

SUBALTERN STUDIES IN ARUNDHUTI ROY'S THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS: A CRITICAL OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Though 'Subaltern other' is theoretical specific, it is also a social, cultural and political construct. It derives its force from the colonial, post-colonial and from post-modern studies. The study dives deep into The God of Small Things, a modern Indian classic, by Arundhati Roy to examine the nature of subalternization and its impact on the individual and on society as well. Roy's fiction is primarily a portrayal of political malpractices, personal relationships, caste and class conflicts, traumatic experience of family feuds, shattered faith, love, marriage, conjugal discord and sex. It is also a story of alienation, loss of identity, marginalization of women with the onslaught of irrational male dominance. The study attempts to analyze how casteism, patriarchy, colonial legacy, women's sensibility along with some socio-political factors contribute to the subalternization of women and the lower caste people in India. The study also incorporates the socio-psychological consequences of subalternization.

Keywords: *Patriarchy, Casteism, colonial legacy, the untouchable, subaltern other*

1. INTRODUCTION

Subalternization is originally a cultural phenomenon which draws its strength from colonial and post-colonial studies. Subaltern studies derive its force as postcolonial criticism from a catachrestic combination of Marxism, Post-Structuralism, Gramsci and Foucault, the modern west and India, archival research and textual criticism (Jameson, 1986: 65-88; Arif Dirlik, 1997: 55). The concept of subalternity has invaded in Indian society in the form of patriarchy, casteism, gender discrimination and through the marginalization of the weak and untouchables. Masculinity and casteism are deciding factors which control the society at large (Andal, 2002: 33). Male egoism, Indian women's sensibility and colonial legacy have also greatly contributed to the process of subalternization. Subalternization has tremendously affected the feminine sensibility, the individual psyche and the society at large. *The God of Small Things* faithfully exposes the social, cultural,

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religious and political malaise by shedding light on the position of women and the lower class people in post-colonial Indian society.

1.1. Objectives of the Study

The primary objectives of this study are:

- To know the nature of subalternization in Indian society
- To trace the impact of subalternization on the individual's psyche and on society
- To explore the issue of 'subaltern other' in *The God of Small Things*

1.2 Literature Review

In the postcolonial studies the 'subaltern other', the 'marginalized other', 'colonized other,' 'the cultural other' and the 'oriental other' have been used interchangeably to mean the backward and the subjugated who stand at the last level of the social and economic ladder and who fall prey to prevalent political practices and class conflicts. By 'Other', postcolonial critics like Edward Said (1978), Gayatri Spivak (1988), Homi K. Bhaba (1997) refer to the marginalized or the colonized subject. The terms 'marginality, 'subaltern' and the like refer to the colonized people in Asia, America or Africa during the colonial period, when they were marginalized by the colonizers. Originally, the treatment of 'Other' as a concept is to be found in the writings of Sartre, Derrida and Lacan. Lacan (1996) states that the 'Other' refers to both the colonizer and the colonized. According to him the 'Other' can be compared to the master, the lord, the colonizer, the empire or the imperial centre which makes the colonized subject conscious of his/her identity as they are somehow 'other' and dependent'. Spivak (1990) argues that the colonizing 'Other' gets established when the colonized 'Others' are treated as subjects.

The 'subaltern' owes its origin to Antonio Gramsci's (1973) writings and it underlines a subordinate position in terms of caste, class, gender, race and culture. The term was popularized by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. In her essay titled, "*Can the subaltern speak?*" (1988:35) she says: "The subaltern cannot speak." Subaltern means the colonized and oppressed subject whose voice has been silenced. Spivak uses the term 'subaltern' to mean people of 'lower rank' and to mean the colonized, the working class, the blacks and women.

The term 'subaltern' has a relevance to the study of Third World literature especially to Indian literature. Spivak laid stress on the gendered subaltern – woman, who undergo oppression doubly inflicted by both colonial legacy and patriarchy in the Third World countries. And in some contexts contesting representational systems violently displace and silence the figure of 'gendered subaltern' (Spivak, 1988: 306). Though Spivak's silencing of 'subalterns' refers to women in colonial India, her contention equally encompasses women in the decolonized India as well.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study is a critical analysis of the theory of 'subaltern other' as reflected in Roy's fiction *The God of Small Things*. The information and the idea used in this study have been procured mostly from secondary sources. The references used to validate the study have been cited from different

books and literary articles published in recognized journals. The literature review which has been elaborated to enrich the study is randomly borrowed from different books and journals on literary theory specially the theory of ‘subaltern other’. The target text *The God of Small Things* have thoroughly been fortified for references for the authentication of the analysis presented in the study and also to prove the points of the researcher.

3. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

3.1. Subaltern other in *The God of Small Things*

India in the post sixties has been X-rayed and has undergone a microscopic observation both at micro as well as macro-structural levels in *The God of Small Things*. The story rotates around the postcolonial Kerala reeling with effects of cross-cultural encounters. Ayemenem shows up to be a catalytic world – in miniature that is often torn in dissensions. The Paradise Pickles & Preserves stands for a symbolic empire in post-independent India. It implies industrialization and modernization which holds promises and hope forth for its subjects to change their fortune. The factory in reality never becomes the paradise for the powerless and the ‘Dalits’. Rather it appears to be an apparatus of exploitation for both women and the ‘Dalits’. Hence the workers in the factory stand for ‘the subaltern other’ (Roy, 1997: 103).

3.2. Colonial Legacy in Effecting Subalternization

The workers in the Paradise Pickles & Preserves are the colonized natives – the ‘subaltern other’ who are appropriated, regulated, disciplined and fed by a man like Chacko. Mammachi and Chacko here embody the colonial power. They are settlers who came from Syria; Syrian Christians. They are outsiders but they are the governing race. Fanon (2001) states, “The governing race is the first and foremost, those who come from elsewhere, those who are unlike the original inhabitants, ‘the other’”.

3.3. Role of Patriarchy in Subalternization of Women

Patriarchy is psychological, social, cultural and colonial specific. Subalternization and silencing of women go on at different forms and colour in Indian society and are perpetuated by different forces in the society. As a representative of dominant patriarchal culture Reverend Ipe always tries to control the female members of his family. Pappachi also always thinks about his family reputation and preserves the discriminatory values. Mammachi becomes a prey to patriarchy. Mammachi’s entomologist husband, Pappachi, tortures her mentally and physically (47-48). Mammachi’s pickle making job earns Pappachi’s jealous frowns instead of favour. He greatly resents the attention she gets in society for her skill in it. Pappachi’s egoism puts Mammachi’s talent for music to an end. A few words of praise from the music teacher provokes him to put an end of her lessons abruptly. Pappachi used to beat Mammachi and finally gave up speaking to her until his death. Therefore, Mammachi’s position in her own house is no better than a ‘subaltern other’. She becomes a ‘subaltern other’ in her own house.

Chacko, another patriarchal voice in the Ayemenem house, enjoys all privileges, which are deliberately denied to his sister, Ammu. He sexually exploits women workers in his pickle factory. He calls pretty women who work in the factory to his room, and on the pretext of lecturing them on labour and trade union law, flirt with them outrageously (55).

Roy's *The God of small Things* raises objection against the misinterpretation and misuse of power, politics, social systems, traditions, norms, culture, custom, religion and knowledge. Roy's voice of protest carries significant weight in decrying religious and social institutions like the church, family traditions, civil administration and so on.

3.4. Treating of Women as a Sex Object

Treating women as sex objects is both colonial and cultural specific. Soon after marriage, Ammu discovered herself in the same net of male exploitation. Her alcoholic husband tortures her physically and harasses her mentally. Ammu's physical exploitation by her husband indicates the typical Indian male's inherited assumption of superiority. Velutha even goes to the end of forcing her to accept the proposal of having sex offered by his English boss Mr. Hollick. The attempt of using Ammu as a commodity and continuous physical assault inflicted upon her by her husband forces Ammu to desert him.

Quest for sexuality is integral to colonial intervention as is shown by Said (1978:190) in his *Orientalism*. Sexual exploitation of the factory women and the tea pickers by Chacko and Mr. Hollick respectively is a testimony to the continuity of such sexual quest in the postcolonial era. The superior white Englishman is coveting his subordinate's wife; it is the colonizer's coveting (Millet, 1972: 143). Before this, he coveted the poor tea-pickers and became successful. The tea-pickers did not protest, neither did Ammu's husband. It is the silence of the colonized as is Velutha's in front of Mammachi and Chacko.

