

REPRESENTATION OF SUBALTERNITY IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

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Abstract: Arundhati Roy (born November 24, 1961, Shillong, Meghalaya, India) an Indian author and political activist, is best known for her Booker award-winning novel *The God of Small Things* (1997) and for her involvement in environmental and human rights issues. The novel composed in an unconventional plot, using multiple techniques and a lyrical language for dealing with subaltern issues, Roy's novel won the 1997 Man Booker Prize for Fiction and became the bestselling book. The present paper seeks to explore the subalternization of women and the Untouchables in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997). It highlights the subordinated, marginalized condition of a person due to their belonging to the periphery of society. The maltreatment of the subaltern is the major issue. The novel depicts the condition of the untouchables and women in India, especially in Kerala. In Kerala, untouchability is prevalent more than elsewhere in India, and is not restricted to Hindus only, but Christians practice these rules and customs also. The paper will explore the theme of the subalternization of women and the Untouchables by analyzing three main female characters in the novel: Mammachi, Ammu, and Rahel and male character Velutha, an Untouchable in the lingering caste system of India.

Keywords: Subaltern, Untouchable, Caste system.

INTRODUCTION

Arundhati Roy (born November 24, 1961, Shillong, Meghalaya, India), an Indian author and political activist, is best known for her Booker award-winning novel *The God of Small Things* (1997) and her interest in environmental and human rights issues. The book composed in an unconventional plot, using multiple techniques and a lyrical language for dealing with subaltern issues, Roy's novel won the 1997 Man Booker Prize for Fiction and became the bestselling book.

Roy's subsequent literary output primarily consisted of politically oriented nonfiction, much of which aimed at addressing the problems faced by India in the age of growing global capitalism. Among her publications are *Power Politics* (2001), *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (2002), *War Talk* (2003), *Public Power in the Age of Empire* (2004), *Field Notes on Democracy: Listening to Grasshoppers* (2009), *Broken Republic: Three Essays* (2011), and *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* (2014) *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017).

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Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* deals with various issues related to subalternity. The concept of subalternity has invaded in Indian society in the form of male subjugation, patriarchy, gender discrimination, colonial legacy, class conflicts, political hegemony, and economic discrepancy. The novel attempts to deal with this issue of subalternity and deals with the theme of ever dominating and the ever-present caste system in the Indian socio-cultural order and its damaging effects on the people who are born in the lower caste. Another concern is the unbridgeable gap between the poor and the rich or privileged and deprived people of India. The novelist is concerned with the caste and class conflicts in the socio-economic and political life of Indians. The novel also highlights the gender discrimination prevalent in Indian society.

The present paper mainly explores the subalternization of women and the oppressed or untouchables in *The God of Small Things* (1997). It highlights subordinated, marginalized condition of a person due to his/her belonging to the periphery of the society. The maltreatment of the subaltern is the major issue.

CONCEPT OF SUBALTERN

Antonio Gramsci first used the term subaltern in his essay 'On the Margins of History'. It was associated with those groups in a society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes. Subaltern classes may include the people who are denied access to hegemonic power. Under this category come people like farmers, workers, women, etc.

The history of these groups was initially studied by subaltern studies group and their study is grouped under the term Subaltern Studies. The formation of Subaltern Studies Group (SSG) is not a sudden or an abrupt phenomenon. Ranajit Guha started this group in 1982 when a collective of South Asian scholars in Britain, especially Partha Chatterjee and Dipesh Chakrabarty, initiated the publication of a book titled *Subaltern Studies*. The most prominent scholars of the subaltern studies are Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Gyan Pandey, Edward Said, Gautam Bhadra, David Hardiman, Shahid Amin, Sudipta Kaviraj and a few others.

SUBALTERNITY IN THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

In her novel, Roy criticizes the traditional values of the caste-ridden, gender-biased Keralite community. Arundhati Roy presents three generations of women to bring to light the double marginalization of the Indian women, on the one hand, by her own native culture and, on the other, by patriarchy. The first generation of women, Mammachi and Baby Kochamma, are committed to their subordinate existence and silently advocate the sovereignty of men. The second generation, represented by Ammu and Margaret Kochamma, rebels against the socio-cultural codes of their society. They go beyond the limits of sexual codes imposed by patriarchal norms. Between the two, Ammu pays a high price for their disagreement and defiance. Rahel, the representative of today's generation, inherits the rebellious attitude of her mother Ammu and lives the life of a rebel and a non-conformist who is free from inhibitions and oppression. Far from being traditional, she is a violator. She is guilty of incest, which is not accepted even in today's society. The male-dominated society strongly borders these characters. In *The God of Small Things*,

Roy shows resistance to gender oppression, class oppression, caste, and inciting anti-colonial thought and action. The present work examines the subalteration of four characters, namely Mammachi, Ammu, Rahel and Velutha.

