

Echoing the Voices on the Margin in 'The God Of Small Things'

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Abstract: Arundhati Roy excels at putting the spotlight on the people who exist on the fringes of the Indian society. She encountered outstanding success with her first novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997). She dons the roles of a novelist, a feminist, a social activist and an ardent environmentalist. She captured the world's attention with her novel that had a multitude of themes and stories woven into the fabric of her novel. The action of the novel spans over two weeks but it moves back and forth to capture the stories of three generations and their marginalization. The novel encapsulates the actual marginalization of the so called untouchable and subalterned castes that still live on the edge of society even after many years of independence. It also focuses on the double marginalization of women at the hands of both men and women. This marginalization is both actual as well as metaphorical.

Keywords: Marginalization, gender, caste, untouchable.

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The renowned political & social activist, Arundhati Roy (born November 24, 1961, Shillong, Meghalaya, India) first shot to fame with her award-winning novel *The God of Small Things* (1997). The novel that won the Booker Prize puts the spotlight on feminist perceptions, post-colonial dimensions, politics, literary tourism and her ethnicity. It has many intricately woven themes that are juxtaposed to bring out the caste system, gender difference and the police-politician relation that exists in the country even after many years of independence. Roy says in the novel, *"Fifty years after independence, India is still struggling with the legacy of colonialism, still flinching from the cultural insult (and) we are still caught up in the business of 'disproving' the white world's definition of us"*. The novel features the subjugation, ignorance and marginalization of the people in Kerala.

The various themes are juxtaposed against each other and include Family and Social Obligation, Desire and Social system, Love and Sexuality · Change vs. Preservation and Small Things versus Big Things.

However, the most important theme of the novel is marginalization which spans three generations in the novel. It shows the chasm between the marginalized groups and the exploiters or, in other words, between the weak and the powerful. The novel chiefly highlights the influence of the social morality that dominates the individual morality and dictates how one should live in the society and which act is considered as digression from the social morality.

Caste Marginalization

The story is located in Kerala, a state with the highest literacy rate. The family in question is a family of Syrian Christians and we are shown that the untouchables face torture and harassment not at the hands of Hindus but at the hands of a Syrian Christian family so caste marginalization is cross caste and not restricted to Hindus alone.

Velutha, or 'The God of Small Things', belongs to a class of untouchables. He is a paravan who lives besides the river and smells of fish. The Paravan are the lowest of the untouchables. Mammachi when she narrates how the untouchables are treated during her days to Rahel says:

"Pappachi would not allow Paravans into the house. Nobody would. They were not allowed to touch anything that Touchables touched. 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 (TGST, pp. 73-74)

They had to wipe away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a paravan's footprint..."***They had to put their hands over their mouths when they spoke, to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed"***. (Roy, p.73-74)

Mammachi's narration of the treatment of the untouchables is tinged with a sense of pride as she explains the class dynamics to the little children. This clearly reveals how caste dominance becomes ingrained in the psyche of children though instilling a sense of class superiority and abhorrence of the lower class. These children are too young to question these stereotypes and racial myths and blindly naively allow a sense of superiority to be inculcated in them.

Velutha never wanted to break the societal norms and as a child whenever he made toys for Ammu, he gave them to her making sure he did not touch her. However, Ammu broke barriers by allowing him to touch her. She saw nothing wrong in it. This way Ammu and Velutha had already begun to disregard societal norms much before there was any spark between them. Then again it was at the initiation of Ammu. As a lonely young divorcee, not finding any love or having any equal standing in the house, it was no surprise that she was drawn to him.

"She saw the ridges of muscle on Velutha's stomach grow taught and rise under his skin like the divisions on a slab of chocolate. She wondered at how his body had changed – so quietly,

from a flat-muscled boy's body into a man's body. Contoured and hard. A swimmer's body. A swimmer-carpenter's body. Polished with a high-wax body polish. He had high cheekbones and a white, sudden smile. “(8.80-81)

Ammu and Velutha had always given more importance to individual morality rather than to social morality. Hence, none of them saw anything wrong in allowing their love and passion for each other to reach fulfillment. When this love affair is discovered, we see how his low social standing makes him the target of the outrage of the society and authorities. Even Ammu's mother who is very forgiving about her son's digressions and even paid for his encounters with women, finds Ammu's relationship with Velutha unpalatable. She wonders, “**How could she stand the smell? They have a particular smell these paravans,**” The Kochamman family is probably more conscious of their social standing because as Christians, they are shunned by the Hindus and so probably try to enforce their superiority by dehumanizing others.

