

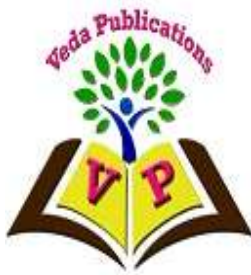


## SHADOWS OF FORGOTTEN SUBALTERNs: EVOLVING NEW IDENTITY IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*

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### ABSTRACT



Arundhati Roy's, novel removes a complicated historical heritage observed with restraints and indignations. Its local fictional world extends into a universal one with its sensitive depiction of perennial conflicts and offers suitable fodder for its international readers. It has as its backdrop a social construction characterized by compulsions of a pervasive caste system. The oppressive system legitimizing social segregation and mutual exclusion has not been inverted by Marxism and Christianity. The very shape of the fictitious tale enlisting kid's linguistic idiosyncrasies through a brief recreation of their perspectives as against the normative and institutionalized language the adults imply the transgressive breaching of the entrenched confines of history. It sets up the dominant paradigms of History as a counterpoint of the biology of individual volition- the primordial constraints of the primeval affection rules upon Identity. The assertion of biology or nature against customs or nurture - the fictitious tale's core issue is recognized with the conflated sexual transgressions of the characters. Ammu, Chacko's young sister who has returned to Ayemenem after a failed inter-community marriage.

**Keywords:** *Subaltern, Discrimination, Social Conventions, Patriarchal Society, Victimization.*

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The division of caste plays a major role in separating the people of India. The permanent solution of the caste is not possible until the discrimination based caste and creed comes to an end. In recent time, a new importance is given to the word 'subaltern' in the Indian cultural context as it considers the subordination based on caste, class, age and gender. The term 'Dalit' is vividly referred in the academic circles than the word 'subaltern' and it shows the suppressed sections of the society. Dalit issues have an ancient history. These issues were the direct result of the Hindu caste system. There were four major class distributions in the society such as Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. Dalits have been represented by novelists like Mulk Raj Anand in the pre-independent era and Arundhati Roy in the post-modern era. He was the first novelist who showed the victimization of Dalit in various strata of the society.

Gramsci was credited with explaining a recent dimension to Marxist theory by presenting the term 'subaltern'. He was a humanist who could rotate the Marxist theory more applicable to the lower section of the society. Gramsci inculcated the technique of persuasion to get social justice in the society. He adopted the term subaltern to refer to those classes in the society who are destined to the hegemony of the dominant class. The non-hegemonic classes have been denied near approach to power. The subaltern class does not have a history but their history can be described and then it would appear to be intricate as that of the higher classes. The subaltern classes would get their voice when the subaltern history is perfectly written and presented. But the history of the influential class has become the official one, providing no space for the subaltern to raise their voice. Antonio Gramsci expressed that the marginalized people by themselves are not systematized and they have less approach to the power of representation.

Subaltern studies were launched in India in the beginning of 1980 with the various editions of Subaltern Studies: *Writings on South Asian History and Society* by Ranjit Guha. In the preface to the first volume, Guha emphasized that his purpose was to develop an organized and thoughtful discourse of subaltern terms in the field of south Asian Studies

and to rectify the elitist bias and characteristic of creative works on this topic. Subaltern studies assist to clear the history of the labour class and their emancipation in future. The subaltern studies are important in case of India as India was a subaltern of British Colony and after getting freedom from the shackles of Britishers; Indians were subordinated to the neo-colonialism of the Western World.

Arundhati Roy has widely depicted the numerous injustices against the marginalized and in particular the troubles of the Dalit Christians in her novel *The God of Small Things*. When the Christian missionaries came to Kerala, they started converting people of lower section, such as Pulayas and Parayas into Christianity. The newly converted Christians became completely depressed when the high class within the church rejected them as unwanted class. The miserable condition of this class has been represented in her novel, *The God Small Things* from a historical point of view.

Roy has delineated subalternity in a hierarchical structure of power in her novel *The God of Small Things*. Roy creates a demarcation between the suppresser and the suppressed in the third chapter of the novel and it is being titled as "The Big Man Laltain, Small Man the Mombatti". By the word 'Laltain' Roy defines the dominant class people and Mombatti refers to the lower class of the society. The two main characters of the novel Velutha and Ammu Create the Mombattis in the novel and all the other power exerting people, such as Chacko, Baby Kochamma and Comrade Pillai come under the banner of Laltains. Velutha is a victim of marginalized Caste. He is the representation of the untouchable in the novel *The God of Small Things*. He is dark in colour and there is an irony within the nomenclature Velutha, as it signifies 'something White'. Comrade Pillai, who is supposed to safeguard the rights of the people, works against Velutha for reasons of Caste:

He may be very well okay as a person. But other workers are not happy with him. Already they are coming to me with complaints... you see comrade, from local stand point, these caste issues are very deep-rooted.

