

The God of Small Things as a Subaltern Study

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ABSTRACT

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* created a lot of controversy and criticism from the moment of its publication in 1997. Because the novel raises certain issues like untouchability, marginalisation, subalternity which are deep rooted in Indian society and culture. Patriarchal frame work never allows women to work freely. Women are often suppressed and crushed. They have not been given equal rights and opportunities. Alongside, the oppression of women, the most enduring form of social inequality in India is the caste system. Roy's narrative is unrelenting in its need to bear witness to the routine cruelties of patriarchy, and women characters are consistently bullied, harassed and made to defer to the needs of male relatives and family members. In *The God of Small Things* Roy explains the crushing sense of caste inferiority felt by older untouchables, such as Velutha's father Vellya Pappen, as a product of Kerala's ingrained rules of caste, epitomized in the 'Crawling Backward Day' of the pre-independence period when they were not allowed walk on public roads, not allowed to cover their upper bodies, not allowed to carry umbrellas.

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The God of Small Things which came in 1997 seeks to revisit the ways in which colonisation interrupted the systems, structures, knowledge, values and beliefs which corroborated how Indians understood their place and position in the world, it also tries to look out to interrogate the other face of colonisation: which it fails to change, i.e. how certain structures and systems survived

the experience of colonisation. It seeks to expose the modes in which colonialism often integrated rather than disturbed native hierarchies like that represented by caste. Roy has often accentuated the growing distance between powerful and the powerless in contemporary India. 'At some point', she argues, 'we have to [...] realise that the inequity in our society has gone too far. Take for instance the refrain that India is a country of one billion people [...] the truth is that we are a nation of 50 million people and the rest are not treated as people. (61) Alongside the subjugation of women, the most imperishable form of social inequity in India is the caste system and Roy's blasé critique of caste in *The God of Small Things* embrace both the social history of its perspective 'walking backwards' rules and its latter day protraction in the prejudices of characters such as Mammachi and Inspector Thomas Mathew. Mammachi we are told, exhibits an 'impenetrable touchable logic' (ch.2, p.75) in her sightlessness to the atrocity of caste, something which is evoked in her degenerative short sightedness. In fact, this cecity is shared by older untouchable Paravan characters such as Velutha's father, Vellya Pappen, whose encumbered glass eye typifies his loyal acceptance of the world view of his touchable employers.

Although caste was originally present only in Hinduism, Syrian Christians of Mammachi's and Baby Kochamma's class are in effect what Roy terms "caste Christians sharing their Hindu neighbours revulsion at Untouchability." The efforts made by Untouchables (among them Velutha's grandfather Kelan) to get away the indignities of Untouchability; with the reaching of the new political order are unsuccessful. They convert to the predominant religion of the colonisers, Christianity in the hope that a change in status and experience will follow. But as practiced by the British, colonialism and the independence that follows it intensifies rather than rectifies the material, social and cultural evictions of Untouchables:

[Under the British] they were made to have separate churches, with separate churches, with separate services, and separate

priestes.... 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 they were Christians, and therefore casteless. It was little like having to sweep away your footprints without a broom, Or worse not being allowed to leave footprints at all. (74)

A similar fortune awaits Velutha, the only card keeping member of the Marxist Party almost a century later. Begrudged by the other Touchable workers for 'ancient reasons of their own', it is clear that Marxism like Christianity fails to considerably modernise the caste system. Even Chacko in his ideological bickers with Comrade Pillai recognises that Pillai's cries (Caste is class, comrades) are pharisaic (281); hollow promises. The limits of caste strictly restrained and patrolled before, during and after British occupancy, as Velutha and Ammu find out to both their owns and the twins cost. Both wittingly step outside the "love laws" the edges of the caste system. Velutha as a Paravan the lowest of the Untouchables does so in becoming a chippie and in his relationship with Ammu, while she knowingly does so in first marrying and then divorcing a Hindu outsider and then by falling in love with Velutha. As Roy confesses in interview with Maya Jaggi, both are joined in transgression, they are external to their communities, outcastes to their castes." While Ammu and Velutha detached by caste, Roy argues that their relationship and the reactions to it if they are culturally specific are also symbolic of a universal "human nature": "Human society has always establish ways in which to dissever itself, to make war across these sections, to make love across these sections. It is actually a manner of looking, a manner of presenting the inconsistent sides of our nature, our capability to love so deeply yet be so abrasive."