Velutha is brutally punished for the act of loving and faces torture at the hands of the police who have no compunctions about beating him up and ultimately killing him mercilessly. His social class had dictated every aspect of his life and his death was ruled by it too. The God of Small Things becomes The God of Loss.

Marginalization of Women

The marginalization of women spans three generations. We have Mammachi, Ammu and Rahel. Mammachi belongs to the older generation of women and faces marginalization at the hands of her husband, Pappachi who beats her with a brass vase or an ivory handled riding crop. Mammachi had exceptional talent for music not without skills but her jealous husband does not allow her to indulge in her passion for music, especially playing the violin. When the violin trainer tells her husband that she is “**exceptionally talented**” and “**potentially concert class**”, he breaks the bow of the violin one night and throws it. The same jealousy does not allow him to cooperate with his wife and help her in her pickle making business saying it was not “**a suitable job for high-ranking ex-Government official**”. It is no wonder that Mammachi, who is trapped in a loveless marriage with Pappachi fails to understand Ammu's love for Velutha.

Ammu, who represents the second generation is marginalized at the hands of both men and women. She belongs to an affluent family but while her brother receives the love and attention of the family as well as inheriting the property, she is simply married off because her father did not want to spend money on her college education. Marriage is a great factor in her marginalization. Knowing that she is considered as a financial burden by her father, she resignedly accepts whatever life offers her; and life offers her a bad deal in the form of a drunkard husband who does not earn enough to support his family. He tries to force Ammu to “**please the boss**” but she refuses and the marriage ends in divorce. As a divorcee, she is again at the mercy of her family, mainly the male members – her father and brother Chacko. She carries the stigma of being a divorcee and she is made aware of it at every turn. An example can be seen in how she is made to stand apart from everyone else at Sophie Mol's funeral.

Ammu faces double marginalization. She is marginalized not just by her father and brother but also by her mother who fails to lend her the required support or empathise with her. The same mother who not only overlooks her son's discrepancies is unable to allow any happiness to her daughter. So Ammu is a marginalized character in her own house. Vellya Paapen and Velutha are at the bottom in the caste system as they belong to an untouchable caste called Paravan. As Mammachi belongs to a higher caste, she has always treated Vellya Paapen and Velutha as an outcast and never let them come inside the house or to touch anything that is touched by a touchable.

The lonely and unloved Ammu reaches out to Velutha and he fills the void in her life, being the best companion to the children. The children are really happy in his company and he becomes a god in their eye- The God of Small Things. Ammu meets him at night *"to love by night the man her*

children loved by day." In the dark of the night, he is her lover by the river. Both of them are united as the flowing river joins the two banks of the river.

Baby Kochamma, who would not have the family name sullied and who is perhaps jealous of Ammu's relationship with Velutha discovers them. This discovery destroys many lives. When Ammu goes to the police station and tries to defend Velutha, the police officer's inappropriate behavior is another example of marginalization of women at the hands of men. Velutha, "the Untouchable" is killed by the "Touchable Boots", of the state police. Ammu is banished and dies alone, only thirty one "a very viable-diable age" (161).

In some ways most of the characters are marginalized as their rights are violated by stronger sections of society. It is reflected in the right of the little children who are deprived of so much in their lives and are damaged forever. It is present in Little Estha's molestation at the hands of the *'Orangedrink, Lemondrink Man'*. It is reflected in the separation of Rahel from her mother and in the misery of little Estha who lost his 'God' and had to bear the burden of betraying him in order to save his mother. When the inspector asked him if Velutha had kidnapped them, he says "yes". Everything changes with that word. Roy says at that moment, *"childhood tiptoed out. Silence slid in like a bolt"* (19.82-83) Estha withdraws into a silence. He got separated from his twin sister with whom he shared a very close and special bond. Finally he lost his mother too within a short span. These losses leave the kids damaged beyond repair.

The denial of rights is reflected in the denial to the youth who didn't bow down to the love laws *"that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much"*. The desire of a high class young woman to find love and physical gratification are savagely thwarted by a patriarchal society and the dream of an untouchable man who, against his better judgment dares to love a woman who is *"one of them"*- the higher class-meets with death as he is kicked and beaten by police officers and finds his death at their boots.

Roy has drawn on the theme of marginalization of castes and women in the orthodox Indian society but while doing so, she has also brought out the sufferings, pains, subjugation, prejudice, physical and sexual violence of women in society that refuse to change or accept. As Roy puts it, *"Change is one thing. Acceptance is another"* (279).

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