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A Subaltern Study of *The God of Small Things*

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Subaltern is a word that is used to denote someone with low ranking in a social political and other hierarchy. It also used to describe someone who has been marginalized or oppressed. This term was first adopted by Antonio Gramsci who was an Italian Marxist. He used the term subaltern to refer the groups who are outside the established structure of political representation.

It may also be emphasized that Bonaventura de Sousa Santos (2002) used the term subaltern cosmopolitan in his book. It denotes the context of counter hegemonic practices movements, resistances and struggles against the neo liberal globalization especially against the social exclusion. Here the term subaltern is used to denote marginalized and oppressed people particularly struggling against hegemonic globalization.

In 1970, this term was used to describe the colonial people of South Asian Sub-Continent but today it includes all the oppressed people like tribal people, dalith, immigrant labourers, oppressed women, etc.,. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* comes under the category of subaltern studies because it deals with the theme of oppressed women, marginalization and caste discrimination.

Torture and Trauma of the Protagonist in *The God of Small Things*:

Ammu is the central character of the novel who is the most ignored and humiliated figure. She is humiliated in her own parents, place, faces all the biases and partial treatment before and after marriage. Her very own people, her dear ones deserted and misbehaved with her when she needed them the most. Their indifference and torturous attitude lead her to an emotional wreck and thereby resulting in her pathetic insignificant end.

Ammu is the woman who suffers the dictates and insults of her father, ill-treated by her husband who also seeks to trade her modesty for his job survival, and to crown it all her brother usurps all her property and renders her deserted and destitute with her children. This is because of the simple reason that Ammu as a daughter and she has no right on the property. Aijaz Amad calls her "a woman of great grit" (Prasad, 2006, P. 39).

Gender Bias:

There are the biases for women, harbored by various people at various ages. Chacko is the character who can be termed as a typical hypocrite, eccentric, jealous and a lecher of a

person. He is one selfish person who wants to lead a comfortable luxurious life besides the fact that he too has faced frustration, desperation and misery on the personal level. He is divorced by his wife Margaret Kochamma, later his daughter too dies by drowning. So at a personal level he has to face two great losses. His character is revealed in the following lines said to the twins:

“We are prisoners of war. Our dreams have been doctored. We belong nowhere. We sail unanchored on troubled seas. We may never be allowed ashore. Our sorrows will never be said enough. Our joys never happy enough. Our dream never big enough. Our lives never important enough. To matter.” (p. 53)

Chacko is very indifferent towards his sister Ammu. He being himself estranged from his wife and having lost all the family is sadist enough not to see his sister flourishing. He is very cold towards her and mocks at her twins Rahel and Estha that “Ammu had no locusts stand” (p. 57). He does not want to share an inch of his property as he says: “what is yours is mine and what is mine is also mine.” (p. 57) this shows his extremes greed, jealousy and selfishness. Ammu truly regards him a man of the “wonderful male chauvinist society” (p. 57) his taking over the factory Chacko comes to Ayemenem after resigning from his job of a teacher at the Madras Christian College. He takes his pension and provident fund to buy a Bharat Bottle-Sealing machine for the pickle factory. He works for the rehabilitation of the factory. The factory was a small unit run like a long kitchen by Mammachi before Chacko’s arrival Chacko gets the factory registered as a partnership and informs, Mammachi that she is the sleeping partner. He makes investments in equipments like cauldrons, cookers, canning machines and increases the labor force for the betterment of the factory. Though Ammu too did lot for the factory as much as Chacko but her efforts were never recognized and went in vain as the author observes:

“Though Ammu did as much work in the factory as Chacko, he always referred to it as my factory, my pineapples, my pickles. Legally, this was the case because Ammu as a danphtes, had no claim to the property” (p. 57)

Thus Chacko can be termed as a member of a “wonderful male chauvinistic society” hypocritical and an utterly selfish man.

Step motherly treatment:

In Ammu’s own home “Ayemenem House”, she is given step motherly treatment. Her father refused to believe that an Englishman could malign the modesty of a lady, as he said – “an Englishman, any Englishman, could covet another man’s wife” (p. 42). Her brother Chacko flings irony on the twins and says “Estha and Rahel were indecently healthy. And so was Sophie Mol”. He said, “it was because that didn’t suffer from inbreeding like most other Syrian Christians. And Parsees” (p. 61). Ammu’s mother Mammachi holds the same opinion. She says “what her grand-children suffered from was far worse than inbreeding. She meant having parents who were divorced. As though these were the only choices available to people: Inbreeding or divorce.” (p. 61). Further it is evident that the male member of the family Chacko is sent to Oxford to get education but on the other hand Ammu is deprived higher education even in India because she is a female. Because as according to pappachi, college studies, corrupts a lady. On top of it all Chacko’s cynicism can be seen when he after returning from Oxford, is given responsibility of Ipe household. He is seen asserting himself and throwing his weight around.

