

The Voice of Ammu and Velutha in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things: The Subalterns Who Speak*

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Abstract

Arundhati Roy is an Indian Novelist born in Shillong in 1961. She spent her childhood in Ayemenem or Aymanam in Kerala. She then studied architecture at the School of Planning and Architecture, New Delhi. Early in her career Roy worked for television and movies. *The God of Small Things* (1977) is the debut novel of Arundhati Roy. It is a story about the childhood experiences of fraternal twins whose lives are destroyed by the "Love Laws" that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much". The novel is a description of how the small things in life affect people's behavior and their lives. The book is semi-autobiographical and a major part captures her childhood experiences in Aymanam. *The God of Small Things* won the Booker Prize in 1997 which brought her an instant International fame.

Right from its emergence in the 70s, the idea of subaltern studies has provoked both excitement and cynicism. The subaltern historians originally started as an Indian version of "History from below" approach of the West. The term "Subaltern" came from the writings of Antonio Gramsci and is referred to subordination in terms of class, caste, gender, race, language and culture.

GayatriChakravortySpivakhowever, cautions against such essential distinctions. For her, subalternity is not a general umbrella term to denote suppression. "Subaltern", she insists, "is not just a classy word for the oppressed, for other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie." In postcolonial terms, it is 'the space of difference between the imperialist or ruling classes and those whose presences and voices have been consistently snuffed out of the capitalist/casteist/patriarchal/colonial narrative and the dominant cultural perspective. A

subaltern study is an offshoot of a postmodernist worldview that began as an interrogation of the very foundations upon which social thought and cultural assumptions were shaped.

In Louise Bennett's phrase it led to a 'colonization in reverse' dismantling the monolithic assumptions of the West. An extension of this 'resistance to elite domination' as Ranajit Guha puts was to identify oppression in all its forms within societies and nations. Leela Gandhi "Subaltern studies defined itself as an attempt to allow other people finally to speak within the jealous pages of elitist historiography and in so doing, to speak for, or to sound the muted voices of, the truly oppressed" (1-2).

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* can be seen as one of the most powerful novels on a definite social problem, like oppression of the downtrodden, and also touching upon related problems. It problematises the oppressive machinery based on caste discrimination

and collusion with it of certain political forces. *The God of Small Things* is a dazzling tour de force in fictional art. Like Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children* it burst upon the world as a product of a highly imaginative mind that sees beneath the surface realities and seeks to establish between the two, by inventing technique that reveals multiple realities and telescopes past and the present in a surrealistic portrayal of the life at Ayemenem House. It is a playful book, full of poetry and wisdom. Arundhati Roy herself says that "it isn't a book about India. It is a book about human nature." (2)

"She has very aptly and beautifully portrayed class antagonism and class exploitation; exposure of the ostentation and hypocrisy of big Man-Marxism, patriarchal domination and callous administration; the problem of Love Laws: ("who should be loved. And how. And how much." (328); a forbidden relationship between a touchable and untouchable and above all, a highly debated theme of incestuous relation between the twins." (Prasad) Arundhati Roy, in one of her interviews, rightly holds the view:

"Fiction for me has been a way of trying to make sense of the world as I know it. It is located very close to me this book. It is located in the village I grew up. If I had to put it very simply, it is about trying to make the connections between the smallest of things and the biggest ones and to see how they fit together". (GKT, 4)

Arundhati Roy is deeply involved with India's social problems, particularly those concerning the socially marginalized and dispossessed people, i.e. dalits, women etc. The book

shows maladjustment between *The God of Small Things* (Pappachi, Baby Kochamma, Mammachi, Chacko, Comrade Pillai and Inspector Thomas Mathew) and *The God of Small Thing* (Ammu, Velutha, Rahel, Estha, Sophie Mol etc.). In *The God of Small Things*, there are four chief characters- Ammu, Velutha, Rahel and Estha who become rebellious against their respective parental authorities. Velutha represents the untouchable who was exploited by society for a long time simply because he belongs to the so called lower caste (paravan) whereas, Ammu emerges as a sad and much wronged character in the novel who wants to have her own way in life but is mercilessly suppressed.