(Roy 278)



Velutha, in the novel, *The God of Small Things* was tortured by the police for an unknown cause. He was accused of murdering Sophie Mol and molesting Ammu. When Mammachi heard about the illicit relationship between Ammu and Velutha, she called Velutha to Ayemenem house. Roy delineates:

When Velutha arrived, Mammachi lost her bearings and spewed her blind venom, her class, insufferable insults, at a panel in the sliding-folding door until Baby Kochamma tactfully swiveled her around and aimed her rage in the right direction, at Velutha standing very still in the room. (283-284).

Baby Kochamma fabricated a story to take revenge upon Velutha for his relationship with Ammu. Since Velutha was a subaltern, the police became inhuman to him. Velutha met Comrade Pillai for assistance since he was a Card-holder of the communist party. Pillai refused to assist him and reminded him:

It's not in the party's interest to take such matters. Violating party discipline means violating party unity.

(Roy 28)

Velutha was neglected both by the police and the political party to which he owed his allegiance. When Velutha was in police custody, Ammu appealed to police that Velutha was innocent. But Ammu was humiliated in the police station by the police inspector Thomas Mathew. The subalterns have no scope for convincing things. They have been compelled to maintain the age old tradition of silence by the Laltains. Both Velutha and Ammu failed in their effort to express to their authority. The Mombattis have never been permitted to raise their voice against Laltains, as they have been suppressed.

Arundhati Roy in her novel *The God of Small Things* has showed difficulties and the deplorable situations of the people who are segregated on the basis of their caste. During colonial period, caste segregation existed among the Keralites. And when Christianity came with an option of casteless religion, some of the lower section people readily converted to that religion with an anticipation of living in a casteless society. They were never able to satiate

their anticipation, as they had saved their lives from drowning into the water.

The Pulayas joined the Anglican Church to escape the scourge of untouchability. They get little money and food as an added incentive. They were acknowledged as rice Christians. They were created to have separate churches, with separate services and separate priests. As a special favour, they were even provided their own separate parish bishop. After independence, they got that they were not entitled to any government advantages like job reservation or bank loans at low interest rates as officially on paper they were Christians and therefore they did not belong to any caste. It was like a having to clean footprints without a broom. Or worse, not being permitted to leave foot prints at all.

The newly converted Christians were divided between two classes- one is not willing to accept and one is already discarded them. Mammachi summons to her memory the rigid caste structure that existed in our Country.

Velutha dared not to sweep off his footprints as his forefathers used to act when the caste system was noticed. But in this independent democratic India, his footprints are deleted by the authority, especially the police and the political party, for his venture to create affection towards a touchable female. Baby Kochamma lured Estha and Rahel with false convictions that were accountable for the demise of Sophie Mol. It is a horrible thing to take person's life. It's a bad thing that anyone can ever perform. Even Almighty do not forgive that baby Kochamma threatened the kids to protest Velutha for the demise of Sophie Mol, in order to protect their lives and that of Ammu the kids consented the proposal of Baby Kochamma to rescue Ammu and thereby maintain the respect of the family. It was Baby Kochamma who chose Estha, recognizing him to be the more practical and accountable of the two.

Velutha in the novel *The God of Small Things*, ceased in the police custody at the Kottayam Police Station. The police did not pay heed to his condition as he was a Dalit and not help by anyone. Velutha was dumped in the pauper's pit even though he was a Christian. An innocent carpenter who had the present of an engineer, had to happen the scapegoat for the honour of Ayemenem family. Baby



Kochamma and Comrade Pillai were accountable for the inhuman demise of Velutha. The ceasing minutes of Velutha in the police station had been presented by Roy in the novel as:

Boot on bone. On teeth, the muffled grunt when a stomach is kicked... his skull was fractured in three places.

His nose and both his cheek bones was smashed, leaving his face pulpy, undefined, The blow to his mouth had split his upper lip and broken six teeth . Four of his ribs were splintered,one had pierced his left lung, which was what made him bleed from his mouth.

(Roy 308-310)

Subalternity in terms of Gender is remarkable. Women suffer during war time and in peacetime. She has to struggle in a condition where every protest has a purpose in feminism. She is tagged along for every revolution the concerns, the community, yet she has to wage her own car in a condition where only empty rights prevail; where each trivial victory is but a concise escapade. At the lower section level, a more watched landscape exhibits itself: Dalit females are paraded naked, raped: her kids and spouse, are compelled to drink urine: she is created to carry shit on her head and informed to force it down her throat too. She is ostracized prostitute. Even lower caste people have debased her to a level lower than where they get themselves in; from where they are demanding for freedom.

Subalterns are presented among the educated rich people. The submissive women are suppressed by the male dominant concepts and world opinions. Ammu in the novel happens unwanted in her own home after her love marriage fails with a Bengali man. Women had no authority to family property after their marriage, especially in the Christian denomination. When Ammu comes back to her home, Chacko asserts his status by saying that the house belongs to him. Chacko once again creates the concept clear by telling Ammu that everything belongs to her.