Inspector Thomas Mathew's tapping of Ammu's breast with his police baton is a postcolonial perversion of sex perpetuated by an Englishman – a colonizer Mr. Hollick does it with the native Indian women; Chacko, the Anglophile does it with the factory women and the Inspector Thomas Mathew with Ammu. Mathew's lecherous glance at Ammu's breast and hurling foul comments on Ammu by addressing her a 'Veshya' are a sign of commonality among the powerful and the ruling class. Another similarity which is commonly found with the power mongers is that the powerful people misuses their knowledge to gain control over sex and society. Michel Foucault (1980) in his concept of 'discourse' shows how different discourses in society contend for power using knowledge. He states that power controls sexuality and uses knowledge for its own interest and thus regulates the knowledge of sexuality to ensure a knowledge-based administration of power. Mr. Hollick, Chacko, Pillai and Mathew know that the weak do not have a say, they cannot protest. So they dare to regulate them as they wish. Mr. Hollick uses his colonial status, Mr. Chacko his 'Oxford'/capitalistic knowledge, Pillai his knowledge of communist ideology and Inspector Mathew his knowledge of criminology in exploiting Ammu and Velutha.

Arundhati Roy voices against the consumerism of sex in the global market monopolized by men. A woman longs for equilibrium between physical and the spiritual. Ammu feels that she

is not merely in possession of a man who by virtue of being a man, has his sole right over her body. Apart from her physical self she is also a person who longs for emotional communication (Prasanna, 2007: 75-96). In *The God of Small Things* Roy shares the shocking experience of the lustful and carnal nature of man.

3.5. 'Widowhood' and 'Divorce-hood' in Subalternization of Women

The fate of the divorced women too is brought to the fore in *The God of Small Things*. Comrade Pillai's pronunciation of the word as "Die-voiced", confers mortality to Rahel. Divorcee Margaret is no more than a whore in Mammachi's eyes. Baby Kochamma's attitude towards deserted Ammu is typically Indian. Indian society sometimes accepts widowhood graciously, but not a divorced girl. A widow does not have any status either in her parents' house or in society. The fact becomes clear from the comments made by Baby Kochamma:

"She subscribed wholeheartedly to the commonly held view that a married daughter had no position in her parent's home. As for a divorced daughter –according to baby Kochamma, she had no position anywhere at all." (45-46).

3.6. Gendered Subaltern Other

Gendered subalternity is a theoretical, psychological and social construct. Chacko misses no chance of exploiting his women employees. He pays the factory workers less than they deserve. Though Ammu did as much work in the factory as Chacko, whenever he was dealing with food inspectors or sanitary engineers, he always referred to it as 'my factory', 'my pineapples', 'my pickles'. Legally, this was the case because Ammu, as a daughter, had no claim to property (57). What is Chacko's is Chacko's and what is her's is also Chacko's (Hossain, 2012: 107-133). Ammu's position in Paradise Pickles as a business partner illustrates the status of corporate women in India. She becomes a gendered subaltern in her family and a marginalized other in the factory.

Ammu is robbed of her rights and opportunity to continue her education like her brother, Chacko, who enjoys all the privileges of studying abroad. He goes to Oxford to pursue his higher education. Pappachi violates the principles of equal opportunity by depriving Ammu of higher education. Pappachi stands as a typical orthodox Syrian Christian patriarch who inculcates the beliefs that college education is an unnecessary expense for a girl (38). Pappachi also neglects and escapes his fatherly duty of seeking marriage proposals from eligible grooms for his daughter, Ammu. After her separation from her husband, Ammu was compelled to come back to Ayemenem, her father's house, her brother's house only to live like a colonized slave, like a subaltern other, and an exile in her own land (Kundu, 2001: 43). *The God of Small Things* "emerges as a strong statement of love and strong indictment of all that inhibits in." Roy is against the hypocrisies and irrationalities of patriarchy, pseudo idealism whether Marxian or Christian, legitimacy of marriage and meaningless masculine prerogative.

3.7. Casteism in Promoting Subalternization

Casteism and class feeling is a social and cultural construct. In India higher caste people enjoy more wealth and opportunities than lower caste people who perform manual jobs. Among the lower

caste people, untouchables have the lowest standing and usually the lowest economic position. The 'touchable' workers at Paradise Pickles sniff at Velutha because Paravans are not meant to be carpenters (77,159). Though Velutha is more skilled than any other workers in the factory, he is paid less by Chacko. He exploits Velutha on the ground of his being an untouchable Pariah. Untouchables happen to turn to be a subaltern race in post-independent Indian society.

Inspector Matthew and the 'crusader of the oppressed' Comrade Pillai, willfully shake hands with each other to favour the false FIR lodged against him by schemy Baby Kochamma, merely on the ground that all of them are touchable whereas Velutha is an untouchable. Comrade Pillai does not even mention that he is a member of the Communist Party. At another place comrades are seen discussing with Chacko, the owner of the Paradise Pickles, Velutha's dismissal from his job (279).

