

# Subjugation, Subaltern and Transgress in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this article is to bring out the subjugated women from the patriarchal society and the subaltern man from untouchable's background and how they transgress the social taboo. Roy portrays the euphemistic picture of the status of both in this society in the name of tradition, culture, customs, religion and rules. *The God of Small Things* is a novel of the unheard voice. Roy portrays Ammu as a helpless victim in the patriarchal society and the subaltern position of the marginalized untouchable through Velutha.

**Keywords:** subjugation, oppression, marginalization, subaltern, untouchability, patriarchy, transgression ...

## Introduction

One of most prestigious Man Booker Prize winner Suzanna Arundhati Roy was born on 24<sup>th</sup> November 1961 in Shillong, Meghalaga. She was born to a Bengali Hindi tea planter and Christian women from Kerala. She spent most of her childhood at Ayemenem a town in Kerala. The study analysis Roy's *The God of Small Things* as a story about a family, subjugation, oppression, patriarchy, subaltern, marginalized, untouchables and transgression. Roy narrates the story from the town of Ayemenem using the flashback and flash forward technique. She constructs her narration moving backward from the present to the past, when the twin protagonist Rahel and Estha were 7 years old in 1969 to the present 1993 when they reunite at the age of 31.

Roy's *The God of Small Things* is a novel of the unheard voice. The novel revolves around Ammu, her twins and Velutha. Ammu as a subjugated women from the patriarchal society and Velutha a subaltern man from untouchables. Roy portrays the euphemistic picture of the status of both in this society in the name of tradition, culture, customs, religion and rules. Ammu is a helpless victim in the patriarchal society. She was subjugated from her childhood. She became the victim of the gender based inequality. She was not given the right education "a college education was unnecessary expense for girl" (38) where as her brother Chacko was educated at Oxford by her father Pappachi. When the family refused to give sufficient dowry she becomes frustrated and leaves to stay with her aunt at Calcutta. Roy narrates her situation as

**All days she dreamed of escaping from Ayemenem and the clutches of her ill-tempered father and bitter, long-suffering mother. She hatched several wretched little plans. Eventually, one worked. Pappachi agreed to her spend the summer with a distant aunt who lived in Calcutta. (38-39)**

Roy portrays the patriarchal society through Ammu's father, husband Baba and brother Chacko. Ammu's mother Mammachi was a traditional subjugated silent women who 'bears' Pappachi's male sovereignty "Father Bear

beat mother Bear” (180). She has put up with years and years of incessant beating, marginalization and humiliation by Pappachi. Ammu is also accustomed by Pappachi’s cold calculating cruelty she says “a lofty sense of injustice and the mulish reckless streak that develops in someone small who has been bullied all their liver by someone big” (181-82).

Ammu in order to avoid her parents and returning to Ayemenem she marries a tea estate assistant manager. She becomes a play card in the hands of her husband who wants to sell her to Mr. Hollick the employer in order to remain in the job. Ammu finds her husband to be an alcoholic who also beats her and even attempts to prostitute her by sending her to Mr. Hollick’s bungalow. Mr. Hollick says “Ammu be sent to his bungalow to be ‘looked after’” (42) and Baba tortures her mentally and physically “grew uncomfortable and then infuriated by her silence. Suddenly he lunged at her, grabbed her hair, punched her and then passed out from that effort” (42). Ammu remains silent until the torture turns to her children, she returns to Ayemenem with her twins only to be regarded as a “wretched Man-less woman” (45). Chacko’s male sovereignty comes out when he reminds the twins that their mother has no ‘locus standi’ no legal rights to inherit the factory or the house for instance (56). Even though Ammu did as much work in the factory, Chacko clearly confesses to his sister that “what is yours is mine and what’s mine is also mine” (57). She as a daughter has no rights to any property, and Ammu was aware of the reason that “thanks to our wonderful male chauvinist society” (57). Chacko too always referred to it as “My factory, My pine apples, My pickles” (57).

