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# Cross-currents of Subaltern & Gyno-critical perspectives in Arudhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* : An Analysis

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Gynotext and diasporic women writers on women are so closely related that *ecriture feminine* seems to be solely concerned about the marginalization of women in the patriarchal mainstream setup. In this regard 'gynotext' is nothing but ***gynocriticism*** in velvet gloves. Like Julia Kristeva, other leading French feminist critics also associated with feminine writing with the female body. Helen Cixous, for example, posited an essential connection between women's bodies, whose sexual pleasure has been repressed, and women's writing. "Write yourself. Your body must be heard", Cixous urged in an essay entitled "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976). Cixous believed that recognizing this connection would enable women not only to realize their sexuality but to enter history and move toward a future based on 'feminine' economy of giving rather than the 'masculine' economy of hoarding. Luce Irigaray focused on women's sexual pleasure (***jouissance***), arguing that it could not be expressed by the dominant masculine language. Irigaray explored the connection between women's sexuality and women's language through the following analogy in a book entitled Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un (*This Sex Which is not One*, 1977): just as women's ***jouissance*** is more multiple than men's unitary, phallic pleasure, so 'feminine' language is more diffusive than its 'masculine' counterpart.

This emphasis on feminine writing as an expression of the female body drew criticism from almost all the quarters – the French feminists, the North American feminists and others. The group of North American feminist critics, including Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, Patricia Meyer Spacks, and Elaine Showalter, created a different model, which Showalter herself dubbed ***gynocriticism***. In ***A Literature of Their Own,*** Showalter outline just such a tradition by providing comprehensive overview on women's writing through three of its phases. She defined these as the "Feminine, Feminist, and Female" phases, phases during which women imitated a masculine tradition (1840-1880). Protested against its standards and values (1880-1920), and advocated their own autonomous, female perspective (1920- present). In this context prominent writers like Kamala Das, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgel, Shobha De, Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapoor, Jhumpa Lahiri, and above all, Arundhati Roy have emerged as the most significant voices

against the feminine marginalization. Especially, Arundhati Roy's ***The God of Small Things*** represents, in my humble view, layers of voices of marginality with a garb of creative ***gynotext*** that forms a class in itself.

A land of lush green backwaters, deceptively beautiful, "Past butterflies drifting through the air like happy messages./Huge forms/A Chameleon/A startling shoeflower/The scurry of gray jungle fowl running for cover" (305) and across the unpredictable, wild Meenanchal river to the Ayemenem house presents three generations – the descendants of the venerable Rev. E. John Ipe and Aleyooty Ammachi – who broke the rules, crossed into forbidden territory, tampered with the laws that lay down who should be loved and how and how much and conjured up "a time when the unthinkable became thinkable and the impossible really happened" (31).

In ***The God of Small Things***, Roy unfolds an excruciatingly beautiful tale in cinematographical style, of the disintegration of a family set in postcolonial milieu focusing on Kottayam district where Syrian Christians were dominant in a community that naturally adapted to the English language and culture. The atrocities and horrors that flash by in fragments – of crushed innocents, of conflicting marriages, of police custodial deaths, of cruel casteism, of masculine hegemony – all victims of irrational societal norms project one face of postcolonial India "a picture of the uncivilized, brutal and almost a tribal society that India appears to the western world" (Vimala Rama Rao et al. 46). Yet within that dark face of India, plural voices emerge from the margins, shouting to be heard; and in a sense, that is what the novel is all about. The scope of this paper, therefore, is to identify those voices, especially the voice of the author raised in protest against rank oppressive forces, a critical voice that "eventually becomes the voice of your conscience" (Customer Comments, Online Review).