When Chacko came to know the relation of Ammu and Velutha he threatened her to oust her from the house and to break all her bones. In the eyes of Syrian upper class Christians the untouchables Veluthas and Vellaya Pappans are not human beings; they are no more valuable than the lowly beasts. To the former the later are Pariahs, the 'Pariah dogs' only. Caste consciousness is so pervasive in Indian society that the pure and the high try all sorts of tactics to flaunt their superiority. The maid-servant Kochu Maria puts on Kunukku in her sewn-up earlobes just to impress others about her touchableness (70).

Velutha is deprived of the opportunity of developing his innate engineering skill to full fruition due to his social inferior position. "...that if only he hadn't been Paravan, he might had become an engineer." The comment highlights the concept of untouchability. Roy gives a graphic description of the suffering of untouchables or the subaltern other in *The God of Small Things*. The Paravans like other untouchables were not permitted to walk on public roads. They were not allowed to cover the upper part of their bodies. They were not allowed to carry umbrellas. They had to put their hands on their mouths when they spoke to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed (74). Because of the low status in society they were not even allowed to enter the house of any respectable Syrian Christian in Kerala. When Velutha went to Mammachi to plead innocence against the fake charge of murder and abduction Mammachi treated him like the subaltern other in a colonized society. Mammachi spat on Velutha hurling inaudible abusive language at him:

"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)

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

Subalternization leaves a traumatic scar on the mind of the victims leading them to lose their mental equilibrium, individual identity and social recognition. They lead a psychologically disturbed life. A feeling of insecurity as an outcast in the family and an alienated social being haunts them throughout their life. Such shocking and traumatic experience helps create a psycho-generation who are physically disabled and mentally handicapped. Rahel and Estha bear good

testimony to this fact. Vainglorious attitude regarding class distinction, prejudiced standing about love and marriage, snobbish and fake concept of family traditions and values bring no profit either for the individual or for the society. Rather, they create new problems ranging from family discord to pushing a person to undertake a suicidal attempt in utter frustration or killing, vandalizing or sex-perversion or to creating other chaotic situations in society. Arundhuti Roy expresses his deep concern about the freedom of expression and the restoration of the right to live and love regardless of caste, colour and gender.

5. CONCLUSION

The God of Small Things emerges as a novel of protest. It is an assertion of the subaltern other or the marginal other through meaningful self expression which transgresses socially given relationships. Ammu, Velutha, Rahel, and Estha are the spokespersons of Roy. Through Ammu, Estha and Rahel, Roy voices the female self and sensibility. She aims at exploring the female psyche boldly encountering male chauvinism, patriarchy, social discrimination, political exploitation, sexual subjugation, religious vandalism, with the assertion of their authority and identity. Ammu views her marriage with Velutha as a release from her imprisoned life. She represents the resistant post-colonial spirit. She becomes the spokesperson of the author herself. In marrying a Bangali 'Dalit', she attempted to obtain social dignity and ensure the right to fulfill her sexual and emotional needs. Velutha prompted to violate age-old love-laws which forbid genuine cross-cultural relationship. When Ammachi humiliated and threatened him to kill, he boldly protested Ammachi's fulmination replying "We'll see about that" (285). It is a protest of untouchables, a protest of the silent and the subaltern other. Though Ammu and Velutha were finally silenced by the state apparatuses and patriarchal society, they have at least been able to raise their voice for a space for both the 'cultural other', the 'subaltern other' and the 'biological other' (women) in the male dominating and caste committed society.

The twins, Rahel and Estha's incestuous love, bears the trait of protest against traditions, custom and love-laws. Social, economical, political and psychological repression often leads people to enjoy sex perversion (Hossain, 2012:120). Roy registers her protest against patriarchal systems of operations and exploitations by articulating a feminine sensibility in her novel *The God of Small Things* and by demonstrating their equal footing with the male counterparts having the parameters of their own. Roy attempts to offer a set of directions in her fiction to change and to define the status of women in Indian society. She supports the rebellious perspectives of women and gestures at the prospect of the emergence of a healthy society inhabited by a new generation who would find space enough to live a decent life with the guarantee to love and marry anyone. The subaltern other thus finds a voice and speaks out in safeguarding his/her rights in Roy's *The God of Small Things*.

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