The Subaltern and the text: Reading Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*

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More than sixty years have passed since Indian gained its political autonomy, but the fact remains that women and untouchables living in Indian society are yet to witness freedom in a truer sense. Women, of course, have witnessed some improvement in their status, and now most of them are getting education, which was previously declined to them. But their conditions remain problematized as they continue to be at the receiving ends both in their own houses as well as outside their domestic spheres. Untouchables, on the other hand, continue to occupy the lower strata in the social hierarchy. Still, they are considered to be defiled creations of this earth having no rights for their (re)formation. Post-colonial India has given birth to various political parties but even they have failed to strengthen the deplorable condition of untouchables. Ironically, many political parties merely use them as perfect weapons to secure their personal favours and as many votes as possible. This increasingly paradoxical status of untouchables – although they are powerless yet they have an inherent capacity to give power to others – is one of the most contested issues, along with the empowerment of women, which lies central to the field of post-colonial studies. The present paper seeks to explore the maltreatment meted out to the subalterns in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1981, to be cited hereafter as TGST). It will highlight the various ways in which the rights and privileges of both these classes are generally ignored or cancelled out even in the present era of post-colonialism. Clearly a novel which deals with the troubled history of females and the untouchables, Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* has already received high critical acclaims. The novel fetched her the valued Booker Prize in 1997, the year which brought double glories to India, since the year also marked the Golden Jubilee year of India’s Independence and put a brake to the self-glorifying statement of Lord Macaulay made in 1835 that "A single shelf of a good European library in worth the whole native literature". Roy has become
decidedly one of the chief figures in the history of Indian English literature. The novel draws attention to the mental as well as physical exploitation of both the females and the untouchables. The contrast between males/females, and touchables/untouchables is explicit throughout the novel. These unfair and destructive binary divisions disclose the bitter reality of India progressing towards prosperity.

The maltreatment of the subaltern is one of the major issues in TGST. Before we move ahead, it may not be out of place to have a look at the meaning of the term "subaltern". The term was popularized by Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist in the 1920s and 1930s as a surrogate for the term "proletarian class" in order to counter Fascism. In India, the term was catapulted by the Subaltern Studies Collective writing in 1982 on Southern Asian history and society from a "subaltern perspective". In the Preface to Subaltern Studies, Vol. I, Ranajit Guha propounded a working definition of "subaltern". "The word "subaltern"... stands for the meaning as given in the Concise Oxford Dictionary, that is of inferior rank. It will be used as a name for the general attitude of subordination in South Asian Society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way." In this paper, the term "subaltern" is applied to two groups- the woman (Ammu) and the untouchable (Velutha). The third chapter of the novel entitled “Big Man the Laltain, Small Man the Mombatti” artistically symbolizes their subalternity. Ammu and Velutha represent the Mombatti whereas those opposing their unorthodox love affair represent the Laltain. The other characters- Kochamma, Mammachi, Chacko, Estha, Rahel, Vellya, and Inspector Mathew- are caught up in a complex web of actions and reactions in their daily affairs with one another and with the outer world. Physical and moral corruption is linked with the social and political corruption of Ayemenem.

Untouchability, the worst form of social rigidity which is still prevalent in India is the outcome of the snobbish rishis living in ancient days. It rightly reduces a man of the lower strata of society to nothingness, thereby reminding us of Wordsworth’s famous lines "And much it grieves my heart to think/ What man has made of man", Even the Rig Veda has
some instances of inter caste marriages of Brahmanas with Rajanya Women, and of the union of Arya and Sudra. The treatment meted out to the untouchables and Velutha in TGST is a matter of concern for all right-thinking people. Placed in the southern Indian state of Kerala and divided chronologically between the late 1960s and the early 1990s, the plot of The God of Small Things (cited hereafter as TGST) revolves around a forbidden relationship between a Syrian Christian divorcee, Ammu, and a low caste carpenter, Velutha. It is a story about the rights of the women and the untouchables versus age-old restrictions imposed by the traditionalist Indian society which still remains both heterogeneous and heterodox. The story tells us about Ammu’s twins called Estha and Rahel, about the inter-caste affair, about the subsequent beating and killing of Velutha by the police of Ayemenem, a village in Kerala, and about the death by drowning of the children’s cousin, Sophie Mol. The entire human drama in the novel takes place in the context of the division of India through caste and class, polluting thereby the natural beauty of the human world.

The novel also has references to caste conversion of a number of people, including Velutha’s grandfather Kelan, and their becoming Christians, such people joined the Anglican Church in the hope of getting freed from the course of untouchability. They converted in order to get some food and money, and in some cases even a job. But this conversion did not efface their problems and they continued to occupy the lower position in the society. They were still discriminated against and were provided with separate priests and separate churches. They were never measured in an equal scale of humanity. Freedom of the nation had not brought much relief to the untouchables. No doubt, they were being given job reservations, but this reservation was in a greater sense, meant only for those people who had some money to spend on education. The question, then arises; what ‘post’ do we witness in their status? Roy states in this regard that: "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".3
Roy does not only make us cognizant of the colonial past, but also makes us look at the shadow of an older pre-colonial history.