"The voice of children", avers Maria Calvis, "is very important because they come out with truths about themselves that sometimes adults overlook." Significantly, the novel is recalling life as seen through the eyes of the seven-year-old twins, of the traumatic experiences that led to loss of childhood, of powerlessness in an oppressive adult world that reduce their lives to nothingness. The dominant theme of the novel is "the intrusion of the violent and ugly adult world into the innocence, purity, fragility and make believe of childhood" (Vimala Rao, et al). The story centres around Estha and Rahel and the arrival of their cousin Sophie Mol and her mother, Margaret, from England. As a U.S. reader observes:

Roy captures the essence of growing up in the postcolonial third world. In depicts the loss of identity that one feels trying to belong to a colonizer's culture… one sees how even tiny people know 'their place'. How 'brown feet in Bata sandals' know where they stand in relation to white Sophie Mol. (Moria Calvis)

Estha and Rahel's existence in the Ayemenem house is shaky right from the beginning: to their grand aunt, Baby Kochamma, they are half-Hindus without a father, therefore 'little monsters and always suspect; even to the servant Kochu Maria, Sophie Mol is "sundarikutty, a little angel" and, the twins 'little demons'; for their beautiful, blind grandmother, Mammachi, the blindness extends to the soul in her blatant partiality to her white-skinned, blue grey blue-eyed granddaughter. With Sophie Mol in the limelight, the sense of insecurity deepens for the twins.

Little snatches of information and events underscore the single identity of the twins. They are described as dizygotic two-egg twins, Estha older by eighteen minutes. Although there was no confusion identifying them as usually happens with identical twins, the author explains that "the confusion lay in a deeper, more secret place" (2) for "Esthappen and Rahel thought of themselves together as me, separately, individually, as we or us. As though they were a rare breed of Siamese twins, physically separate, but with joint identities" (2). This is shown tangibly, as when Rahel feels the taste of the sandwich Estha eats in the train when he is 'returned' or when Rahel wakes up one night giggling at Estha'a funny dream. After twenty-three years of separation, when the twins meet again, memories are the only bridge that reunites them as they cross into forbidden territory in an amorphous relationship that defies definition, very much like Ammachi's banana jam that was neither jam proper nor jelly.

For the twins who are "Hansel and Gretel in a ghastly fairy tale" (293) there are precious few happy childhood memories. They share the childish habit of playfully reading words backwards – 'Pots' for 'Stop', 'Naidni Yub, Naidni Eb' for Be Indian Buy Indian – being precocious with their reading, which game is read as perversity and interpreted by Miss Mittins as "Satan in their eyes'. On the way to Abilash Theatre in Cochin, they are surrounded by some party men in the communist procession. One of them opens the car door on Rahel's side, speaks kindly to her asking if she is feeling hot, then jokingly adds," Ask your daddy to buy you an Air Condition!" (79) Rahel feels happy, pleased to have Chacko, her uncle, mistaken for her father, "Like a normal family" (79). The children enjoy playing with Velutha, greedy for love, even if it could come only from one, who to the adults is an 'untouchable'. Above all, they cling tenaciously to the affection of their mother and fear rejection, however mild it may be. Rahel, therefore, punishes herself by not having supper in the Lodge to make amends for having hurt Ammu earlier at the Theatre. She does this to regain the loss of her mother – "A little less her Ammu loved her" (112). When Sophie Mol appears on the scene, Rahel watches "hawk-eyed to try and guage how much Ammu loved Sophie Mol, but couldn't" (143). The culmination of the fear of loss of love occurs when Ammu shouts at the twins that they are two milestones and that she suffers because of them; careless words spilled in desperation, but also the oppressive language of a mother to children powerless to oppose. The harsh words drive the children to undertake measures that cause the tragedy of Sophie Mol's death inseparably affecting their own lives in the process.

Sophie Mol occupies centre stage of the play the family enacts, with Ammu and her children at the margins:

> *Rahel looked around her and saw that she was in a play.*
> *But she had only a small part.*
> *She was just a landscape. A flower perhaps. Or a tree.*
> *A face in the crowd. A townspeople.*
> *Nobody said hello to Rahel. Not even the Blue Army in the greenheat.*
> (172, 173)

The adulation and special treatment accorded to Margaret and Sophie Mol drives Ammu off stage from where they watch the high drama with disgust verging on rebellion. She begins to hope it had been Velutha at the procession after all, an insidious fatal attraction for Velutha growing within her as she

identifies with his "living breathing anger against the smug, ordered world" (176) that she so raged against. It set off the "rage of the suicide bomber" (144) that leads her to eventually "love the man her children loved by day" (44).

