

Breaking Social Laws: A Critical Study Of Arundhati Roy's God Of Small Things

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ABSTRACT: *This article sheds light on multifaceted discrimination and exploitation encountered by minority marginalized groups owing to social laws and norms prevalent in post colonial state of Kerala, India, in light of Arundhati Roy's God of Small Things. These so called social laws not only strengthen the bonds of subordination and discrimination against women, subalterns and other downtrodden sectors in the Society but restrict them from enjoyment of their individual, economic as well as social rights and leave them to more vulnerable position. If one transgresses those strictly stipulated laws, codes and norms, he/she will be made stumbled, sometimes will be led even to tragic death. Those in power within social hierarchies subject the transcending individuals, sometimes called as dissidents, to most cruel and inhuman punishments. The central character in the Novel, Ammu and her lover Velutha show extreme kind of audacity and boldness to challenge these existing social laws and age old taboos and go to claim their individual choices and freedom and eventually end up in having their family shattered, children traumatized for the rest of their lives and finally bringing in their own decay and death.*

Keywords: *The God of Small Things, Transgression, Forbidden Love, Postcoloniality, Patriarchy, subaltern etc.*

Introduction:

Arundhati Roy is one of the most prominent Indian English Writers. Born in Shillong, Assam on 24th November, 1961, Roy gained education at Corpus Christi School at Kottayam, followed by Lawrence School in Tamil Nadu. Then she became Architect in Delhi.

Roy's debut novel, God of Small Things, is a vivid exploration of Indian history and politics, profoundly rooted and firmly entrenched caste system and its relations, forbidden love, its aftermath and cultural tensions, social discrimination and misogyny, women's marginalization and subordination, betrayal etc. The plot is revealed in a fragmentary manner, jumping back and forth between scenes in 1969 and 1993, with its back story scattered throughout. The story is about wealthy, land-owning, Syrian Christian Ipe family of Ayemenem, a town in Kerala, India. Most of the plot occurs in 1969, focusing on the seven-year-old twins Estha and Rahel, who live with their mother Ammu, their grandmother Mammachi, their uncle Chacko, and their great aunt Baby Kochamma. They have close relation with Velutha, an untouchable man working in their factory.

The protagonist of the Novel, Ammu, is relentlessly oppressed and inhumanly discriminated by most of her family members at Ayemenem House. This led her to go against conventions and social laws. After her father Pappachi retires as an "imperial Entomologist" under British Government in Delhi, the family settles down in their ancestral home at Ayemenem. Ammu had been deprived of the right of further higher education because "*Pappachi [her father] insisted that college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl*"⁶. She could not have other goals or ambition in her life "*other than to wait for marriage proposals while she helped her mother with the house work*"⁷. She got suffocated at Ayemenem House, having witnessed the patriarchal oppression by her dad. Her mother Mammachi too suffered from male chauvinistic prejudices and animosity. No social code didn't protect her from an entire lifetime of abuse, confinement and mental and physical persecution by her father. At times he was beating her mother with a brass vase and showing all kinds of cruelty against her. Mammachi never responded to him and accepted all torture with mute obedience.

Ammu, being audacious and independent, fled to Calcutta, seeking refuge from this hellish atmosphere, on the pretext of visiting her distant Aunt. There she for the first time transgressed the existing social code of marriage established thousands of years ago, and married a Bengali Hindu. Marriage didn't bring change to her abysmal situation. Her husband was always inebriated and at times his alcoholism made her suffer than ever before. He became even ready to present Ammu to his English boss Hollick to "be looked after". He had also violent tendencies – "*he lunged at her, grabbed her hair, and punched her*"⁸, and treated her like an object. So, unlike her "bitter, long suffering" mother who tolerates all of patriarchal prejudices and atrocities from her husband Pappachi, Ammu resolved to abandon her husband Baba "*when his bouts of violence begin to include the children*"⁹ and return with two kids, Estha and Rahel, and no dreams to Ayemenem, where she was least welcomed.

Ammu rebelled against the system of marrying from same religion/class and went ahead to marry a Hindu. She disagreed with stiff social structure and marital codes that rather seemed to be a disciplinary institution, as Michel Foucault would have called it, working towards silencing and controlling the one who stands apart, as if a lunatic/non-conformist who needs to be imprisoned/reasoned. When Ammu saw that her marital union is not what she anticipated, she dared to cut it through, while her female relatives seem to abide by the rules of a system that has extremely repressed them. She fought against a world that, as we shall see still now, waves green flag to men's carnal bliss but repudiates similar female longings. After having returned from Calcutta to Ayemenem, Ammu was devastated to see the gender discrimination towards her. Her brother Chacko was allowed to enjoy all sorts of considerations. He was given oxford education. He has right to choose his spouse and marry a lady of his own choice and class, while Ammu, his sibling, is denied of the same right. Even Baby Kochamma is allowed to study further, even after her traumatic love affair with Father Mulligen. A world of difference lay before individuals with apparently no specific reason. Son and daughter under same roof are given different treatment. Both Ammu and Chacko return to their ancestral home after failed marriages. Chacko, while being in Britain, married an English lady named Margaret who divorced him and went to another man, Joe.

