



# Different Aspects of Subaltern in Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things

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**Abstract:** Meaning – The word ‘Subaltern’ denotes a person holding a subordinate or an inferior position. ‘Subaltern Studies’ gained momentum in the last part of the 20th century. Antonio Gramsci, ( 1891-1937) an Italian Marxist, thinker adopted the term ‘Subaltern’ in a sense of ‘inferior rank’, to refer to those working class people in Soviet Union, who were subjected to the hegemony of the ruling class. The working class includes peasants and workers who were denied of hegemonic power. The term ‘Subaltern’ has been adopted by a team of historians who are known as the ‘Subaltern Studies Group’ who aimed at promoting a discussion on Subaltern themes. They used the term ‘Subaltern’ to refer to the prevailing subordination in terms of class, gender, race in the South Asian Society. The group consisted of such members as Ranjith Guha, Dipesh Chakrabarty and Gyanendra Pandey. etc. The concept of ‘Subaltern’ gained more prominence and currency with Gayatri Spivak’s essay “Can the Subaltern speak?” (1985). In this essay, Gayatri Spivak an Indian literary critic, a practical Marxist feminist, focuses on some of the problems of the Third World Women. Her opinion is that if in the context of colonial production the Subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the Subaltern as a female is even more deeply in shadow. The Booker Prize winner Arundhati Roy is one of the contemporary intrepid Indian English writers who dream to change the world by raising voice against the existing injustice, discrimination and convention of the society which try to marginalize human being into nothingness, suppress and control individual’s identity in a boundary. Her outstanding novel The God of Small Things (1997) is a tragic resonance of “The subaltern”. This term is defined by many critics such as Gramsci and Spivak who limit it only to proletariat and women respectively. 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. This paper attempts to study is an attempt 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.

**Keywords:** post colonization, casteism, subaltern, untouchable, gender, class subjugation.

## Introduction

A few dozen hours can affect the outcome of whole lifetimes and that when they do those few dozen hours like the salvage remains of a burnt cloth must be resurrected from the ruins and examined—this is the premise of Arundhati Roy’s 1997 novel The God of Small Things. The setting of the story is a town named Ayemenem in Kerala India, the story revolves around the fraternal twins Rahel and Esther. The whole narrative is woven from the point of view of the twins as they reunite and navigate through various phases and experiences of life. The narrative takes place mostly in the past reconstructing the events that led to the tragic separation of the twins.

The novel features a range of subaltern subjects-widowed and divorced women, working poor ostracized by their caste, children caught between elite and non-elite formations, and a community of Syrian-Orthodox Christians occupying a hybrid, uncertain space in the midst of a dominant Hindu majority. Taken together, their predicament serves as a pivot around which Roy spins a fascinating, aesthetically rewarding narrative.

Although the novel opens in an unexpected note with Rahel and Esther being reunited in Ayemenem, the actual opening of the novel can be traced to the part where Ammu comes to Ayemenem after her father's retirement. Ammu's extremely strict Indo-Anglican father was an Imperial Entomologist under the British rule and after Independence he worked as a Joint Director of Entomology. Ammu's father was a bad-tempered man but his wife was a docile and meek woman. Roy shows how submissive Mammachi is constantly suffered at the hands of her husband. However, she eventually starts her own business of pickle named 'Paradise Pickles and Preserves' when her husband retires.

We get to know from the narrative that Ammu's brother Chacko is sent to Oxford for higher studies but Ammu's education is suddenly stopped by her parents. She is forced to learn household chores so that she can get a husband easily. Arundhati Roy describes, „Pappachi insisted that a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl, so Ammu had no choice but to leave Delhi and move with them.” This leads to a bitter relationship between Ammu and her parents. She wanted to escape and this is why she married a Bengali-Hindu man in Calcutta. Gradually, Ammu finds out that her husband is an alcoholic. Ammu became a victim of domestic violence. He even has no qualm of conscience as he gets ready to sacrifice Ammu's honour to save his job. Ammu's suffering grows with the course of time and she finally divorces her abusive husband and returns to Ayemenem. Chacko, Ammu's brother welcomes Ammu and the children. However, Ammu's children, Esther and Rahel are considered as doomed, fatherless waifs; because they were Half- Hindu, hybrids who, according to Baby Kochamma, have no self-respect and Syrian Christians would never marry them. The birth of dizygotic twins, Estha and Rahel and Sophie Mol's death become significant incidents in the novel. These incidents play a major role in the novel and make everyone suffer.