Velutha makes up for the loss of love and recognition of the twins and becomes "the god of small things". The term 'untouchable' is rendered-a-misnomer by Estha and Rahel effortlessly and she lands in his arms. He carries them on his back and treats them like a prince and princess. Velutha is privileged with the twins in a way Sophie Mol is not and they avoid her like poison. However, she manages to, persuade them to take her with them across the river, consequently letting loose terror. She herself ends up with death by water, a mere-child with red-brown hair floating down the Meenachal with fish-nibbled eyes.

Things change in a day for them. They wake up near the History House and bear silent witness to Velutha being crushed to death under the heels of policeman. More terror follows in the police station. Baby Kochamma heaps guilt on the children. She glibly calls them 'murderers' and tells them "what" matters is whether you want to go to jail and make Ammu go to jail because of you" (318). She tricks them into complaying with her suggestion that Estha should just say 'Yes' to identify Velutha in the lockup:

*The Inspector asked his question. Estha's mouth said 'yes'*
*Childhood tiptoed out.*
*Silence slid like a bolt.*
*Estha returns to Rahel and whispers in her ear:*
*You were right. It wasn't him. It was Urumban.*
*Thang god, Rahel whispered back*
*Where d'you think he is?*
*Escaped to Africa* (320)

They float on this fiction, this make-believe as a temporary safety value saving them from mental breakdown. However, the guilt remains. They reply the scene as children, as teenagers, as adults unable to resolve the extent of their role in the deaths of Ammu, Velutha and Sophie Mol. They are victims of adult exploitation. Instead of having them exorcise their memories that haunted them, they wind up feeling. They are sinners, not the sinned, perpetrators and not the victims.

Twenty-three years later, when the twins meet again, they are "A pair of actors trapped in a recondite play with no hint of plot or narrative. Stumbling, through their parts, nursing someone else's sorrow. Grieving someone else's grief' (191). Estha had "terrible pictures in his head" (32) that got lodged deeply within him, like "mango hair between molars Rahel drifted through childhood, drifted in and out of marriages, with empty eyes reflecting the quietness in Estha's soul. The lessons learnt from History too early in life had driven one insane and the other insecure for life. Destroyed childhood is a global crisis. As Leela Menon observes, "the reports of gun-toting school children in the U.S. killing and injuring of classmates testify to increasing psychological trauma and social alienation. In contrast, Indian children are more victims than offenders". Roy takes the smallest of the small, and shows how the sweet rose of innocence fades when they become victims of adult aggressiveness and cruelty.

A strong voice is raised against the system of patriarchal oppression operating in the Indian system. The God of Small Things presents complex relationships that are doomed one way or the other. It becomes the fertile ground for the study of various postcolonial issues of marginality such as gender bias, domestic violence, Anglophilia and dowry evil in a country where "various kinds of despair competed for primacy" (19), where between "the terror of war and the horror of peace" terrible things kept happening.

The lives of Mammachi and Pappachi involve an interesting study of domestic violence and anglophilia rolled into one. As Chacko avers, they are as a whole, a family of 'anglophiles' with an inclination for anything English-Chacko has an English wife, their obsession for watching "The Sound of Music," Ammu's fad for instilling love for the English language in the twins, Pappachi's unshakable good opinion of the covetous Mr. Hollick and of course, Pappachi's lifestyles, especially his manner of dressing "coasting down importantly down the narrow road in his wide car, looking outwardly elegant but sweating freely inside his woolen suits" (48). Roy pokes fun subtly at the ridiculous lengths anglophilia runs in the family, making them prisoners of a war won and lost, making them "adore our conquerors and despise ourselves" (53). The westernization stops with the externals. Inside, they are tradition-bound to the core.

Domestic violence begins with Pappachi's disappointment in not having been named after the moth he had discovered. "Pappachi's Moth was held responsible for his black moods and sudden bouts of temper. Its pernicious ghost… tormented him and his children and his children's children" (49) though Roy would have us believe that in reality he had been ill-tempered long before he discovered the moth. The disappointment becomes an excuse to legitimize his violence on wife and daughter. Ammu remembers the Father Bear Mother Bear stories she was given to read and how it really registers in her mind; in her version, "Father Bear beat Mother Bear with a brass vase. Mother Bear suffered those beatings with mute resignations" (180). As Ammu grows older, she develops "a lofty sense of injustice and the mulish, reckless streak that develops in someone small who has been bullied all their lives by someone Big" (181, 182). Chacko puts an end to Pappachi's beating Mammachi when he comes home for holidays. He had grown up and was strong. Pappachi never touched Mammachi thereafter, but he never spoke to her either as long as he lived. He brought out his favorite rocking chair and smashed it to pieces to vent out his frustration. He was jealous of his wife and the attention she was getting with her pickle factory and would not help her though she was almost blind. His Nirmala C. Prakash sees it, in the Mammachi – Pappachi relationship, they remain as islands and "fail to shape up as continents because their relationship lacks mutual love, understanding and adjustment" (36)

