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## ***The God of Small Things: A Study in Oppression, Marginalisation and Subalternity***

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### **Abstract:**

Arundhati Roy is a force to be reckoned with, for unravelling the most hidden facets of oppression, marginalisation and subalternity in her highly praised debut novel ‘The God of Small Things (1997)’. It is written from ‘Subalterns’ perspectives exposing the socio-cultural and political forces that unfairly treat, humiliate and control those who are at the margins of society. It narrates a saga of subjugation and suffering of the subalterns in the state of Kerala and portrays their life in ‘God’s own country’ as an ‘ungodly’. The protagonists of the novel live in such a nasty socio-political space, where they are controlled by the hierarchy of patriarchy and hegemony of class and caste by dictating how the marginalised should live and behave. As far as the family, the society and the state form an integral part of the individuals and shape one's socio-cultural and political identities and realities irrespective of gender, caste and class. But what if these institutions treat its members in the most brutal and unfair ways, pushing them to the margins of society? Then the existence of an individual is at stake and such victims are taken as 'subalterns', ‘inferiors’ or ‘small things’. The text explicitly brings out the subalternity of the major characters who are tormented by the power structures embodied in the patriarchy, caste and class hierarchies and in the state machinery, for transgressing societal norms. In the backdrop of this crisis, the paper sets out to contextualise the ‘little things’ vis-a-vis ‘big-things’ and brings out the complexities of power dynamics that oppress, exploit and marginalise the ‘small-gods’.

**Keywords:** Hegemony, Marginalisation, Oppression, Subalternity, Transgression, Victim.

### **1. Introduction:**

Arundhati Roy in her famous memory novel ‘The God of Small Things’ problematizes the ‘little things’ living at the periphery of the society and culture in ‘God’s own country’ and

reports their condition as an 'ungodly'. The book is written from 'Subalterns' perspectives exposing the oppression and injustices meted to those who are at the margins of society subverting the arbitrariness of caste, class and gender and tries to raise the voice of the voiceless. The protagonists live in such a nasty socio-political space where their lives are not only controlled by the hierarchy of class and caste but also dictated by such forces who decide how 'small-gods' should live and behave, compelling them to remain at the periphery of society. As far as the family, the society and the state form an integral part of human beings that shape their socio-cultural and political identities and aspirations. In fact, the foundations of family, society or state have a core meaning and value system to an individual as these institutions not only care and protect but also safeguard the freedom and dignity of its members. A well known fact is that a family or society or state is supposed to care and protect its members irrespective of gender, caste, or class. But what if these institutions treat its members in the most brutal and unfair ways and push them to the margins of society, or even bleeding to death? Then the existence of an individual is at stake and such victims are taken as 'subalterns', 'inferiors' or 'small things'. The state of being in such a condition of oppression and marginalisation is termed as 'subalternity' and victims of such oppression are termed as 'subalterns'. The novel explicitly brings out that Ammu, her twins Estha and Rahel, Velutha, Vellya Paapen and Kuttappan are those subalterns who are tormented for transgressing the societal norms, class and caste boundaries, by the power structures embodied in the patriarchy, caste and class hierarchies and the state machinery. The role of the family, the society and the state is in question as these institutions not only flagrantly victimise the 'subalterns' but also thwart their attempts to resist their marginality, suffering and subalternity. The novel attempts to voice those voiceless, unheard men, women, children and the untouchables who have been victimised for years as Indira Bhatt asserts "The novel is all about atrocities against the small things- childhood and youth, women, young and old and the untouchables." (Bhatt, 44)

## **2. Conceptualising the 'Subalterns': A Perspective**

Postcolonial study exposes the racial, caste and class biases and the sufferings of colonised, oppressed and marginalised natives by lending them a space in literature and culture. It aims to destabilise hegemonic discourses of the dominant and powerful classes, castes and races by revisiting their past and exposes the injustice and oppression meted to the downtrodden in society. In the light of the postcolonial framework the paper tries to

bring out the struggles and oppression of the marginalised in the family and the society by highlighting their sufferings in the postcolonial set up that often go unheard and unnoticed, taking them 'subalterns'- as "outcast" and "the other". In fact, the subaltern studies an extension of postcolonial framework, tries to expose and demonstrate the oppression, exploitation and marginalisation on the basis of gender, caste, class and race especially dealing with the untouchables, women and children.