Mammachi

Mammachi is representative of the old generation of women and is an example of suppression and sacrificing life. She is the mother of Ammu and Chacko. She has faced brutal marginalization. The man responsible for the marginalization of Mammachi is none other than her husband, Pappachi. She meets her husband's brutality throughout her life. He used to beat her every night with a brass vase. Mammachi's exceptional talent for music, especially the violin, arouses jealousy in the mind of her husband. Her husband's jealousy peaked when the violin trainer made the mistake of telling her husband that his wife was exceptionally talented. Later one night, he breaks the violin and throws it into the river. A few words of praise from the music teacher provoked him to put an end to her lessons abruptly. Mammachi's pickle-making job earned Pappachi's frantic frowns instead of favour. He was greatly offended at the attention she gets in society for her skills in it. Far from assisting her in pickle making activity, he beats her black and blue; Pappachi refuses to help her on the pretext that pickle-making is not "a suitable job for the high-ranking ex-Government official." Thus the marriage of Mammachi to the sadist Pappachi lacks love, understanding, and co-operation.

Mammach, who has been a victim of injustice and has endured her husband's abusive attitude, ignores Chacko's sexual exploitation of female workers in the factory and thus perpetrates the injustice. "Touchable" Men have no aversion to "touching" Untouchable women, just as white men in racist, segregated countries forced themselves on black women, leaving them with litters of bastard children who were considered "Coloured" in their turn. Even the children are not spared. There would be two flasks of water, boiled water for Margaret Kochamma and Sophie Mol and tap water for everybody else. This results in her marginalization.

Ammu

Ammu is the second important women character in the novel, who emerges as a much-marginalized character in the novel. She is marginalized in the hands of men as well as women. She is a female protagonist of the novel and comes from rich family of Pappachi and Mammachi. We expect her upbringing to be full of care and love, but in reality she shocks the readers. Ammu received no affection and love from her parents. Her family belonged to the upper caste and desired that their daughter married someone from a family like theirs but Ammu marries a Bengali. Soon after marriage, Ammu faced the same net of male exploitation. Her alcoholic husband tortures her harasses her mentally and physically. Ammu's physical exploitation by her husband indicates the typical Indian male's assumption of superiority over women. The use of Ammu as a commodity and continuous physical abuse inflicted upon her by her husband forces Ammu to desert him, although not before giving birth to fraternal twins Esthappen (Estha), a boy and Rahel a girl. Ammu retreats with her children to the family estate, doomed to live a miserable life

as an outcast. Marriage for Ammu has been a horrible experience; her husband is the reason for her physical and psychological suffering. Thus marriage institution becomes the reason for further marginalization of Ammu.

Even though Ammu raises Estha and Rahel to be brilliant children, the rest of the family resents their presence at home in Ayemenem. The new head of the family is her brother Chacko, a former Rhodes Scholar and current member of the communist party. While Chacko tolerates the family, Ammu's aunt Baby Kochamma is very harsh and abusive at Ammu and her children for the rest of her life. Baby Kochamma desires to make all those around her miserable, especially her divorced niece Ammu and her two children. The marginalization of Ammu is a result of the traditional patriarchal family structure, where the female child is always unwelcome and treated as a burden on the family. After completion of her schooling, Ammu's brother is sent to Oxford University for higher education, and she is not allowed to get further education. Pappachi is a typical orthodox Christian patriarch who believes that education for a girl is of no use. His conservative outlook does not allow Ammu to attain higher education. This dual nature of her parents is a prime factor responsible for her marginalization. She is deliberately robbed of higher education, which is the only bright spot in her future life. Her father remains a barrier between her freedom and future progress. In spite of all these sufferings, she loves and cares for her innocent children. She plans for their future, their education, and the perfection of their manners. She is the mother and father of both. The gradual detachment from the Ayemenem house accelerates her connection with Velutha, the untouchable factory worker. When her relationship with Velutha is discovered, Ammu is locked in her room, and Velutha is banished. Ammu is first dismissed as a woman and then as a widow, because of her caste-breaking affair with Velutha. Chacko throws Ammu out of their family house:

“Get out of my house before I break every bone in your body!”

