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A Discourse on Margin in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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The God Of Small Things(1999) written by the Booker Prize awardee, novelist and social reformist Mrs. Arundhati Roy is an epoch making piece of literature by virtue of its thematic relevance to the contemporary scenario and its technical and linguistic experiments and innovations. Studied from the perspective of post colonial theory, the book champions the cause of the marginal people of the society who are socially, politically, economically and sexually outside the hegemonic power structure. Sudhir Kumar writes that , "Post colonial writing is trying to heal up the wounds of the marginalized civilization."1 The text studies those communities who "were greatly reduced in numbers and politically and socially marginalized from the new centers of power."2 Moreover, it registers a reaction and protest to the caste based colonialism and gender based discrimination/colonialism which may sound new words for some time, but which have been the age long practices in our Indian society as means of oppression of women and dalits like colonialism and cultural imperialism which according to the monumental book of Edward Said's *Orientalism* ,deprived the natives and native culture of South Asian nations of their own identity and marginalized them from the centre of power. Marxist historians had already begun to view colonial history from the perspective of the proletarians, but this was again unsatisfying as it was Eurocentric. It was the beginning of subaltern studies in 1980s as a vigorous post colonial critique which gave momentum to the cause of the neglected and oppressed sections of the society.

The importance of the marginals is established from the fact that Homi Bhabha, a key thinker of post colonial thought, emphasized the fact that the presence of the oppressed and minority groups was crucial to the definition of the majority and even the subaltern social groups were capable of subverting the authority of those who had hegemonic power. bell Hooks writes, "This is an intervention. A message from the space in the margin that is a site of creativity and power, that inclusive space where we recover ourselves, where we meet in solidarity to erase the category colonized/colonizer. Marginality is the space (site) of resistance. Enter that space...We greet you as liberators."3

If we observe the words of Robert J. C Young, "Post colonialism, with its fundamental sympathies for the subaltern, for the outcastes of all kinds..."4, we can safely hold *The God of Small Things* as a post colonial text, for it tries to provide ample space for the silenced subaltern voices of women, dalit paravans and minority groups and its ultimate goal is to combat the residual effects of every type of oppression, to destabilize the dominant ideologies regarding the marginals and to make universe worth living for all.

Marginalization is a process in which a person or a group of persons or a minority community is separated from the main stream of society and is forced to occupy the edges or peripheral existence. Such marginalized groups are placed at the lowest end of the power structure; their voices are not heard; they are deprived of social, economic or political

equanimity. Marginality is a state of being marginal. Marginalization has many forms –social , cultural and economic. During the colonial period it occurred due to cultural imperialism-the superior western countries intruded and occupied the lands and resources of the South Asian nations and tried to dominate them by uprooting their native cultures and by educating them in their own languages, and in this process the natives became ostracized from their own country and identity. In modern times, manner and causes of domination have changed. The giants of globalization and capitalism have marginalized the poor working class from the main stream of power structure. Migration is a big cause of marginalization. The eastern migrants to western countries like Britain or America in search of jobs and knowledge are considered inferior due to their black race.

The God Of Small Things does not discuss aforesaid types of marginalization. Instead, it talks about the most familiar types of discrimination based on gender and caste in Indian society. The title of the novel is significant for it depicts the unfortunate and marginalized people like Ammu, Velutha and Rahel as the god of small things. It also brings out the eternal conflict between the haves and have not; high and low; the Big man Lantern and the Small Man, the Mombatti; The God of Small Things(Ammu and Velutha) and the God of Big Things(Pappachi, Mammachi, Chacko and Comrade Pillai).There is one full chapter entitled as "The God of Small Things" in which Velutha and Ammu's problems have been discussed. The big man is like a lantern symbolizing the security of the upper class against the social cruelties while the small man is like a mombatti which symbolizes the paravans who are unprotected and left to die without any fault of their own. The novelist has chosen an untouchable Velutha as the protagonist and Ammu as the heroine of her novel.

Casteism has been a stigma on our Indian society which has encouraged untouchability and social discrimination which are disastrous for the national integration of India. It is the crude and closed form of earlier 'Varnashram' system of early Vedic period which was formulated to divide the society in four sections on the basis of ' Karma'-Brahmin ,Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra- out of which Brahmin was at the top and Sudra was at the bottom of the social ladder. The subdivision of Sudras has prevented their union and caused their exploitation. Dr. Ambedkar writes,

"Caste system is ... the division of labourers(which) prevents them from being united and makes them exploitable."5

Now, caste system is generally assumed to be determined on the basis of birth and hence it has become an obstacle in the development of talented and intelligent Sudras. Despite the reformatory efforts of Dr Bhim Rao Ambedkar, Mahatma Gandhi and the Dalit Panther Movement in 1970s the condition of the scheduled caste has not bettered much.

In the novel, Mrs. Roy shows how in the post independence India, the condition of the paravans has worsened even more than before because of their change of religion from Hinduism to Christianity. On one hand, they are deprived of the reservation facility from Indian government. On the other, they are discriminated from the pure Christians. The cursed life of Paravans is described by Mammachi in chapter "Pappachi's Moth" in this way:

"...Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints...were not allowed to walk on public roads, not allowed to cover their upper bodies, not allowed to carry umbrellas. They had to put their hands over their mouths when they spoke, to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed."(*The God of Small Things*, p.73-74)

In the novel, we see that Velutha is victim of the elite class. He is treated as an untouchable and is not allowed to enter the house of Pappachi. Baby Kochamma hated the fetid smell of Velutha's body, "How could she stand the smell? Haven't you noticed; they have a particular smell, these Para vans?" (*The God of Small Things* p. 78)Mrs. Roy shows how a man of worth is put to death simply because he belongs to a low caste. She critically analyses that caste system is fatal for those talented youth of dalit class who can prove themselves far better and worthier than those of upper class, but unfortunately, such talents remain crushed and hidden and are denied equal opportunities to prove their worth. She disapproves of the brahmanical hegemony of power structure and raises her voice against it.