Such is the incorporation of the divides of the caste that it is Velutha's father, Vellya Pappen, lacerates between fear and duty who irradiates Mammachi to the inside details of the lovers umbrages. He thereby promotes the novel's central theme of

betrayal – of children by parents, of family by community. His perfidy occasions others, that of Velutha by his would be Marxist companions and the community more generally and of Ammu by family, community and nation. Mammachi's first reaction to the news is to confine Ammu in her bedroom, an imprisonment that operates as a metaphor for Ammu's wider entrapment within the transmissible caste values and boundaries of others. This imprisonment arguably tracks to the death of Sophie Mol and Velutha, reflected by Ammu's death in the hotel room of the Alleppey Bharat Lodge, itself restated in the death of the sparrow in the back of the creaky Sky Blue Plymouth years later. By contrast, however, for Velutha the full "terror" of his transgression is "unspooled" (257) in a single night in the grounds of the History House.

As one of the cardinal themes of *The God of Small Things*, caste inequity is involved in the politics of the Narmada river dam scheme criticised by Roy in *The Cost of Living*. Most of those displaced by the construction of dams are Untouchables and ethnic people and characteristically, Roy uses architectural metaphors to describe how the social design of the caste system ascertains that sections of the Indian population have become consumable in the workings of the state. The representation of the marginalised individuals and the communities in both *The God of Small Things* and Roy's journalism is something which has inspired a number of people to write about them and also creates awareness that how the powerless in the hands of powerful is suppressed and subjugated. Roy's engrossment with oppressed social groups in India poses questions to do with the conceptual figure of the 'subaltern', which have concerned Indian historians and postcolonial critics for some time.

The word 'subaltern' originally referred to denote a junior officer in British army, later coined as a political term in the 1930's by the Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci, who used this word in his *Prison Notebooks* to describe 'groups or classes'

which were socially outclassed and had no ideological power. Gramsci previously used instead of 'proletarian' in order to avoid censorship, but it soon came to denominate less organised working class groups such as peasants and farm laborers. The term was later used by the 'Subaltern Studies' group. The Subaltern Studies group was dissatisfied with both colonial and Indian nationalist historiography and what they saw as a failure, in these traditions, to represent the political struggle peasants, women and low-caste groups. Their resolution was to return to the historical texts of colonialism and Indian nationalism and to study them against the grain, thereby baring the traces and overwritten signs of 'subaltern' resistance. The postcolonist theorist and critic Gayatri Chakrawarti Spivak, a fringe member of the Subaltern studies project, later interrogated some of the groups' suppositions and amended the concept of the subaltern. In her essay 'Subaltern studies: Deconstructing Historiography' 65 Spivak indicated that the methodology of the Subaltern studies historians might not be capable to the task in hand and admonished that the self-determining consciousness of the subaltern could never be regained fully from colonial or nationalist archives. In attempting to regenerate the historical 'agency' of peasants and tribal people's from these documents, reasoned Spivak, the Subaltern Studies group was actually in peril of objectifying them in the same way as earlier historian had done. Spivak's intent was to underscore the need for a 'deconstructive' self-awareness in the group's work. This cognizance would admit the power involved in the act of historical representation as a process for addressing for minorities and would result ideally in a 'strategic essentialism' 66 in which the retrieved subaltern consciousness is recognised as a politically advantageous but unrepresentative image of intending identity rather than the real thoughts and wants of subalterns themselves.

While she reviewed the Subaltern Studies project, Spivak also formulated her ideas about subaltern representation in what

is probably her most renowned essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak'? 67 Here Spivak queried similar suppositions in the work of extremist French theorists such as Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze that the views or demands of the oppressed (even though they are the subjects of 'discursive' ideological conditioning) can be transparently represented. Spivak's other basic qualification to the concept of the subaltern was to indicate that it was, necessarily, a gendered category, and while the essays adumbrated above deal with the efficacious expunction of the subaltern voice by historians and critics who arrogate a representative knowledge of them, in other words such as 'The Rani of Sirmur', 68 Spivak shows how different ideological systems such as colonialism patriarchy combine to doubly erase women as subalterns or women are doubly colonised firstly by colonialism and secondly by the patriarchy. (This point has also been explored by other feminists critical of 'First World Feminism') As Spivak contends 'Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced [...] if, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in the shadow.' 69 A latent problem with Spivak's theorising is that it seems to switch, as Bart Moore Gilbert notes, between conceptual and concrete definitions of the subaltern. These shifts ruminate changing critical emphasis in Spivak's ongoing 'subaltern' analysis and there is not adequate space to conjecture on them fully here. What must be observed, in relation to Roy's political concerns, are Spivak's late suggestions that developments in technology and global capitalism have changed the conditions of subalternity, especially the notion that subalterns are debarred from wider networks of capital. Today claims Spivak, 'the subaltern must be rethought s/he no longer cut off from lines of access to the centre.' 72 This is because transnational corps, operating from the centers of European and American power, are now interested in the specialist environmental knowledge of rural South-Asian