Heart broken, he left to India. He is warmly welcomed and Ammu is considered a liability. Even Pappachi doesn't believe Ammu's statement of an English man's molestation. Ammu's marriage with Hindu man is considered filthy while Chacko's marriage to an unethnical Margaret is glorified. Her marriage and children are humiliated while Chacko, his wife and daughter Sophie Mol are appreciated in all means. *"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"*¹⁰. Baby Kochamma, Ammu's aunt, who is desperate due to her unrequited love to Father Mulligen always resented Ammu. She wanted Ammu to accept a pathetic fate of a wretched loveless life like her, which Ammu altogether dissented. As per Baby Kochamma, a divorced daughter had no position anywhere at all. Ammu's mother Mammachi too, instead of fighting for her rights and dues, accepted everything, in contrast of Ammu who always quarreled with her destiny and never wanted to give in. Furthermore, Mammachi refused to have sympathy on Ammu's miseries while she appeared to be soft with and allowed Chacko to have all enjoyment of life.

The hypocritical gender norms that shape the Indian mindset are highlighted in juxtaposition of contrasting treatment towards Ammu and her brother, Chacko. This imbalance and bias in stance towards two people of same kind, gets epitomized when Chacko announces 'what's yours is mine, what's mine is also mine.' Chacko has as many affairs as he pleases with the girls working in his factory. His mother understands "his man's needs" and makes things convenient for him by arranging a special entrance for the girls and even paying them off. On the contrary, Ammu's marriage and offsprings are looked upon as impure due to her union out of class. Her woman's needs are left unrecognized. One can note here that the ethical code is twisted according to convenience and the elaborate falsehood are balanced by hypocrite elder generation in a cultured and polished form.

Altogether Ammu is nearing an "Unsafe Edge". She has nothing to lose now. She decides to transgress taboos to satisfy her individual choice. *"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"*¹¹.

Therefore, she dared to challenge prevailing social rules. She fought with her fate and tradition passed to her by birth. She entered into illicit relation with untouchable Velutha, paravan carpenter working at Mammachi's factory. She didn't want a dreadful monotony of disgraced man-less woman. Ammu's resolution to fend for herself and escape the binds of gender repression is more evident in her decision to raise Estha and Rahel single-handedly. In a way, her insistence on asserting herself as a single mother accounts for the strict code of behaviour she imposes on her children. For instance, she grows furious when Estha does not introduce himself adequately to Sophie Mol, harbouring *"A Far More Angry Than Necessary feeling"*¹². Her determination to prove herself while also ensuring that Estha and Rahel feel loved, is eloquently displayed when she later talks to them. *"Everybody says that children need a Baba. And I say no. Not my children. Do you know why?" Two heads nodded. "Why. Tell me, Ammu said. [...] "Because you are our Ammu and our Baba and you love us Double". "More than Double,"*¹³ Ammu said.

Velutha is too always at odds with societal rules and codes. He is shackled in the chains of sordid castism ingrained in the Society. He is never allowed to even think out of that box drawn around him. He is a good carpenter, head strong and well educated too. All these are small things as they still didn't help him to change his class. Whatever he does, he is still considered a Paravan. He is accepted by Ipes only as long as he is useful. Of him, everything was small. He is God of small things. He can't have big dreams. He is restricted from going beyond the boundary, strictly bricked around him.

He is victim of age old customs of untouchability. Though his ancestors took refuge in Christianity, *"to escape the scourge Untouchability"*¹⁴ in Hinduism, the elite class of Syrian Christians deserted them. *"They were made to have separate churches, with separate services and separate priests"*¹⁵ and it was considered *"a special favour (that) they were given their own separate Pariah Bishop"*¹⁶. To make things worse, they lost their backward caste privileges from Government too after conversion. *"After Independence they found they were not entitled to any Government benefits like job reservations or bank loans at low interest rates, because officially, on paper, there were (only) Christians, and therefore casteless"*¹⁷. So those like Velutha are thrown from frying pan to fire.

Velutha's life is thus filled with discrimination and inferiority as an untouchable. He had to enter by *"the back entrance of the Ayemenem House to deliver the coconuts they had plucked from the trees in the compound"*¹⁸ and was not allowed into the house "Pappachi would not allow Paravans into the house. Nobody would." On top of that, *"They were not allowed to touch anything that Touchables touched"*¹⁹. In his childhood, Velutha could only bring the toys that he had made *"for Ammu, holding them out in his palm (as he had been taught) so she wouldn't have to touch him to take them"*²⁰. His life was waste and of no importance." *"He left no footprints in sand, no ripples in water, no image in mirrors"*²¹. He is a great skilled carpenter. *"He was like a little magician. He could make intricate toys - tiny windmills, rattles, minute jewel boxes"*²². But the system of untouchability prevalent in Society hampered his all potentials that he knew he couldn't proceed in his career and life. Even *"Mammachi (with impenetrable Touchable logic) often said that if only he hadn't been a Paravan, he might become an engineer"*²³. This meant his birth, which considered low in the eyes of elite class while there is no difference in fact between low or high birth, impeded him to move ahead in his life like other human beings.