Pappachi did not provide higher education to Ammu, while Chacko had gone to Oxford for higher studies. Ammu chose her future husband

where she lived in Calcutta with her distant aunt. She realized that her father won't provide her any dowry as everything belonged to males in this patriarchal society. Ammu had to discard her spouse when he asked her to sacrifice her honor for a stranger. The opinion of the male dominated society is expressed through words of Baby Kochamma who subscribed wholeheartedly to the commonly held opinion that a married daughter had no status in her parent's home. As for divorced daughter, she had no status anywhere at all. And as for a divorced daughter from a love-marriage, words could not define Baby Kochamma's outrage. As for a divorced daughter form an inter-community love marriage, Baby Kochamma selected to remain quivering silent on the topic.

Ammu was dominated by her family members for her affinity with Velutha. She has to search a service outside for her survival. But she was observed dead at the Bharat Lodge in Alleppey, where she had appeared for a service interview as someone's secretary. The church refused to bury her as she had protested against the rules of the church. Ammu's deceased body was cremated in an electronic crematorium. Mammachi had complete affection for her son Chacko as he had stopped.

Papachi's great blows on Mammachi who permitted Chacko's Man's requirements with the poor females of the factory. Mammachi had created a different entrance for Chacko's room so that the object of his requirements would not have to leave traipsing through the house.

The word Subaltern is very relative. Velutha is a subaltern as he appertains to the lower section of the society. Chacko, who asserts all the strength in Ayemenem house, became a subaltern when he reaches Oxford for higher education. When we compare female with male, female became the subaltern. So, the subaltern class may alter their identity and may become powerful one as in the case of Chacko. Chacko and Ammu committed the same mistake but the entire case was handled differently by the male-dominated society. The hypocrisy of the society was observed through the treatment of Chacko and Ammu episode where Ammu was horribly tortured.



Gayatri Spivak defines the theory of subalternity in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" She gave a challenge to the race and group inhuman of the western academy, demanding "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In the terms of colonial production the subaltern has no written background and can't speak: the subaltern as woman is more profoundly in shadow. It is the fact in case of Velutha and Ammu in the novel *The God of small things*. They are suppressed for the sake of others and they have to carry the badge of humiliation and contempt for all their lives. The subalterns attempt to voice but they are not able to have transactions between the speakers and the listeners. When Velutha was arrested by the police, Ammu went to the police station to manage things in order. Ammu happened the object of laughter when police inspector retorted, stating that the police realized all they required to understand and that the Kottayan police did not receive statements from Vaishyas or the illegitimate children. The subaltern speech is being misinterpreted by the authorities as they have no power. So, the interaction does not take place between the speaker and the listener as the message is being distorted by the other elements. The subaltern is compelled to live in silence even when they attempt to articulate it to the authorities. As Kate Millett points out:

When a system of power is thoroughly in command, it has scarcely a need to speak itself aloud. When it's working is exposed and questioned it becomes not only subjected to discussion even to change. (Millett 58)

Dalit men protest to victimization. They suffer at the hand of the upper section of society by giving it out on their spouses and their daughters. Perhaps this is one of the worst tragic tales of humanity that they suppressed themselves, try to fill the gap by dominating their females to drudgery and further torture. Simon and C. Varghese point out:

Women, especially upper caste women, contribute to the oppression by protecting their own subjugation, willingly or unwillingly. They not only adhere to the status quo, they help it perpetuate by keeping the spiral of silence intact. When

they accept the status quo, life is much easier and they don't have to fight for anything. They get perks and rewards. Patriarchs are also happy because the existential order is not altered.

(Simon and Varghese 243)

India is a country of varieties and vitalities and unity in diversity seems to be driving of our nation. But a lot of disparities in the name of religion and caste exist within the nation. Artificial divisions are being promoted by the vested private interests. People are divided on the basis of caste so as to cause divisions in the society. The primary objective of such kind of class system seems to give cheap work available in the society. The untouchables have been commenced of the fact that it was their moral obligation to form the menial job.

Mulk Raj Anand has attempted to erase untouchability from the society. Anand was inspired by Gandhian principles to struggle the menace of caste system in our nation. As Anand wrote in *Untouchable*:

Why are we always abused? The sanitary inspector that day abused my father. They always abuse us. Because we are sweepers. Because we touch dung. They hate dung. I hate too: that is why I came here. I was tired of working on the latrines every day. That is why they don't touch us- the high castes.

(Anand 58)

Gandhi has visited numerous places in our nation to pacify the agitations and he was real prophet to carry out the message of fraternity. When the constitution of India was drafted by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar; he had laid extraordinary rights to the scheduled tribes and caste. These rights are enjoyed by the people only on the situation that they should have enough documents to prove their identity as per the government rules. Arundhati Roy has concentrated in her novel *The God of small Things* on the issue of rigid caste system. Roy's novel explores how the Parayas and Pulyas have lost all their advantages of reservation in the name of caste. Even after independence, the marginalization of the Dalits still continues to hold its prominent place in the society. The Dalits are naturally gifted people who



can excel in numerous aspects but the societal class system does not permit them to act so Tejerro comments:

The first generation of women in the novel give extreme importance to patriarchal social norms, indeed they succumb to them. When it is publicly discovered that Ammu, a respectable high-class woman, also has 'Women's Needs', the situation becomes unbearable to the traditional conservative sector of the community. (Tejerro 105)

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