subalterns in order to develop new patented crop strains. This is inevitably, a very cardinal estimate of the complexities of Spivak's belief of the subaltern, but even from this rough outline, a number of key points emerge which are relevant to *The God of Small Things*. In the figure of Velutha (as an Untouchable) we might be enticed to see a fabricated representation of the subaltern, especially as the social structures he dwells only allow him to 'speak' in limited ways, and he frequently simply appears in the novel as a body, or as the object of other characters fears and desires'.⁷⁵ However, some critics see this deficiency of articulacy as an imaginative failure on Roy's part and describe Velutha as 'wretched stick of a character, a good hearted prole with a six packs for a stomach'.⁷⁶ Putting these expostulations to one side and reminding ourselves of Spivak's discussions of subaltern figures in literature,⁷⁷ we could also contend that Roy's 'limited' representation of Velutha is a creative choice (rather than an apparent failure) and emphasizes the lack of political agency available to the subaltern. Surely in looking for the instances of subaltern resistance in *The God of Small Things*, Velutha's unrealistic appearances and disappearances, his quite hints and his audacious technical 'design aesthetic' can be constructed, more hopefully, as an equivocal protest at the 'touchable logic' that restrains him. This is a notion given by Anuradha Dingwaney Needham in her essay "The Small Voice of History" in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* when she states, 'What make Velutha dangerous so far as touchables and untouchables are concerned is his refusal to be interpolated [or addressed] as a Paravan [...] Within the governing logic of Roy's novel it is precisely this out of placidness [...] that makes Velutha a likely agent of the possibility of social change. (78)

Our version of Velutha is complicated, however, if we retrieve Spivak's definition of the 'subaltern' as a gendered female class that includes women from India's upper and middle classes. This qualification details us towards Ammu as the more evident subaltern figure in the novel, meshed in her crippling

social role as a divorced woman in the highly patriarchal Syrian Christian community. Nonetheless, by staging Ammu and Velutha's affair as one of the central events of the *The God of Small Things*, Roy seems to suggest a probable commonality in their – differently experienced-subalternity something which flickers a heated debate about the novel's realism. The lovers in *The God of Small Things* literally represent the domineering intersection of historically approved forms of subordination (in this case caste and gender) that make up conjectural category of the subaltern. As an approach that takes account of how intellectuals and experts unknowingly silence subalterns by 'speaking for' or romanticising them, Spivak's work should sensitise us to the disposition amongst her readers to present Roy as a subaltern herself. As Spivak warns: 'Often what happens is that [...] intellectuals [...] who become spokespersons for subalternity are taken as token subalterns. Roy's intervention of caste is provided in Nirmala. C. Prakash's 'The Twice Damned God of Arundhati Roy' 88 in which Velutha is compared with Bakha, the protagonist of Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Untouchable*. In Goqila's view, caste regulation functions hand in hand with other forms of subjugation such as patriarchy in *The God of Small Things*, allowing Chacko to satisfy his 'Men's Needs' with lower caste women, but punishing Ammu for a akin cross-caste affair. Goqila argues that Roy thus exposes how caste distinctions are maintained through the regulation and patrolling of female sexuality, and also how caste, class and patriarchy aggregate in the disastrous 'official' response to Ammu and Velutha's intimacy.

Issue of Untouchability and of sexuality is intimately connected, through the traditional concern of patriarchal discourse with the conservation of values and prerogative through descent, and therefore a fixation with the exclusive use of women as property. Furthermore, the fact that characters like Mammachi are preoccupied with untouchability, something which is ridiculed by Roy in the opposite term touchability,

transmutes the simple question of touching into a power-issue but also into a highly insidious and sultry obsession, even the most insouciant “touch” is oversaturated with symbolic meaning. 92 Finally a further sub-category of the subaltern that we have not reckoned in as much detail, children, which are also treated like subalterns in the novel *The God of Small Things*. Estha and Rahel are the two marginalised children in the text are being subjugated, not given any status and power in the family and are oppressed in the patriarchal society. Hence we can say that *The God of Small Things* is truly a text of the marginalised characters like Ammu, Velutha, Estha and Rahel. And this novel shows meticulously that how in our male dominated patriarchal society, women, untouchables and children are subjugated, oppressed and crushed.

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