

*The God of Small Things: The Predicament of Untouchables and
Subalterns in South Indian Society*

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The God of Small Things, a contemporary Indian Classic by Arundhati Roy is an analysis of the nature of subalternization and its repercussion on the individual and on society as well. The present fictional work is chiefly an interpretation of political misuse, personal relationships, caste and class conflicts, distressing experience of family dispute, broken faith, love, marriage, loss of identity, and marginalization of women as a result of foolish male dominance. K M Pandey remarks:

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. (47)

The God of Small Things talks about the subalterns and their adjustment in society where untouchability is seen as a stigma. The novel strikingly outlines their plight in India, especially in Kerala. It shows how they are being dehumanized by the overriding hegemonic ideology. Roy's novel places the focus on two kinds of subalternity: one is the 'gendered subalternity' that is embodied by Ammu, mainly and the other is the 'social subalternity' signified by the untouchable, Velutha. The novel is a spectacular description of the social reality of India where subalterns especially female and untouchables are destined to a marginalized and compressed life of mortification and torment. The term 'subaltern' was popularized by Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist in the 1920s and 1930s as a substitute for the term "proletarian class" in order to counter fascism. In India the Subaltern Studies Collective Writing projected the term in 1982 on Southern Asian History and Society from a 'subaltern perspective.'

The novel brings out an interesting fact where big man is seen as a representation of 'Laltain' and small man as the 'Mombatti', which in an artistic style stands, as a symbol of their subalternity. Ammu and Velutha represent the Mombatti whereas those resisting their love affair represent the laltain. The rest of the characters- Kochamma, Mammachi, Chacko, Estha, Rahel, Vellya, and inspector

Mathew are caught up in a web of actions and reactions in their daily affairs with one another and with the external world.

Positioned in the Southern Indian state of Kerala the plot of the novel revolves around a forbidden relationship between a Syrian Christian divorcee, Ammu and a low caste carpenter, Velutha. The novel also talks about Ammu's twins called Estha and Rahel, about the inter-caste affair, and the subsequent thrashing and killing of Velutha by the police of Ayemenem, a village in Kerala. The novel also speaks in length about caste conversion of a number of people, which includes Velutha's grandfather Kelan, and their becoming Christians in the hope of coming out of the curse of untouchability. The main reason for conversion was to get some food, money and in some cases even a job. Despite this conversion their problems did not terminate and they continued to occupy the lower rank in the society.

The novelist also highlights the ill treatment meted out to Ammu by her parents. Her education is abruptly stopped whereas her brother is sent to Oxford for higher studies. 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 she started hating her parents and moved to Calcutta with her distant aunt and marries a Bengali-Hindu man who worked in a tea-estate. But later on divorced him without the concern of her parents. In one of the incidents her husband even forces her to satisfy his boss, Mr. Hollick's lust in order to save his job. In a male chauvinistic social set-up, women are often seen as vulnerable. The dominant patriarchal ideology suppresses them and frames some discriminatory 'laws' for them. Spivak comments:

It is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow.... (28)

After divorce, Ammu along with her twins comes to live with her parents in the Ayemenem house where nobody welcomes her whereas her brother Chacko, the son of the family is welcomed with open arms, though both of them are suffering from a common grief of divorce. Ammu's children are also seen as hopeless, hybrids, and cursed. There are various events that denote that when a woman becomes a widow or divorcee she loses all powers in her life. Chacko takes over his widowed mother's

business of pickles, Paradise Pickles and Preserves as if she cannot run the business on her own. Amitabh Roy asserts that being, 'marginalized by her son in old age and facing an economically disadvantaged position, Mammachi is a subaltern in more than one way' (38). Even inspector Mathew's behaviour towards Ammu brings out the reality of the status of widows and divorcees in the Indian society. Their character is always under question as described well by the novelist:

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. (281)

According to the novelist, worst were the conditions for Paravans in the society. She mentions that, 'Pappachi would not allow Paravans into the house. Nobody would. They were not allowed to touch anything that touchable touched' (7). Roy also explains that:

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...Paravans 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. (73-74)

Despite Velutha being more skilled than rest of the workers in the factory, he is still paid less by Ammu's brother, Chacko. He is exploited on the grounds of his being an untouchable. In post-independent Indian society untouchables have come to be seen as a subaltern race. Inspector Mathew and comrade Pillai who calls himself as the campaigner of the oppressed, lodges a false FIR against Velutha along with clever Baby Kochamma, merely on the ground that all of them are touchable whereas Velutha is untouchable. On learning about the illicit relation of Ammu and Velutha, Chacko threatened her to oust her from the home and to break all her bones. According to, Syrian upper class Christians the untouchables Velutha and Velaya pappans are not human beings, they are seen only as deprived creatures. When

Velutha went to Mammachi to beg innocence against the fake charge of murder and kidnapping. Mammachi's treatment of him was nothing less than the subaltern other in a colonized society. She spat on Velutha and abused him by saying:

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!...Mammachi spat on Velutha's face. Thick spit. It splattered across his skins. His mouth and eyes. He just stood there. Stunned. (284)

Roy is very critical of the indifferent and prejudiced attitude of the society towards untouchables and women. Her work affirms Spivak's theory of subalternization that subaltern cannot speak and is hence spoken for. Ammu suffers a lot because of her secret relationship with Velutha. She is seen as a subaltern in terms of being rootless economically, and also in a sense of family, and culture. Her affair ruined Estha-Rahel's childhood also. Estha is sent back to his father, Ammu dies and Rahel remains alone in Ayemenem. This way the twins face the ordeal of separation. Baby Kochamma disliked Ammu's twins and always-favoured Chacko's half-British daughter Sophie Mol. Even Chacko, who ruled Ayemenem house, was a subaltern when he stayed in England. Margret's parents did not support their marriage because of his Indian origin.

The God of Small Things shows how Ammu, her twins and Velutha were made to suffer because of their smallness. They all were outcasts in their own domicile. Ammu suffered because she was a woman who tried to cross the limitations set by the society, the twins suffered because they were crossbreeds and fatherless and Velutha suffered because he was an untouchable. The novel is a good example of this societal and male imperialism. It showcases the common behaviour of a society that how it makes a constant endeavor to keep its imperial rule undamaged over the weak ones. Roy has successfully portrayed a gloomy picture of the South Indian society and expresses her disappointment with the social set up of the post-colonial India which still controls an individual's life.