. She is the only person whom we held responsible for the worst conditions subalterns in novel, including; Velutha, Ammu, Velan, and the twins. She is also responsible for the death of Velutha, who has beaten up by the police for kidnapping and murdering Sophie Mol.

The God of Small Things is a predicament of untouchables and subalterns in southern Indian society. Velutha is a representative of an untouchable, a dalit or suppressed, who is gifted with carpentry and mechanic skills. He seems beneficial for Ayemenem house and *Pickles and Preservers* factory. In spite of his skills, he has unfortunately been paid less than touchable carpenters in the factory but fortunately more than untouchable workers. He is the only character from the dalit community depicted in the novel who has sense of equality and self- respect. All the untouchables in the factory including Velutha have been discriminated by Mammachi.

Love is most significant issues in *The God of Small Things*. Velutha is beaten up by the police inspector to death for (no reasons) having love affair with Ammu. Ammu dies in the desires of love. Baby Kochamma remains bachelor for life time for not finding desired love. The twins break up into the pieces after many shocks like the divorce of their parents, ignorance of the family, Sophie's death, Velutha's death and separation from life. Velutha feels that the twins' company and Ammu's attraction for him can bring some respect for him in the society but finally the socio-cultural ills lead him to death.

Conclusion:

To conclude, we find that Arundhati has a deep concern for 'small things'. The small things mean the victims of socio-political, economic and cultural practices. She confirms small things as women, dalits and children who are placed in the position of second sex. Women are considered the private property and always taken them for granted. The defenseless children always suffer a lot to the servitude. Dalits and downtrodden workers are exploited and abused at the hands of masters and powerful people. Therefore, in *The God of Small Things* Arundhati Roy has raised the voice of all these voiceless to reconstruct their social-cultural status.

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