Double standard becomes the norm of this family. Pappachi is used to very gentle and decent behavior with outsiders but terrorizes his own family:

*He donated money to orphanages and leprosy clinics. He worked hard on his public profile as a sophisticated, generous, moral man. But alone with his wife and children he turned into a monstrous, suspicious bully, with a streak of vicious cunning. They were beaten, humiliated and then made to suffer the envy of friends and relations for having such a wonderful husband and father.* (180)

Chacko who saves his mother from the violence of his father mercilessly chases his sister out of 'his' house. Mammachi is no exception: to her Sophie Mol is "loved from the beginning" (137) whereas the twins are neglected. She subscribes to gender bias by recognizing Chacko's "men needs" and has a side door

leading to her son's room for the worker women to enter, while the same failing in her daughter, Ammu's relationship with Velutha, creates an uproar.

Tragedy strikes the family with the arrival of Sophie Mol; but that is only one way of looking at things. Basically, the family members suffer because of their distorted approach to Love Laws – the love laws that were made "long before Christianity arrived in a boat and seeped-into Kerela like tea from a tea bag" (33), the laws that lay down "***who should be loved and how. And how much***" (33). At twenty-seven Ammu's life had already been lived. She had married the first man who proposed to her because her father did not have the suitable dowry for her. Baby Kochamma, who "lived her life backwards" in her old age, had, remained a spinster for the same reason. She also shared the common view that a married daughter had no position in her parents' home:

*As for a divorced daughter – according to Baby Kochamma, she had no position anywhere at all. And as for a divorced daughter from a love marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochamma's outrage. As for a divorced daughter from an intercommunity love marriage – Baby Kochamma chose to remain quiveringly silent on the subject.* (45-46)

Marginalized thus, by both society and family (Chacko's my factory, my house, my wife etc, whereas Ammu and children have no "Locus Stand I") she flouts at society and its rigid ethical codes in rebellion, breaking Love Laws and destroying the twins she had tried so hard to protect. Ammu is a tragic victim, struggling against terribly tyrannical forces. In Indira Bhatt's view, "It is the helpessness of the powerless against the powerful ones" (Bhatt, 47).

The domination of men stifles, the voices of women as they fight against cruel patriarchy at different levels: Mr. Hollick, the English estate manager bequeathing on tea-pickers a number of ragged, fight-skinned children on the estate, Pappachi's rages and brutal attacks on wife and daughter, Father Mulligan's subtle emotional exploitation of ex-nun Baby Kochamma, and Chacko who enjoys the profits of the pickle factory run by Mammachi but would not lift a finger to defend the defenceless children of his own sister. On the other hand, the victims themselves become victimizers: "Mammachi provided the passion. Baby Kochamma the plan. Kocku Maria was their midget lieutenant" (258). It was Baby Kochamma's idea that Estha be returned to his father; this bitter, spiteful woman who deflects her hatred for Velutha on the children and Ammu. Goaded on by Baby Kochamma, Ammachi loses control for the first time in her life and becomes the cause for Ammu's suffering.

Throughout the novel there is a reference to Conrad's ***Heart of Darkness***; Roy subverts the theme, for in her work, Kunz is not the oppressor but the oppressed, the native with his heart of darkness. Casteism is one of the cantankerous social evils that eats at the heart of the nation, tearing its people apart in a social divide of touchable and untouchable. Roy brings the marginal to the centre in her novel by making Velutha the "god of small things" drawing him in such vibrant colours that every other character pales in comparison. Kuttappan, his physically handicapped brother and "a safe Paravan" is a foil to Velutha, "a Paravan with a future" (119), the progressive, talented Dalit at loggerheads with a society that withholds his identity from him and would destroy him if he crossed the limits.