A very significant part of the novel is dedicated to represent the conditions of the Paravans—the low caste people, the ultimate victims of society's disparity. Roy describes the conditions of Paravan, „Pappachi would not allow Paravans into the house. Nobody would. They were not allowed to touch anything that Touchables touched.” she also describes, „Mammachi told Estha and Rahel that she could remember a time, in her girlhood, when Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan's footprint“.

Caste and religion have always been an integral part of India's socio-cultural scenario. Roy in this novel has displayed how different types of subalterns suffer. The issue of inter caste marriage and relationships play a catalyst role in the life of Ammu as well as her children. The narrative of *The God of Small Things* describes that Ammu has married a Hindu man and later divorced him when find him alcoholic. Later, she willingly breaks the so-called sacred laws of love and sex while sleeping with Paravan, Velutha. The issue of the subjugation of the subalterns is displayed through multiple aspects. Arundhati Roy presents 'a variety of the subaltern' (Hajela 195): Class subaltern (Velutha), gendered subaltern (Ammu) and age subaltern (Estha and Rahel). Velutha is a paravan, the untouchable, who is allowed to work in the factory of Mammachi because of his great skills in carpentry. When his affair with Ammu is revealed Mammachi spits on his face and lodges a false F.I.R of rape and abduction against him. The way the police treats Velutha is a clear representation of how the subalterns' voices are often repressed by the authority. He is brutally tortured and beaten to death by the police without any investigation. While Velutha represents class subordination, Ammu represents sex/gender subordination. Although Ammu has always been a rebel, she has been educationally neglected by her father Pappachi who considered college education as unnecessary for girls. She has been exploited by her husband, a Hindu business executive, for his career prospects, and divorced. While back to her parent's house 'As for a divorced daughter according to Baby Kochamma, she had no position anywhere at all'. Leading a loveless life, she discovers her love in Velutha: 'To love by night the man her children loved by day'. Roy describes the love laws; „the Love Laws ... The laws that

lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much. However, for practical purposes, in a hopelessly practical world...”

### **Subaltern ‘other’ in God of Small Things**

India in the post sixties was scrutinized and its caste and gender issues are well highlighted the God of Small Things. It is set in the postcolonial Kerala grappling with the cross-culture issues. Ayemenem itself becomes an epicentre of dissention where the subalterns like Veutha and his father had to face the consequences of an overly anglicised world which defines its own set of ‘love rules’. The Paradise Pickles and Preserves is a symbol of empire in post-independence India. It represents Industrialization and modernisation which promised to change the future but in reality, this factory fails to become a paradise for the powerless, he ostracized and the ‘Dalits’. The factory workers are regulated by Chacko who himself is a symbol of colonization. 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. It becomes a centre of oppression for women and the Dalits. Hence, the factory workers are the ultimate example for ‘the subaltern other’.

### **Patriarchy and Subalternization of Women**

Patriarchy is another name of colonisation of gender. It is culturally and socially appropriated. 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. Pappachi never approved Mammachi’s pickle making job. He is annoyed by the social attention that Mammachi receives and brutally puts an end to her talent for music. 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 male voice in the novel, enjoys all privileges from childhood. He is sent to Oxford for studies while his sister’s studies are denied. He even sexually harasses the women factory workers but gets away with it because Mammachi supports it. 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. Roy’s *The God of Small Things* is a protest against the abuse of power, politics of gender, social systems and norms that robs women of their free will and custom and religion that ostracizes women as a result of patriarchal norms. Ammu in her own rebellious way tries to go against the ‘love rules’ set-in stone by the society and faces the most unfortunate consequences. A woman’s voice gets suppressed and killed by the brutal forces of authority. Velutha’s death is not only a death of a person but also the death of basic human rights of Dalits or the subalterns.