Arundhati Roy portrays a detailed picture of the protagonist Ammu's journey from childhood to adolescence, to the experience of marriage, to a sympathetic and loving mother, to a rebel wife who challenges the age-old hypocritical moral stand of a patriarchal family. As a little girl, Ammu had to face a lot of trials and tribulations. She had seen the cruelty of her father, Literary Discourses Pappachi, who used to beat her and her mother Mammachi with a brass wase. She was also deprived of higher education because, according to Pappachi, college education is not useful for a girl. He behaved like a decent man but demonstrated his male ego and bourgeois mentality when he tyrannized his wife and child: "Not content with having beaten his wife and daughter, he tore down curtains, kicked furniture and smashed a table lamp" (181). In Calcutta, Ammu 'met her future husband' at someone's wedding reception. She was in a hurry to marry him because she knew that in Ayemenem, people were quite dead against her wishes and so something was better than nothing. Her future husband:

"Proposed to Ammu five days after they first met. Ammu did not pretend to be in love with him. She just weighed the odds and accepted. She thought that anything, anyone at all, would be better than returning to Ayemenem. She wrote to her parents informing them of her decision. They didn't reply" (39)

But after marriage she discovers that her husband was an alcoholic and when he offers her as 'a gift' to Mr. Hollick an English manager, his boss to save his job, she spurns the proposal of her husband, hits him with a heavy book, divorces him and ... "returned unwelcomed to her parents" (42), to her home in Ayemenem with her twins.

She is now a helpless divorcee and her twins "seemed like a pair of small bewildered frogs engrossed in each other's company, lolloping aim in arm down a highway full of hurling traffic. She was quick to reprimand her children but even quicker to take offence on their

behalf (43). The phrase "to take offence on their behalf is linked metaphorically with the image of "bewilderedfrogs", revealing the inner concern and anxiety of a mother for her children. Chacko, Ammu's brother cynically says; "What's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine." Why? Because "Ammu, as a daughter, had claim to the property" and she "had no locusts stand I." (57). Arundhati Roy portrays the inside of her character through symbolic language. She does not like to be intervened even by her children in the process of the afternoon mares: "She wanted her body back. It was hers, she shrugged her children off the way a bitch shrugs off her pups when she has enough of them" (222), Ammu is at least the master of her body. Without a partner since 31, she was not wrong in tracing the presence of certain body longings and urges infesting her psyche craving satisfaction. Roy describes this situation with great tenderness, "....Ammu undressed and put a red toothbrush...triumphantly around the bathroom" (222-23). A divorcee woman has no place or respect in the traditional Indian family, she knew it, but hadn't experienced it. Her vacuous days: blank nights stifled spirit more brutally than her husband's beatings did. She was neglected, ignored and humiliated. Being tenacious in spirit, she devises means to fill her time- wearing flowers in her hair, taking midnight swims, smoking cigarettes and listening to film songs on her radio.

It must be remarked that with all her verve for wit, sarcasm, humour, satire and irony and eye for the incongruous, Arundhati Roy has predilection for emphasizing the powerful play of the sensuous in man. Fate had another cruel turn to offer to Ammu. She meets Velutha after years. She had met him when she was a child. But now he had grown into a strong, muscular man and a gifted worker. That he was a paravan, an untouchable, hardly ever occurred to her. He was an attractive male and she an admiring woman. Velutha was fond of her children, playing by day with them. The self-effacement of Velutha, his humility, the total absence of any consciousness or self-importance, self-sacrifice or pride in loving a woman of high-caste, that Ammu considers him The God of Small Things. She felt drawn to him till their fates got linked fatally.

The novel's development and significance also depends upon this untouchable man Velutha, a paravan who suffers untold miseries at the hands of people whose attitudes are guided by age-old casteist prejudices. He always lives on the margins of the society and is

deliberately obstructed from getting into the central place. He was protected and assisted by the Ayemenem House family. He is a man of simplicity and innocence, a man who knows how to make 'intricate' toys-tiny wind mills, rattles, minute jewel boxes out of dried palm reeds; a man who could carve perfect boats out of tapioca stems and figurines on cashew nuts; he can repair radios, clocks, water-pumps and looks after the plumbing and all of the electric gadgets in the house. Moreover, when Mammachi decided to enclose the back verandah, it was Velutha who designed and built the sliding-folding door. "Velutha knew more about the machines in the factory than anyone else" (75). He was hired as the factory carpenter and the general maintenance of the whole factory was given charge to him. But this caused great resentment among the other touchable factory workers because they thought, "paravans were not meant to be carpenters" (77). So in order to keep the workers happy, Mammachi paid Velutha less than she would give to a 'touchable worker. They acknowledged that Velutha is a talented boy. But they could never forget that he was a paravan. Mammachi often said, "if only he hadn't been a paravan; he might have an engineer" (75).

Velutha is intelligent and sensitive. However, his exceptional talents and skills, his keen understanding and deep sensibility could not get the respect from those who were less talented. Although they were awed with him, they could not get over the fact of his being a Paravan. Velutha belongs to the new generation youth who had great courage and defiance, which his father Vellya Pappen ever dared to dream, Vellya thought, "in a Paravan they could (and would, and indeed, should) be construed as insolence" (76). He always grudged the craftsmanship and natural skills of Velutha. There is a sense of unpleasantness between father and son due to continuous nagging and bickering of Vellya. Velya belonged to a time

"... when Paravans were expected to crawl backward with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins and Christians wouldn't defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravana's footprint. In Mammachi's time, Paravan's like other Untouchables, were not allowed to walk on public roads, 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 polluted breath away from those whom they addressed" (73-74).