Mammachi concedes – "with Touchable logic" – that if Velutha had not been a Paravan, he would have become an engineer. Like a magician he could make intricate toys with wood – tiny boats, rattles, windmills – that earns him the title. He is ambitious, strives to overcome social hurdles through politics by becoming a communist card-holder. Velutha strives against forces that are too strong for him, fortresses that are centuries old and cannot be pulled down in a day. However, like Ammu, he defies a hypocritically smug society, in his case, a caste-ridden society that treats people like him as lesser than mortals having absolutely no human rights either to life, liberty or love.

Mammachi recalls the time when Paravans were outcastes, and "were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints" (73). Conversion to Christianity during the British rule could not help them escape from the scourge of ***casteism***. They suffered marginalization spiritually, being segregated in separate churches, end economically, being denied government benefits since officially they had become casteless, or non-existent. In Roy's words, they were not "allowed to leave footprints at all" (740). Velutha's life is summed up in the definition given to the word 'dalit'. 'Dalit' means "burst, split, scattered, dispersed, broken, torn asunder, destroyed or crushed" (Selvaraj, 10).

Velutha becomes a victim of the police atrocity to which he succumbs in its custody. In life, he fares no better. Exploited by his employers, he is paid less than touchable workers; exploited by his party, he is betrayed for personal gain; exploited by Ammu in a fragile spider-web relationship they know cannot survive; and finally exploited by Baby Kochamma who transfers her hatred for the communists on to Velutha. The twins alone love him for what he is and miss him so much when he dies, "He left behind a hole in the universe through which darkness poured like liquid tar" (191). The *heart of darkness* is shown at its worst when the touchable policemen mash him up under their boots and then step back to assess their work at an aesthetic distance: "Their work, abandoned by God and History, by Marx, by Man, by Woman and (in the hours to come) by Children, lay folded on the floor" (310).

Was Velutha's death needless, or contrived? Roy, the realist reveals her anger at such forces of oppression by her deadly controlled irony in relating the hounding of Velutha by the police. This is very much part of the India she portrays in the novel, corrupt and horribly violent, indifferent to atrocities that happen in real life. Like lynching dalits for skinning a dead cow. Kancha Ilaiah in his "***Social Equality : Lessons from the U.S.***" draws parallels between India (the dalit bias) and the U.S. (the Black bias) and wishes India could learn from the U.S. example allowing Afro-Americans to maintain their black identity with dignity and self-respect. He says "such spiritual and social democratic values are responsible for advancement of blacks in all walks of life." When will India's intellectual class think not only creatively but also sensitively and positively and thus accord dignity of labour and socio-spiritual to its masses, irrespective of any kind of divide like caste, class of gender? Mari Marcel Thekaekara, while examining this issue of casteism states the dalit plea is: "In the last century we got rid of slavery and apartheid. Let this century be the one to annihilate casteism."

To conclude, the title ***The God of Small Things*** is significant because it celebrates the life that is filled with "small things", "small lives", "small people" and "small events". In themselves "small" but leading to far reaching consequences. Roy has written literature "that dares to dare," touching on a variety of ideas and ideologies, and in her words, tries to "explain complicated things in simple language", (***Frontline***,

14). Her treatment of women is a little disheartening since they are all negative and destructive, whereas writers like Anita Desai and Sashi Deshpande have moved to creating a new and empowered female selfhood. However, the novel is perhaps only her own past 'exorcised' while her present social concerns prove amply her self-actualization as a pro-active citizen fighting for the cause of the marginalized tribals over the Narmada Project. Meanwhile, "little events, ordinary things, smashed and reconstituted. Imbued with new meaning" (32) will be, what ***The God of Small Things*** is all about. "And there will be no more dreams." Thus, the diasporic women writers of gynotext have devised special framework within which to examine and evaluate all varieties, formal and informal, of female-authored works ranging from diaries to novels to poems. These focus on the feminine gender in its relationships with the mainstream society, both of which exist along a continuum of attitudes towards sex, sexuality, gender, identity and language. Like the typical gynotext Roy's ***The God of Small Things*** endeavours to discover "a world of their own", to use Showalter's phrase, which, in turn has reinforced the attitudes and aspirations of their female readers and ultimately, their literary successors. The male world too gains an insight into the feminine world by proxy perhaps.

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