

## **Voices from the Margins: Her-Story in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things***

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**Abstract:** Historically, the Indian women have been leading a life of marginalization and oppression, more so because of a complex of other social factors like caste and class. Belonging to a particular caste furthers this marginalization by relegating them to the periphery of already sidelined castes. This marginalization is further complicated within the framework of a marriage that tends to work as the microcosm of the more general macrocosm, the society. This paper seeks to recover these historically repressed voices through a critical analysis of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* where she gives voice to her women characters and highlights the prevalence of caste system in India. The analysis uses the postcolonial feminist perspective to study her representation of the marginalized and oppressed women characters. The three women characters, despite belonging to upper castes, are as marginalized as the one untouchable "man" in the novel. Collectively, they are representative of the subaltern and this paper is interested in studying the agency they display in spite of their marginalized and oppressed status. The oppression and the suppression work at more than this (now) very apparent level, and the paper is concerned with critically analyzing the gender balance that exists within the more intimate relationships, particularly the marital relationships, as well as among the women themselves.

**Keywords:** Marginalisation, oppression, periphery, repressed, subaltern.

### **Introduction**

Historically, the Indian women have been leading a life of marginalization and oppression, more so because of a complex of other social factors like caste and class. Belonging to a particular caste furthers this marginalization by relegating them to the periphery of already sidelined castes. This marginalization is further complicated within the framework of a marriage that tends to work as the microcosm of the more general macrocosm, the society. This paper seeks to recover these historically repressed voices through a critical analysis of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* where she gives voice to her women characters and highlights the prevalence of caste system in India. The analysis uses the postcolonial

feminist perspective to study her representation of the marginalized and oppressed women characters. The three women characters, despite belonging to upper castes, are as marginalized as the one untouchable “man” in the novel. Collectively, they are representative of the subaltern and this paper is interested in studying the agency they display in spite of their marginalized and oppressed status. The oppression and the suppression work at more than this (now) very apparent level, and the paper is concerned with critically analyzing the gender balance that exists within the more intimate relationships, particularly the marital relationships, as well as among women themselves.

Gayatri Spivak argues, “the subaltern has no history and cannot speak” (15). Both as an object of colonialist historiography and as a 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). Simone de Beauvoir’s “humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself” (5) is so true of the world depicted by Arundhati in *The God of Small Things*. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir remarks that a “woman has always been man’s dependent, if not his slave; the two sexes have never shared the world in equality” (20) and comments on the social construction of a woman, “One is not born but rather becomes, a woman” (445). Taking this further, she comments on the condition of married women thus, “marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society” (Beauvoir 425). This similarity across cultures in treatment meted out to women can be seen in Roy’s *The God of Small Things* when compared with Chinua Achebe’s *Things fall Apart*. Despite portraying two different social setups, countries and continents that their respective female characters belong to, they share a common bonding in the form of the oppression inflicted on them by the male members of their families. Achebe does not conceal the negative elements of the Igbo society as being patriarchal in various ways, including wife beatings, infanticide and other taboos, and Roy follows likewise in her portrayal.

The three women characters in the novel, namely, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma and Ammu are moulded by a strictly patriarchal husband and father, and they themselves are always in danger of falling to and following the tenets of that skewed patriarchal mindset. The same goes for the male protagonist, Velutha, an untouchable or *paravan* in the caste system of India, who is as marginalized despite being a man. This study will focus on how these women characters relate to each other, to Velutha and to other men around them, and how

they despite their marginalized status display agency through their actions. The differences in their ways of relating to this untouchable man reveal different aspects of their characters and their lifelong conditioning, having grown up and lived in not only a patriarchal setup but also in a society that has been divided along caste lines.