The word 'caste' is derived from the Portuguese world 'casta' which means pure or unadulterated (sharing a Latin root, with the word 'chaste'). The rigid caste system which provided the individual with different cultural apparel became evident in India in the early Vedic age. In due course of time different castes emerged in India, setting the ball rolling for the pre-Dravidian of India. They put a ban on the taking of food cooked by the Sudras, and the inter-caste marriage was totally banned. It is in this historical perspective that Roy treats the inter-caste love affairs of Ammu and Velutha and of Chacko and Kochamma. The intense anxiety of Vellya Paapen regarding Velutha's unorthodox affair with Ammu should be read in this context. Paapen is an old Paravan and therefore does not dare to disturb the social hierarchy as he is fully cognisant of the harsh treatment meted out to persons who attempt to transgress the rigid social order. The dizygotic twins are told by Mammachi that Paravans are expected "to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away the footprints so that Brahmins or Syrians Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan's footprints" (pp. 73-74). She still remembers the demonic treatment of the untouchables, who are not allowed to walk on public roads, who cannot cover their upper bodies and who are forbidden to carry umbrella so that they are sun burnt. These untouchables are required to cover their mouth with hands while speaking so that their polluted breath does not contact the high caste persons.

Velutha, on the other hand, is a young man who fails to understand all these nonsensical rules and regulations for untouchables. He is adept in his mechanisms of carpentry and unsuccessfully tries to represent the changing face of India – an India which is marching on the road of progress, but all the same the India where untouchability is still practised. Velutha does not sanction this social discrimination. The subaltern in this novel wants to speak, but he is beaten to death by Inspector Mathew in police lock-
up, thus substantiating the views of Gayatri Spivak expressed in her famous article, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

The subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with "woman" as a pious item. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish.5

Spivak entrusts, in a way the responsibility on the intellectual class of society to represent the subaltern by raising their suppressed voices. This change can only be brought about by an insurgency that is why Roy remarks "Things can changes in a day", thrice in the novel on page numbers – 164, 192 and then on 202. She makes the readers aware that the world can be changed in a day, but it needs a revolution. Roy states in TGST that "Revolution is not a dinner party. Revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence, in which one class overthrows another"(p. 280). It is a real pity to see how inferior class and sex have been mistreated both in the precolonial as well as the post-colonial era. The present era is marked with rapid changes and progression. It is an era where the entire world has become a global village and where multiculturalism is being bred and encouraged. Such is the paradoxical nature of this present era that on the one hand we encourage the functioning of multicultural societies, and on the other, we practice all these atrocities which forcefully put women and untouchables on an enervating track.

In such a rotten society, Roy pleads to the readers to adopt the innocence of the dizygotic twins – Estha and Rahel who inspite of living in India do not know any caste, religion and boundaries. They are completely innocent in this cruel world. Indian social fabric is a curse for those advocating or practicing the rituals of modernity, since time immemorial, it has restricted the romantic movements of lovers despite the fact that Krishna violated this traditional practice, and so did Vishwamitra and many others. Still we have profound regards for them, but when the same love affair is rehearsed between Ammu and Velutha it becomes hostile towards them. This exposes the dual character of our patriarchal
society. Why is it that only man has got the right to (dis)own a woman, to define a protocol for female, and to exploit her feminity? These are vexed issues which need to be looked at with open minds. It is time that we jettison the old incoherent order of traditional practices with new vibrant ideologies so that females do not feel subjugated anymore. Just listen to what Linda Duits and Pauline van Romondt Vis express in the following lines:

“I had this thing that I think Pink also had: like, look, I can do what I want and if you don’t want me like that, well, that’s your loss ... I have this thing like: yeah, if you don’t like me, you don’t like me. That’s something I didn’t have before. Before I really cared about what other people thought, but now that’s less. But not as extreme as her [Pink], but just a bit that I... I don’t give it a shit.”

In the above lines, we can clearly witness the sense of bragging in the females. It is an eye opener statement for those women who are being suppressed in their domestic sphere and outside it. One has to assert itself if one has to survive in the society. One has to realize its innermost strength and stop being submissive to others.

It is really frustrating to notice the way elitist are suppressing and declining the rights of the lower class, and in the same way males are fervently trying to demonize the pure image of women. This explicit differentiation is a matter of concern and some measures should be taken to ensure that their rights are protected. This can only be possible when the government ensures that every member of the society gets an equal opportunity to participate in democracy, they get equal rights, and that their human rights are protected. What I am trying to say is the fact that it is high time for us to take steps so that all these diabolical binary divisions should be effaced, and the world should become a proper place to live in, only then the subalterns will get a chance to speak, and it is then that we can call it a truly post-colonial era.
It is here that the institutionalization of subaltern studies plays a vital role. Ever since its inception, this group is trying its best to protect the rights and highlight the cause of subaltern class. Arundhati Roy has (un)consciously also extended the views of this group by highlighting the pathetic condition of these subaltern in India. The Subaltern group has held many Conferences so far, and it is here that new ideas are being churned out so as to protect the rights of this subaltern class.

We find a moving description in TGST when Ammu falls in love with Velutha, an untouchable carpenter, and starts having furtive meetings with him across the river in the haunted house. Her daring love affair with Velutha undoubtedly incited a sexual desire in Baby Kochamma to some extent. She cannot digest this affair as she herself is denied the carnal pleasure. Baby Kochamma’s sexual jealousy rises to such a height that she obliterates her niece and indirectly contributes to Velutha’s castration and death by the police officers. Ammu could not tolerate this loss and consequently she also meets a tragic end.

To conclude, we can say that Arundhati Roy’s treatment of the subaltern in her novel, triggers the mnemonic of a colonial India. By her treatment of the subaltern, she raises a moot question about their pitiable position in Indian society, but fails in her effort to give them their voice. Nevertheless, she urges them to shatter all conventions of the traditional society in order to fetch an identity for themselves.

Works Cited