But Velutha was not ready to surrender. *Under his careful cloak of cheerfulness he housed a living, breathing anger against the smug, ordered world.* He continuously conflicted with philosophy of his father Vellaya Paapen who always insisted on rules of behavior for untouchables. His father feared for his son the way he spoke and did things, his *"lack of hesitation, an unwarranted assurance"*. He was uneasy at the way his son *"held his head. The quiet way he offered suggestion without being asked. Or the quiet way in which he disregarded suggestions without appearing to rebel"*²⁴. Velutha was stubborn and strong. He never approved complete obedience to the prevailing customs and rules in Society that shrunked his ways. His relation with father strained and he vanished from home mysteriously for four years. *"Mammachi rehired Velutha as the factory carpenter and put him in charge of general maintenance. It caused a great deal of resentment among the other Touchable factory workers because, according to them, Paravans were not meant to be*

carpenters. And certainly, prodigal paravan are not meant to be rehired"²⁵. For that, he had to be paid less than a Touchable carpenter. Thus society always enchained him with its ruthless rules.

Social laws didn't open any entrance before him. Nor did it allow him to uprise of his untouchable status, while he believed he has all potential to design his bright future.

All these incidents in his life led him to transgress the boundary and taste the forbidden love. Hence he transcended man made barriers of caste and loved Ammu. They met near the Meenachil river clandestinely in the heart of darkness for innumerable times and exchanged fruits of lust each other which was eventually caught by Velutha's father Vallya Pappan who presented the entire story to Mammachi, thus adding fuel into the fire of miseries that Ammu and Velutha were hitherto undergoing from head to heel.

Society reverted back in various means. Society doesn't leave anybody who transgresses taboos and break its love laws and other well knit norms and codes. It will collect its tolls. Power structures in Society will remake things in order. Politicians and Police and other pillars of powers will ensure downtrodden groups remain feeble, in order to maintain their status. History's henchmen are there everywhere. Six policemen who tortured Velutha at History House are only "history's henchmen" acting out the inevitable. They are not really there only to arrest Velutha, but to prove that the Touchable order of the world is still intact and safe. Societal laws and codes continue to negotiate its terms and will collect its dues from those who break it. Velutha's father himself betrayed him and threw him to death due to this sin, unpardonable to the Society.

Transgression of love laws brought all tragic consequences. It fetched Sophie Mol's death and later death of Velutha at the hands of the cruel police custody. The mother at night and the twins in the day went to see Velutha, whom they are not permitted to love. When the time came, they betrayed Velutha, instead of rescuing him. They bent ironically as per Baby Kochamma's plot. So they are innocently responsible for the brutal murder of Velutha. Estha has to lie to the Police in order to protect his mother going to jail. *"This betrayal has left an immortal wound in his mind Estha "Carried inside him the memory of a young man with an old man's mouth. The memory of a swollen face and a smashed, upside, down smile"*²⁶. Velutha's transcendence of boundaries culminated in his tragic death. Social law or love laws avenged brutally. The cruel treatment is meted out to Velutha as a punishment for his transgression. Ammu was kicked out of Ayemenem house by Chacko and the twins were separated while Estha was returned to his father Baba in Culcutta and Rahel remained in Ayemenem. Ammu has to work for her livelihood and while living in a flat in Alleppey, she lasted her breath in solitude, with none of her kids near to her. Estha never saw Ammu after having left to Culcutta. Rahel and Chacko went to collect Ammu's body which was then refused of a Christian burial by Church and had to be electrically cremated.

The twins, Estha and Rahel, when they are finally joined together after long 23 years of separation at the age of 31, the agony they have endured is so abundant that they transgress the usual limits and they once again smash the 'love-laws'; the very laws that lay down who should be loved, how and how much. Estha discovers the long lost mother in Rahel. He sees in Rahel *"their beautiful mother's mouth"*²⁷.

Roy's novel is thus filled with characters unraveling the shackles of restrictions and limitations. They break the laws that made mandatory by those in power to maintain their supremacy and dominance on powerless and marginalized. They transgress all types of boundaries built by society and break away from taboos and conventions hitherto established.

Conclusion

Arundhati Roy's *God of Small things* is, as stated above, a novel of vivid portrayal of transgressions. As Rahel remarks "*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. The laws that make grandmothers grandmothers, uncles uncles, mothers mothers, cousins cousins, jam jam, and jelly jelly*"²⁸.

Chacko as well as Baby Kochamma too are breaking boundaries but hypocritical attitudes punish Ammu, her lover Velutha and her twins only. Roy's excellent subaltern/women characters resist oppressive and repressive social and political structures. Though they do not succeed in bringing about any tangible change, they could put up a brave fight for realizing their dreams. Their actions exceptionally contributed a lot to the emancipation of different kinds of marginalized groups. Ammu and Velutha transgress societal "love laws" and die as martyrs of love. They are not the Sinners. They are the sinned against. They are the victims, not the perpetrators.

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