Ammu's Alienation:

Ammu started facing hardships at a very young age, right from the age of twenty four, when she should have been enjoying all the pleasures of life, her life came to screeching halt : “She spoke to none. She spent hours on the river bank with her little plastic transistor shaped like a tangerine. She smoked cigarettes and had midnight swim.” (p. 44) she became a virtual social outcast alienated from her home, family and society. Baby Kochamma, Ammu's grandmother who was the most biased and was always against Ammu says:

“.....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. As for a divorced daughter from in intercommunity love marriage. Baby Kochamma chose to remain quiveringly silent on the subject” (p. 45-46)

The ironical conditions in the novel bring women put up against women. A woman herself is against her own fraternity. Though Baby Kochamma has herself undergone a lot of stress and strain yet she does not show any kind of sympathy towards them. This shows the perverted mentality of a human being that if his own past is not happy he does not let others be happy, this is what happens to Baby Kochamma: who does not let Ammu breathe free.

Caste discrimination:

The Marginalized or the untouchables have been the most pathetic figures of our country. Untouchability has been the greatest hampering process which has always been a blood sucking leech to the Indian Society. Untouchability, a great impediment to the marginalized or the dalit sections of the society has shown how much deprivations these societies undergo.

In The God of Small Things Ammu's tragic turn comes when she falls in love with Velutha, a Paravan or an untouchable as said:

“Paravans were expected to crawl back backwards with a broom, sweeping away their foot-prints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians wouldn't defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravans's foot print. In Mammachi time, Paravans like other untouchable 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”. (p. 72-74)

Ammu and Velutha love each other. Velutha was a very talented craftman and had developed ‘a distinctly German sensibility’(p.75). She saw Velutha when she returned to Ayemenem. She saw him.... ”marching with a red flag. In a white shirt and mundu with angry views in his neck” (p. 71-72). Ammu loved Velutha's fiery spirit of revolt perhaps the reason being that she too unrsed the feelings of protest and anger and rebellion. “She hoped that under his careful cloak of cheerfulness, he used a living, smug, ordered world that she so raged against” (p. 176). When Velutha had held her daughter in his arms, she felt that both of them had something to give to each other.

Ammu's relationship with Velutha grew beyond boundaries. She loved him and crossed all limits. Their relationship exceeded to an extent that it came to be labeled as illicit. This relationship too came to a dreary standstill when Velutha's father Vellya Pappen saw them together. He informed Baby Kochamma about it. She was hyper to know about it. She locked up Ammu and had these thoughts:

"She (Ammu) has defiled generations of breeding and brought the family to its knees. For generations of breeding and brought the family to its kness. For generations to come, forever now, people would poing at them at weddings and funerals. At baptism and birthday parties." (p. 258)

Ammu's Tragic End:

After being subject to all abuse, torment, torture and pain – left in a lurch, with no support, no sympathy from anywhere, Ammu left the big Ayemenem House and breathed her last “ in a grimy rook in the Bharat Lodge in Allepy where she had gone for a job interview as some one's secretary, she died alone.” (p. 161). She was discovered dead in the morning by a sweeper who came to clean the room. Her pathetic condition even after she died can be judged from these lines whe her body was dragged outside. “A platoon of ants carried a dead cockroach sedately through the door, demonstration what should be done with corpses” (p.162)

Even Ammu's last rites were not performed properly because this ill fated lady was disowned by the Church who refused to bury her. Such was the [pathetic condition of hers that she was denied even the last rites with proper traditional rituals. Chacko had hired a van to transport the body to the electric crematorium where “nobody except beggars, derelicts and police custody dead was cremated there.”(p. 162). At this time Chacko held Rahel's hand tightly. No one from the family was present there. “The door of the furnace clanged shut. There were no tears” (p. 163)

The God of Small Things shows the male dominated patriarchal society where there are social biases where there is discrimination on the basis of gender caste and class. It presents the rift between the rich and the poor, the high and low, the powerful and weak, touchable and untouchable. The patriarchal society and customs punish the woman who has “defiled generation of breeding” (p.258) and the Paravan who has challednged the age long tradition of social morality. Both these lesser mortals, the ‘mombattis’ of the society get punished for – “Civilization's fear of nature, men's fear of women, power's fear of powerlessness” (p.308)

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