Although the status of women differs in different cultures, the common feature of almost all has been their attitudes towards women, who have been considered inferior to men, and thus have been, by design, kept away from all centres of power and decision-making. Mostly, they have been restricted to familial roles, as Mary Ann Fergusson so rightly points out that “in every age women have been primarily as mother, wife, mistress, sex object – their roles in relationships to men” (Fergusson 4-5) and Sushila Singh concurs by saying, “woman has not been defined as a subject in her own right but merely as an entity that concerns man either in his life or his fantasy life” (Singh 7). This is the reason why, “[T]he Russian Revolution, the Chinese Revolution ... are nothing. The real revolution is women against men” (Lessing 88). The question that automatically arises is, why women who are a part of half of the humanity are against men? They are not. However, although it looks like they are fighting against men, the reality is that more specifically, they have been and are still fighting against the mindsets and ideologies that are historically grounded in patriarchy, sexual politics, sexism and sexual colonialism.

These ideas regarding women’s subordination can be traced via the history of Western intellectual thought to the two most influential philosophers of the pre-Christian theology, Plato and Aristotle. While the former’s attitude to women was contradictory advocating fair deal for women or assigning them an inferior status, the latter regarded women as “[T]ota mulier in utero” i.e. “woman is womb,” procreation being considered their defining function. Later, according to Rousseau also, the fact that women have the ability to bear children became the reason for their subordinate position in the society. The fact that the females give birth, instead of according them a higher status, became a reason to assign them a subordinate position with respect to men not only with regard to their sexuality but also in all other matters. However, an increasing awareness of the injustices done to women gradually resulted in the feminist movement. The women started raising their voice against this marginalization and have achieved a fair degree of success in their struggle for equal rights. In the Indian context, the dilemma has been more complex. In the contemporary times, women are caught between tradition and modernity, and have to bear the burden of not only a

shackled past but also live up to the aspirations for a free future. The man-woman relationship is struggling to come out of the age-old system of man to rule, woman to obey, and man for the fields and women for the hearth mentality. This is what Roy is also doing via her novel: registering her disgust at male chauvinism, and dissatisfaction with the unfair and oppressive patriarchal system.

The women in the novel are positioned as subalterns as a result of their marginalized and oppressed status in the society. Instead of crying or suffering in isolation, some of them try to bring a change in their own positions and perhaps in the society by means of their small acts of resistance and transgressions. There is a sensitive portrayal of these women characters, and their plight, fears, dilemmas, ambitions and contradictions are all dealt with finesse. However, the more important aim is to provoke, which does happen as these female characters continuously struggle to get out of their confined territories, to interpret their lives with individual freedom, and to bring about a change through resistance which takes shape of transgression in behaviour. They interrogate both the confines of the hierarchically structured gendered roles they are forced to lead and the caste system in implicit and explicit ways and by their small acts of violating the codes of conduct meant specifically for them, try to shatter the patriarchal hegemony and convey a positive vision of womanhood.

### **Analysis**

Narrated by Rahel, the woman protagonist Ammu's daughter, the main events in the novel take place in Ayemenem, a small town in the equatorial South Indian state of Kerala during some weeks in the year 1969. A story of love, loss, betrayal and torrid emotions of inherently flawed characters, it is interesting to see "how [it] represents women, what it says about gender relations, how it defines sexual difference" (Belsey and Moore 1). Roy's women characters live their lives according to the prevalent Hindu customs; something concluded by Susan Wadley and Doranne Jacobson also. These dual views with relation to women that are seen in Hinduism consider a woman both as a benevolent and bestowing creative force, as well as an aggressive destroyer. Despite being a Syrian Christian family located in India (and many a times historically converted from Hinduism), they cannot help being influenced by Hinduism. P. K. Balakrishnan in his study on Kerala history, observes that the Syrian Christians considered themselves as high caste in the caste hierarchy of Kerala as they believed they were the descendants of higher castes or Brahmin converts of St. Thomas, the Apostle of Christ who arrived in Malabar in A. D. 52 (Vishwanathan 13).