Velutha inherited from those earlier times this agonized awareness of his social status. He inherited the deep sense of humiliation and hurt that rankled in his heart. He wanted to

remove all these, he yearned to be treated equal to all other men and women. That's why perhaps Velutha was drawn to the Communist Party (M) of E.M.S. Namboodri Prasad. He became a formal member of the party and actively participated in its marches, meetings and demonstrations. His faith in Comrade K.N.M. Pillai is boundless. He sees Comrade Pillai as the messiah of the poor and the downtrodden. His faith in Pillai is extremely simple and unquestioning. This shows that Velutha is at heart a very simple person.

Velutha becomes deeply frustrated. He was a loner and lives a sad, deserted life nourishing the hurt and vacuity day in and day out. Then he meets Ammu, the woman whom he had known as a girl years ago, but who was now the mother of twins. They feel drawn to each other because both could silently share each other's hurts and humiliations. They tried to momentarily fill the void that each found in the other. They knew it was a fatal affiliation, a foredoomed love, but since they knew their end, they were determined to make the best of it.

In that brief moment, Velutha looked up and saw things that he had not seen before. Things that had been out of bounds so far, obscured by history's blinkers Simple things. For instance, he saw that Rahel's mother was a woman. That she had deep dimples when she smiled... He saw too that he was not necessarily the only giver of gifts. That she had gifts to give him too"(176-77).

They embraced their destinies courageously. Both Ammu and Velutha once again demonstrate their great qualities of defying the inhuman forces that keep them pinned them to their positions. Both rise above their drawn lines and rebel against social oppression. However, the price they have to pay is cruel, and too great.

Ammu who antagonizes her family by marginalizing herself socially, is maltreated by the governing body of the family. When her nocturnal rendezvous with Velutha is discovered and the drowning of Sophie Mol was wrongly associated with her illicit affair, she is exiled from home. Tired, exhausted, sick and finally defeated she is found dead in a grimy room in Lodge in Alleppey where she had gone to search for a job. "She died alone. With a noisy ceiling fan for company and no Estha to lie at the back of her and talk to her. She was thirty one. Not old, not young, but available, die-able age" (161).

However, the church refuses to give her a burial. She is therefore, like a pariah cremated in an electric crematorium: "Nobody except beggars, derelicts and the police custody were buried there. People who died with nobody to lie at the back of them and to them." (162).

significantly, this is the ultimate humiliation of Ammu a woman with courage and strong will who gives commendable fight till the last moment. In Ammu, Roy has epitomized her bitter criticism of the sham and spurious social codes. Velutha is accused of causing Sophie Mol's death, and on that plea killed by the police.

Velutha appeared on the scummy, slippery floor. A mangled genie invoked by a modern lamp. He was naked; his soiled mundu has come undone. Blood spilled from his skull like a secret. His face was swollen and his head looked like a pumpkin, too large and heavy for the slender stem it grew from. The inspector asked his question. Estha's mouth said Yes. Childhood tiptoed out. Silence slid like a bolt. (319-20).

Arundhati Roy has created a powerful character in Velutha. He is a commentary on all decadent values and deep-seated orthodox prejudices that perpetuate the unjust system denying the basic joys and comforts of life to the paravans.

In Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, the transgression of the subaltern voices of Ammu and Velutha is not for power but for the deepest desires of any living being to Love, to live and to let live. In the character of the subaltern Ammu, we see the beautiful and gentle mother, who has tried to run away from the strictures of her middle class Syrian Christian upbringing. Meanwhile, the injustice of the story is often led by the embittered Kochamma, the twins' great aunt, who casts a spiteful eye on all happenings in family seeking to take advantage of Ammu's "mistakes" to ingratiate her to the matriarchy. The dilemma of the postcolonial India plays a key role in the book with an emphasis the caste system, and how it touches their lives. Velutha, the subaltern transgresses with the help of Ammu and her kids- Estha and Rabel. The result is not Velutha's up gradation, but the transformation of the status of Ammu, Estha and Rabel as subalterns. They become subalterns as a result of trying to push one subaltern up the social ladder. They too become voiceless and ostracized by the society. Thus *The God of Small Things* is "not about history but biology and transgression" in Arundhati Roy's words. Arundhati Roy's aim is to transform the humble men and women into heroic characters who challenge the hypocritical guardians of social taboos and codes of behavior and smilingly sacrifice their lives in the end. Arundhati Roy says about Velutha:

The God of Loss

The God of Small Things

He left no footprint in sand, no

Ripples in water, no image in mirrors (265)

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