My house. My pineapples. My pickles. (GOST.225)

At the end of the novel, Ammu is exiled from home by her family members. She is separated from her children and not allowed to visit Ayemenem. She desperately tries to seek a good job in unknown places but finally defeated; she is found dead in a dingy room in Bharat Lodge in Alleppey. Her humiliation does not end even after death; The church refused to bury Ammu. Eventually, she is cremated in an electric crematorium where only beggars, decayed people, and police custody are cremated. Throughout Ammu's life, she is severely marginalized by social institutions like family, marriage, religion, and police. We also observe that for her marginalization, not only are men responsible, but women like Mammachi and Baby Kochamma have an equal share. Ammu had been humiliated by her father, beaten and betrayed by her husband, insulted by the police and rendered destitute by her brother. Each of them jointly echoed the male chauvinism and patriarchal structure, which left her nowhere as daughter, wife, sister, and citizen.

Rahel

The third marginal woman character in the novel is Rahel. She is a less minimal character in comparison with her mother and grandmother. She never faces domestic violence as Mammachi and Ammu had faced. Still, she is treated

as a marginalized character because of being a daughter of neglected Ammu. Like Ammu, she bears the brunt of patriarchal domination and psychological torture. She develops a sense of isolation, suffocation, and frigidity in a conservative framework. In other words, the brutality and persecution Ammu and Velutha underwent is also operative against this girl. She, along with her brother Estha, is always treated by the family as outsiders. Neglected both at home and outside, she becomes the object of sufferance and pity, contempt, and hatred. She feels like a fish out of water in the Ayemenem House. She was found breaching a sense of social propriety and decorum and thus blacklisted. She was expelled three times from school. Nevertheless, she continued her wayward and defiant way of living. It is because she is totally neglected by her family, she daughter of divorcee - mother one can easily observe that she is a product of broken home and faces marginalization and its tormenting effects throughout her life. She, too, experienced humiliation and insult in childhood, as her mother witnessed. Her life was deserted and disturbed because of the tormenting memories of the past. For her marginalization, memories associated with her mother plays a key role.

Velutha

Velutha is the representative of the untouchable in the novel. He has a black complexion. His father, Vellya Paapen, was a toddy tapper. They were only allowed to deliver the coconuts from the trees from the back entrance of the Ayemenem house. Mammachi liked him very much, but with a certain distance because he was untouchable. Even though Velutha was untouchable, Mammachi used his ability to make different things and paid him less than the other touchable carpenter. Despite his craft skills, caste themes paved the way for his downfall. The secret love between Ammu and Velutha lasts thirteen days before Velutha's father, Vellya Paapen, reports to Mammachi about it. When the affair was exposed, the police arrested Velutha and brutally tortured and killed him in the event of a rape case without being given the opportunity to open his mouth and speak out about what happened.

To conclude, Roy's women characters in the novel are exploited. They are torn between their individuality and social obligations. Ammu sacrifices her life in her quest for identity. The sufferings of Ammu's mother and her daughter are the major concerns. There exhibits a strong contrast wherein Mammachi accepts domestic violence as her fate while Ammu dares to tread a path where she can have an identity of her own. The novel deals with the struggle within the self, the murky and melancholic moods of men and women. The novelist fathoms the depths of human psyche against the chaotic social backdrop. The novel voices the hidden and suppressed emotions of subalterns. It is an encapturing vista of Indian social life. It also depicts the unremitting struggle of women and untouchables for inscribing their identity in this cruel, conservative and male-dominating society.

The novel problematizes the oppressive machinery based on caste-discrimination and collusion with it of certain political forces. As a research scholar, C.P. Shafeeq rightly states: Arundhati Roy's Booker Prize winner *The God of Small Things* is a bildungsroman novel that gives an account of the childhood experiences of the fraternal twins and the people around them. The novel unfolds a series of small things that change the lives of people. Though much of the story is told from the viewpoint of the seven-year old children, the titular protagonist of the novel, Velutha, is an 'untouchable' or 'the god of small things'. Through the novel, Roy depicts the social disillusionment of the lower

caste people in the South Indian State, Kerala. Despite being legitimate members of a secular democracy built upon the values of freedom, equality, and justice, the plight of the 'untouchables' remain the same in a hostile post-colonial society. (2014: 33)

In fact, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is an outstanding piece of art which sketches the life of women of three successive generations, highlighting their likes, dislikes, sufferings, plights, pains, agony, and the wrongs done to them either by family members or by social forces. The novel sets some directions for social reformation to minimize the gap between the rich and the poor, touchable and untouchable, men and women, and to mitigate the misunderstanding between the individual and the institution. In her novel, Roy has urged for the revival of radical women, their urges, needs, and survival tactics in view of their own social conditions. She has portrayed the endless tale of Indian women who are struggling to liberate themselves from the clutches of the patriarchal society of India.

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