The eldest among the three women characters in the novel that this paper deals with is Mammachi (Soshamma Ipe), simply meaning grandmother. She is a Syrian Christian, married to Pappachi (Benaan John Ipe), the grandfather, seventeen years older than her, who regularly physically abuses her. Some of these beatings with a brass vase leave “crescent shaped” scars on her skull. “He beat her constantly for no apparent reason, the beatings weren’t new. What was new was only the frequency with which they took place” (47-48). Her personal accomplishments like proficiency in playing the violin become causes for her husband’s jealousy that is manifested not only in the abuse he subjects her to but also in other acts like breaking that violin. There is obviously a lack of mutual understanding, cooperation and love in Mammachi’s marriage to the sadist Pappachi. She begins a pickle business where he refuses to help her simply because he considers that pickle making is not “a suitable job for high-ranking ex-Government official” (47). Although he is the one who is responsible for her marginalization, it cannot be said that she herself has no role to play in furthering that marginalization, even when it comes to her daughter. Ironically, she is submissive to people who are senior to her, like her husband, but oppressive to her juniors, like Ammu and her children. According to her, being the children of a divorced mother is a fate “far worse than inbreeding” (59). Her starting the pickle business and succeeding in it could be read as one act of defiance in the face of all the abuse that her husband hurls at her.

The second important female character is Baby Kochamma (Navomi Ipe), Mammachi’s sister-in-law. She loves Father Mulligan, an Irish Monk, who is studying Hinduism in India. According to Binayak Roy, “[T]he beautiful, headstrong eighteen-year-old Baby and the young, handsome Irish monk Father Mulligan fall passionately in love. But the ‘Love Laws’ operative from time immemorial, get in their ways” (59). She converts to Roman Catholicism and enters a nunnery in the hope of establishing physical relations with the monk. She was sent to the Rochester University but even then her father selected a course befitting a woman who is supposed to remain within the premises of the house that is a diploma in ornamental gardening. In the end, all her efforts fail, and she starts living in isolation in the Ayemenem house. She is oppressed by her frustrated sexuality as well as the status of a spinster at her brother’s house. She also places herself on a higher position of morality and chastity and believes that people like Ammu who are weak human beings cannot achieve such a position. Uma Chakravarti in this regard says that the concept of *pativrata* or chaste was one of the most successful ideologies constructed by any patriarchal system in which women

themselves controlled their sexuality and believed that they gained power and respect through the codes they adopted (Gendering 74). Her one-sided devotion to Father Mulligan continues even decades after they meet, and part, with the result that she considers herself as a chaste woman and believes this has been possible due to her self-restraint. She shows agency in her defiance of tradition by deciding to love, convert for that love, enter a nunnery and ultimately, deciding to live alone rather than enter a loveless marriage.

The third character is Ammu, the eldest child of Pappachi and Mammachi, who tries to escape her miserable life at her parent's house. Born in a well-to-do family, she could have been brought up with love and care but her upbringing has been devoid of both and reflects the imbalances within the household and the society at large where the son is well taken care of while the daughter is ill-treated. After her schooling, "Pappachi insisted that a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl," so she is not allowed to pursue higher education whereas her father sends her brother Chacko to Oxford for higher studies. This makes her dependent on the men in her life, the father or the husband. She is kept as a bride in waiting but no proposals of marriage come for her, as the family cannot afford a decent dowry required in the marriage market. She constantly chafes at the confines and manages to escape from Ayemenem and visits a distant relative at Calcutta where she accepts a proposal for marriage from a Bengali Hindu who is a tea estate manager in Assam. Though initially appearing to be an acceptable match, he unfortunately turns out to be an alcoholic and abusive husband who wants to prostitute his wife for his personal gain. She divorces after a couple of years, and along with her twins, Estha and Rahel, is forced to return to her parent's house, "to everything that she had fled from a few years ago. Except that now she had two young children and no more dreams" (42). Her rebellious act leads her back to where her subjugation began: home, where she now faces double marginalization, from men as well as women, for herself as well as her children. Her economic dependence is the reason that she has to return to her parent's house after her divorce. Chacko reminds her that she being a daughter has no legal right to the property at all. Susan Viswanathan in her study on the Christians of Kerala observes that theirs is a patrilineal society. In this system of transmission, the house becomes the symbol of not merely habitants but also of religious values and their expression (129). A married woman in a Syrian Christian society has no right in the family property and is not welcome if she has to return. For Syrian Christians, "marriage is seen as a sacramental and permanent bond, and the arrangement of a match requires the serious attention of elders. Even today, marriages within the same denomination