### **Voice of the colonised**

Ammu is an ambivalent character. She embodies traits of both colonised and the exotic ‘Other’. Throughout her life, we see her getting tortured by her overly strict father, alcoholic husband and an irresponsible brother. The society treats her as an outcast who has no identity except the tag of divorcee on her. She is treated as an object sans desires and hence, she becomes doubly colonised. She is a woman subjugated by the society as well as her own tormented past. As inferred in McLeod “a double colonization refers to the fact that women are twice colonized-by colonist realities and representations and by patriarchal ones too”. Her anger and frustration blurt out as she goes beyond the social norms by defying its love laws. She also impinges upon the vulnerability of a man who is much inferior to her. In seducing Velutha, a paravan, her revenge upon the patriarchal world is complete and in her moral transgression, her colonial identity is invalidated. Ammu’s character shows a dichotomy between being silently tortured and trying to resist it boldly. After suffering an unhappy childhood, she grows into a young woman who has unknowingly acquired her oppressive father’s obstinacy in her refusal to follow the normal order, the accepted codes and to dwell midway in her native past and the disoriented present which her colonizers had imposed upon her.

As a single divorcee mother, she is by default treated as degraded and fallen. She is sexually exploited by her husband and as a defenceless sister: she is cruelly abandoned by her brother. On the other extreme, she is a figure of awe and admiration for her children, the protective mother, the most beautiful woman they had ever seen, they are always afraid of being loved a little less by her, can make any sacrifice to get back that lost portion of her love, they are careful not to disturb her dreams lest they give her a heart attack but most of all they are awed by their unpredictable mother “who wore flowers in her hair and carried magic secrets in her eyes”, who smoked cigarettes and had midnight swims and who could easily set aside “the morality of motherhood and divorcee-hood” and walk a “wilder sort of walk”. In dying, she leaves behind in the form of her children, distorted portions of herself, they are like two halves of her personality, lost and withered and searching for a wholesome union : to become “a single unit” once again.

Ammu herself becomes the transgressor of societal norms when she embarks upon her affair with the paravan Velutha. A unique character, Ammu loves unconditionally and unconventionally. She looks at Velutha as the God of her small world. In Velutha she submits to her own identity as she subjugates all taboos. she prefers the Small God to the Big God which is another act of resistance because instead of succumbing to the Big God of malevolence she worships the small god of love and benevolence. Her seduction of Velutha at once makes her the colonizer and the colonized. Her inherent rebelliousness converts her into a symbol of menace as it says: On the days that the radio played Ammu’s songs, everyone was a little wary of her. They sensed somehow that she lived in the penumbral shadows between two worlds, just beyond the grasp of their power. That a woman they had already damned, now had little left to lose, and could therefore be dangerous (Roy, *The God of Small Things*, 44, 2002). She is powerful because she had acquired the rigor of two opposing cultures and she remains till the end of the novel in a state of double colonization because she had suffered the most debilitating effects of these cultures, each of which had relegated her to the position of the desirable yet contemptuous Other.

### **Casteism**

The caste based social system has always been a matter of concern in India. People of high caste have the privilege to more opportunities and wealth. The clear demarcation between the high caste and lower caste is always present in almost every sector of the Indian society. In *The God of Small Things*, the ‘untouchable’ Velutha is looked down upon by other workers at Paradise Pickles. He is payed less than other workers in the factory because of his untouchable status inspite of his superior working skills. 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. Velutha consequently, is dismissed from his job at the factory and everyone supports this. 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.

Velutha, the ‘God of Small things’ is deprived of the opportunity to develop his skill as a carpenter and improve his conditions. As a lower caste Paravan he is by default, treated as an animal. . 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. 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.

## 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 postcolonial 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. The age old "love laws" are tested and crucified at the altar of society which sees a woman as an object and a Paravan as subhuman.

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