Chacko had a clandestine relationship with the women worker in the pickle factory. He regards them to be “Man’s Needs”, Ammu says:

**... he can’t help having a Man’s Needs she said primly... Neither Mammachi nor Baby Kochamma saw any contradiction between Chacko’s Marxist mine and feudal libido Mammachi had a separate entrance built for Chacko’s room ... , so that the objects of his ‘Needs’ wouldn’t have to go traipsing through the house. (168-69)**

The same Mammachi becomes more powerful when it comes to Ammu. All this was because Chacko was a male and he had Man’s power and none could oppose it.

Roy portrays the subaltern position of the marginalized untouchable through Velutha. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her anthology “Scattered Speculations on the Subaltern and Popular” states about subaltern as “a position without identity” and it is “not a cultural origin, it is a sense of economic collectivity, of social relations of formations as the basis of action” (61). The subaltern Velutha in the narration is low caste ‘Paravan’. Mammachi describes the condition of the untouchable to her grandchildren during the past as:

**Paravan like other untouchable were not allowed to walk on the public roads, not allowed to carry umbrellas. They had to put their hands over their mouth when they spoke, to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed. They were expected to crawl backwards with broom sweeping away from their footprint so that Brahmins or Syrian Christian would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a paravan foot-print. (74)**

Fundamental right as a human being was denied for an untouchable in the country during the colonial period as been described by Roy completely. She also says that they (untouchable) were not allowed to walk on “public road”, “cover their upper bodies” with cloth and “carry umbrella” for protecting themselves from rain or heat. They were not allowed to enter the house of the upper class; they should come using the back door to get food for them. They should cover their mouth with hands or cloth before talking in order to protect the touchable from breathe of pollution. Velutha was allowed to go to a school for untouchable only. He faced a lot of inhuman treatment by his countrymen. In an interview

with David Barsamian in the book *“The Checkbook and the Cruise Missile”* Roy herself describe that caste system is still there in Kerala: “Even among the Syrian Christians-who are the oldest, most orthodox Christians in India-you have caste issues” (2).

Rahel and Estha are considered to be the “small things” are victimized in the novel. They go against the rules and make the untouchable Velutha their God- The God of Small Things. Velutha becomes their friend because he lets them to play and laugh as much as they want. He shares a good relationship with them and becomes a part of their world. All Velutha does is to make them happy was to love them and accept them as children. As Rahel grows up she realizes “It is after all so easy to shatter a story. To break a chain of thought, to ruin a fragment of a dream being carried around carefully like a piece of porcelain. To let it be, to travel with it as Velutha did, is much the harder thing to do” (190).

Ammu after her return to Ayemenem never sees her children to be happy. She loves her children and she wants her family to love them but that was always a dream, her parents, her brother nor Baby Kochamma showed their loved to the twins, they unloved them. Whereas Velutha loved them so much, which made Ammu to transgress from the rules of society and see Velutha with a different eye of love. In spite of being a touchable women Ammu was ready to accept Velutha an untouchable. Ammu always remains transgress in the novel. She has a girl from Christian upper class family crosses the social boundaries and gets married to Baba who is a Hindu. And as a woman her duty is to obey her husband’s words after marriagebut Ammu refuses to do so and she breaks the rules of social taboo by getting divorce from him. Getting divorce was considered to a crime and it was her duty to remain with her husband irrelevant, no matter how terrible a husband may be and no matter how he treats his wife. As Baby Kochamma says:

**She subscribed whole heartedly to her commonly held 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 a intercommunity love marriage- Baby Kochamma chose to remain quaveringly silent on the subject. (45-46)**

Finally Ammu transgress when she sees her daughter playing with Velutha intimately and in that innocent act of breaking the social taboo of touching a Paravan, Ammu realize the love between them and she was caught in society “off-footed, off-guard” (214). The transgression ethnicity revealed by Ammu the touchable. She known the caste system and “Love Law” prescribed by the society “the laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much” (214).Velutha and Ammu look at each other realize their desire for each other “history’s fiends return to claim them” (214). Ammu violates the patriarchal norms and transgresses the boundaries of her caste to love an untouchable man. Roy describes Ammu and Velutha’s tender admiration for each other in these lines:

**... Ammu’s gaze. Centuries telescoped into one evanescent moment. History was off-footed, caught off-guard. This knowing slid into him cleanly, ...Ammu saw that he saw. She looked away. He did too. History’s fiends returned to claim them. To rewrap them in its old, scarred pelt and drag them back to where they really lived. Where the love laws lay down who should be loved. And how.And how much. (214)**

Roy describe Velutha’s transgress from the aspects of the society. As a Paravan (untouchable)Velutha was to follow all social rules but he transgressed and crossed several steps. Apart from learning to read and write he became a skilled carpenter and got appreciation from Mammachi that he has supposed to have a “particular smell” but Velutha is

given permission to “touch things that touchable touch” (73) because of his extraordinary skill with machines. She also comments that “if he hadn’t been a paravan, he might have become an engineer” (75). Whereas the traditional paravan focus on the “small things” like toddy tapping or picking coconuts, he became a member of the communist party and took part in political marches and rallies. And finally the most of all he has relationship with an upper class women Ammu. So being an untouchable Velutha transgress all his boundaries that the society had laid on him. However Roy had made him as one of most oppressed character in the novel. Velutha in spite of being a Communist was not saved by them, when he was charged as a rapist and a kidnapper by the police. The police pronounce a death penalty without any investigation.

Velutha talent crosses the boundaries laid down by Indian history and society where the untouchable are seen as unskilled employees. It was irony that Velutha was appreciated by Mammachi for his skill where as his father VellyaPaapen who accepts all customs and follows the boundaries is always worried about him for not following the rules of history. He tells Mammachi the secret love affair between Velutha and Ammu in spite of knowing that Baby Kochamma will kill his son. And finally he says, he himself will kill him for touching and loving a touchable woman “kill his son with his own bare hands” (199). Social norms about caste system were more important for him then his son’s life. Thus Ammu and Velutha have transgressed several boundaries on their life. As NirmalaC.Prakesh in this article “Man-Woman Relationship in *The God of Small Things*” says the relationship between Ammu and Velutha is “... the only one which germinates from the innermost core of two human hearts” which really grows into “... the perfect kind of man-woman relationship and the only one which is illustrated with scenes resonant with love, sex and feelings of mutual fulfillment” (82).

The transgression committed by Estha and Rahel is similar to Velutha and Ammu. Velutha and Ammu violates the caste system and social boundaries in the same way the reunion of the twins that ends up with love making breaks the rule of history “one again broke the Love Laws. That lay down who should be loved. And how much.” (214). Estha and Rahel’s love making challenges a still wide social taboo of incest, the lines as a subtle imagery to overcome the “Quietness and Emptiness” (328) inside them. Roy concludes her novel without saying right or wrong about love making between them, she leaves to reader’s choice. In *The God of Small Things* nothing is complete and everything is small, reader have to finish it was the idea of Roy. Par Catherine Pessa-Miquel in her article “Breaking Bound in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*” says:

**The lovemaking between Estha is not at all, as it is in Ammu’s and Velutha’s case, a deliberate, willful. Transgression of the Law, quite the contrary: it is a blind, grouping desire to regress to the warmth and security, the freedom from pain, the apartness from the cruelty of life and the world, that the maternal womb provides.(5)**

Roy’s concluding word of Ammu and Velutha’s promise for “Tomorrow” (321) has a hope for a brighter future. The debut novel *The God of Small Things* Roy relates the reunion of twins Estha and Rahel, trauma of the past memories about their cousins(Sophie Mol’s) death, their mother Ammu’s death and their God Velutha’s death. The “Small Things” represent the marginalized world of Velutha and Ammu of subjugation, oppression, violence and injustice by the “Big Things”. The transgression of character of Roy had generated a kind of victory, a sense of achievement and hope for future with the word “Tomorrow” in the novel.

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