... remain the practice ... and inter religious marriages are taboo...” (Viswanathan 103). A separated woman, according to Viswanathan, has no place in Syrian Christian society. She goes on to say that if a woman has any moral courage she will remain in her husband’s house despite all constraints (Viswanathan 112). Ammu in this regard has committed a blunder by marrying a Hindu and returning to Ayemenem after divorce. The Ayemenem family staunchly believes in their community’s views regarding a daughter having no claim on her father’s property. Women of this community are an oppressed and subjugated lot as they are not allowed higher education, are denied any claims on their fathers’ property as well as have no say in the settlement of dowry, which is also controlled by males in the family (Viswanathan 113).

Though Ammu works in the pickle factory established by her mother yet Chacko insinuates that all this property belongs to him being a son. These repeated rejections eventually lead Ammu to seek emotional refuge in Velutha, the one person who shows empathy and sympathy towards her. The secret emotional and physical relationship, “to love by night the man her children loved by day” is her act of transgression against societal rules that forbid a girl from making choices about her own life. This affair with an untouchable is perceived as a great stain on the honour of the family. Since it’s impermissible for an upper caste woman to have physical relations with an untouchable man, and vice-versa, both of them are made to pay its price. Velutha is “accidentally” killed by the police after being framed for rape. Ammu, humiliated by the police, exiled from home, and separated from her children, dies. Even in death, she has to bear the humiliation of being refused a burial by the church, and is cremated in a public electric crematorium meant for the poor and for those dying in police custody. Despite the apparent failure towards the end, Ammu displays agency by way of her decisions to run away from home, marry for love, choose to love again, and finally deciding to care for herself and her children.

Historically, Indian women have been marginalized because of economic and political reasons that have left them deprived of their social, political, economic, legal and religious rights. And their position is the outcome of the pre-colonial customs as well as postcolonial laws. Roy in *The God of Small Things* focuses on the economic oppression of the female characters. Although they belong to the upper class, these women are as economically deprived as the one low caste man, which along with the resonance of the commoditization of

women in the novel, testifies to the fact that marginalized people's lack of access to the resources is in fact the main reason for that marginalization.

Despite initially calling the novel about biology, Roy later relocated its significance in the power structure; the powerlessness and the vicious confrontation, which goes on in the continuum of history. As observed by Tickel (2007), she captures this differing violence and oppression on the marginalized people and attributes it to history. Giles (2011) also studies the novel in its historical context tracing the history of oppression from the ancient past of India. Various factors leading to the marginalization of characters are interlinked with this historical oppression arising from local superstructures, the class and the caste systems, and the religion and the patriarchal. These forces further converge into different oppressions relating to traditions and value systems and which are represented through the novel's characters. The society has different standards as far as women, and people from lower castes, are concerned. Whereas the social set up permits a man like Chacko to marry a woman from a foreign country or satisfy his "Men's Needs" with the pretty low caste women working in the factory, and allows for deliberate construction of a separate door for his nocturnal activities with labour class ladies and that too by Mammachi for his men's needs, the disastrous love affair between Ammu and Velutha continues for thirteen days only and finally when it gets revealed, it results in mayhem for both the woman, Ammu, and the untouchable, Velutha. Tickell (2007) observes that the love laws as mentioned by Roy can be traced back to the Manusmriti, the legal text as codified by the Hindu sage Manu, which distinguishes between *shudras*, the untouchables, and others and sanctions this discrimination for the first time. Manu fixed the code of conduct for women as well by setting a life fully dependent on a male in the family--father, husband or a son. The ancient feudal system, along with dogma, doctrine and fear that replaced religion (Ahsan 20 ), marked the beginning of classification in the shape of the powerful and the powerless; and also the privileged and the unprivileged leading further a further categorization between the loved and the loveless. This continued till the Aryans who based this categorization on class and continued building and bolstering the power hierarchies already in place. The love laws set forth by the society during those times had deep and lasting effects, which are seen in what happens to Velutha, the fourth marginalized character, and the male protagonist, in the novel.