Velutha is son of Vellya Paapen, a paravan, but he emerges to the glory of a hero by virtue of his straightforwardness, fearlessness, meekness, honesty and adeptness in carpentry and machinery, but he is exploited by Mammachi and Chacko because being an untouchable his skill is undervalued and his worth denied. The novelist writes,"Mammachi (with impenetrable Touchable logic) often said that if only he hadn't been a Paravan, he might have become an engineer."(*The God of Small Things*, p.75)In his capacity and mastery over his job, Velutha is very much like Bhakha of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*.He bears the feelings of resentment and remonstrance against his exploitation and discrimination, but he does not express them openly because he is not allowed to speak. His fearless gestures, disregard of suggestions, unwarranted assurance and holding of head high reveal his implicit defiance. He may be black in complexion, but he is symbol of purity and humanity because his name signifies 'whiteness'. He is an untouchable by birth but he is a great man for the novelist. That is why, Chacko and Pappachi are denied the title of hero.Velutha registers his protest by joining the Communist Party, but unluckily, the big men like Comrade Pillai and Chacko conspire against him to entrap him in the false case of Sophie Mol's murder and abduction of Estha and Rahel.Mrs Roy presents a dalit's compulsion to give up his love for an upper caste lady Ammu. A Paravan is not allowed to make love with a Brahmin lady and if he does, he has to pay the cost with his life. Velutha is arrested and beaten till death because he dared to touch Ammu.The murder of Velutha by Big Men creates the most pathetic scene of the novel.

The second type of marginalization pointed out in the novel is gender based conveyed through the character of Ammu who is victim of patriarchal system of society in which only male counterparts have power to reign over the society. The exploitation and marginalization of women have been common phenomena in Indian society. The image of woman has been of a crawling insect, a submissive and silent suffering creature who is expected only to follow the orders of her husband and who is denied to have an independent existence; who is assumed to be supported by man in three roles-father,husband and son. Almost all the contemporary novelists have revealed this problem in their works.Mrs. Roy, too, has chosen this sensitive issue in this novel.

Ammu ,the heroine ,is denied equal education and property with her brother Chacko simply because she is an inferior sex in a male chauvinistic society. She is not allowed to marry a man of her choice. So she transgresses and marries against the desire of her parents. In this sense, she registers her protest against the arranged marriage, but , unfortunately, she falls victim to the sly tactics of her husband ,who is another man to cheat her. Her husband turns out to be a complete drunkard who tries to surrender her to the carnal desires of his boss Mr. Hollick for his promotion. This event shows that man uses woman as a means of his success and woman is seen as an object of sex. Ammu ,again , protests this injustice and leaves her husband with her twins for Ayemenem , but to her utter disappointment, she is unwelcome because according to Indian patriarchy,"A married daughter had no position in her parent's home. As for a divorced daughter, 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."(*T. G. of S. TH.*, p.46)

Mrs. Roy relates the miserable plight of a divorced lady who is not entitled either to remarry or to make love with anyone. It would be a sin to touch and to sleep with a black Paravan. Ammu transgresses third time by loving Velutha. She is punished by the traditional society. She is estranged from her family. She is called a 'veshya' by the inspector and is sexually harassed. On the other hand Chacko is protected for his illegal relations with factory women. Mrs Roy asks why it is woman who is always punished and men who are scot free.

The third marginal character is Rahel. The cause of her marginalization is her psychological disturbance and abnormal behaviour resulting from her inferiority complex due to her inferior sex. She is thrice expelled from school due to her abnormal behaviour. She did not know how to be a girl. Her behaviour did not coincide with her sex. She is first seen to collide against other girls deliberately to see whether her breast hurt or not. Secondly, she is seen decorating a cowdung cake with fresh flowers and later she is seen burning the hair bun of her house mistress. All the three incidents were against the male authority. Even while staying at the hostel, she was uninvited to the houses of her friends. After her marriage, she was alien to her husband.

To conclude, all the three marginalized characters are trying to register their protest against the male authority in their own ways, but all of them ultimately fall victim to their fate. Velutha tries to oppose the Brahmnical power system and to create some space for himself. His daring love affair with Ammu is a clear example of it. His fearless gestures point out his sense of defiance, but his protest is suppressed and he is conspired to death. Ammu also tries to transgress, but she has to face humiliation. The very important thing about these characters is that they at least succeed at the first step of social revolution; they raise their voice against the injustice. Mrs Roy shows that we have to take first step .She supports the sexual freedom of women. She dreams to make a progressive and superstition free Indian society. The novel reminds us of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) which too, upheld the cause of Sudras many years ago. Without upliftment of dalit no national development is possible as Swami Vivekanand once wrote, "The greatest national sin is the neglect of the masses and that is one of the causes of our downfall."⁶ It is "not only a representation of social reality, but also a necessary functional part of social control and also paradoxically an important element in social change."⁷

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