Velutha, a paravan, and the lowest in the hierarchy of untouchables, lives in a small hut near the Ayemenem house with his father and brother. Considered inferior and unclean, he, like



others like him, is segregated from childhood onwards. Educated in a separate school meant for untouchables, Velutha trains to be a carpenter. He works at Mammachi's pickle factory where he encounters Ammu and her children. In Velutha, Ammu finds a person who loves her children sincerely and creates for her children a world of "hooked fingers and sudden smiles" (176). His one act of compassion as well as transgression, of loving and having a physical relationship with a woman of higher caste costs him his life. As Uma Chakravarti says, "while a lower caste man's alleged, or actual, sexual relationship with a 'higher' caste woman causes hysteria, and brings swift and violent retribution upon the lower caste man and often on both persons ... the upper caste man's casual and or continuous use of a lower caste woman is naturalised" (Chakravarti 85).

### **Conclusion**

Women in India have been marginalized in almost all the spheres of life, be it social, economic, religious, political or cultural. The three female characters in the novel share the same lot, being dominated by men in the family, so much so that the Ipe family truly symbolizes subjugation and submission of women. Roy has structured the life of these female characters in such a way that they show coherence and unity in their societal experiences, developing a linear connection in their characters, a unity in their social experiences, having a common history, though every woman's suffering is different from the other. These sufferings sprout from a common root of historical oppression of women in the Indian society. Tickell (3) has defined the novel as the one that "resists categorization," being not only indefinable but at the same time being a plethora of various things. These women are most of the times put on the margins by the male members of the family who do not grant them an equal status in the institution of marriage or family life. They are neither educated to the point where education imparts social awareness and economic independence, nor allowed to decide for themselves. However, each one of these women displays agency in different ways, though small and short-lived that end in tragedy and disaster for some.

Mammachi decides to take up a business independently and prove her capabilities as a businesswoman. She runs the pickle factory on her own and makes good profit. Baby Kochamma defies the society by changing her religion, and then tries to emancipate herself by not marrying any other man. Ammu tries to escape the tyranny of an abusive father and decides to marry a man belonging to a different religion, divorces him when he turns out to be an alcoholic man, rejects the entrenched norms of the caste system by daring to love an

untouchable man. Velutha makes an attempt to be free of the shackles of caste and class and risks loving an upper-caste woman. Although, each one of these characters is human and as flawed, Mammachi discriminates between Ammu and Chacko, helps the latter in his physical misdemeanors while at the same time being intolerant of Ammu's love for Velutha; Kochamma lies for the false family honour, files false charges for rape against Velutha and hurls abuses at his father; Ammu is ultimately unable to do anything for the man she loves or the children she bore; and Velutha is unable to either protect himself or the woman he loves; but each character tries to change their own life as well as the society through their small acts of resistance against the perceived and imperceptible inequalities. Despite their marginalised and oppressed status, these characters display responsibility and agency. They show the courage to reject the various layers of oppression in the society. Roy's characters are reminiscent of Chinua Achebe's in *Things Fall Apart*. And, though they belong to two different countries, they share the common bond of oppression, and Arundhati Roy, like Achebe, does not conceal the drawbacks of the Indian society, including wife beating, caste violence, among others.

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