The term 'subaltern' has been associated with the famous postcolonial critic Gayatri Spivak and her essay, "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*". However, the term was originally coined by Antonio Gramsci referring to a military metaphor, meaning 'of inferior rank'. He further expanded it to refer to "those groups in the society who are subjected to the hegemony of ruling or feudal classes in cultural and social institutions that tries "to identify the cultural hegemony that excludes and displaces specific people and social groups from the socio-economic institutions of society, in order to deny their agency and voices in colonial politics." (*Wikipedia*) In fact, a group of historians called Subaltern Studies Group (SSG), aimed to promote a systematic discussion of subalterns, used the term to explore the hidden facts of systematic exploitation, marginalisation and domination of the poor, economically disadvantaged, women, peasants and children, workers and all such groups who have been /being stripped of their basic rights. It deconstructs 'hegemonic' thought and action that privileges dominant discourses and voices the concerns of the subalterns. According to Guha (1998) "the concept of subaltern intends to promote the discussion of oppressed themes. It helps to resolve the biasness towards oppressed groups." (p, 42)

Spivak, the prominent member of the group further explored the term to emphasise the oppression is a common practice all over the world and applied it to the most oppressed strata of society i.e. the women. She has included the marginalisation and subordination of women that the women in such conditions are doubly marginalised, first for belonging to a postcolonial society and secondly for being a woman. She argues that women are the real representation of 'subaltern' as they are in "deep dark shadows" (Spivak, 1985). Spivak looks at gendered subjects in the society, particularly Indian women as such an ideological construction of gender where male is always dominant giving no space to speak for them for their rights. It targets the colonial set up in which the subaltern has no history and hence cannot speak. To her the subaltern as female is even more 'deeply in shadow' because they have no dominant language around him/her to speak. But Spivak argues that this group must

speak and voice their concern in a language more close to their experiences so that they can speak against the dominant discourse or voice. In fact, Spivak's theory of subaltern is very relevant as still many people suffer in the name of gender, class and creed. The subalterns are also considered as "Others" in society and have no right to say or speak. They are denigrated as inferior, of no quality, or no moral values and thus, lacking in social virtues or moral conduct. Thus, Roy voicing the concerns of 'Subalterns' sees social order as patriarchal manifesting oppressive colonial thought and action.

The text explicitly brings out the group of 'subalterns' represented by Ammu, Estha and Rahel, the Papens who are pushed to the socio-cultural periphery by the hegemonic structures of the patriarchal mindset as manifested by Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, coupled with police-political nexus. Spivak is of the view that such 'subalterns' are never given a chance to speak though they have the ability to raise their voices. The subalterns have the ability to stand in front of the authorities but their voices are suppressed, thwarted and are never realised. The paper is an attempt to explore how family, state and society oppress and suppress those who are at the margins of caste and class in the light of the theory of 'subalterns'.

### **3. The Family, the Society & the State agencies of subalternity**

*'The God of Small Things'* deals with the interpersonal complexities of a typical Indian family that delves deep into the questions of moral, social and cultural boundaries in the state of Kerala. It presents the complexities of exploitation, of domination and of hegemony as a force operative at various levels controlling those who are at the margins of gender, caste, class and culture. Roy presents an image of injustice, oppression and marginalisation of women, children and untouchables in the hierarchy of patriarchy, caste and class. She questions societal norms, traditions, and raises the concerns of the 'subalterns' against oppression and suppression. Anita Singh sees the novel as "a discourse of the marginalised and subordinated" as it "crystallises the issues of atrocities against all those dispossessed of an identity or a speaking voice. The writing subject itself [Roy] belongs to the rank of the hitherto silent. The act of authorship is an act of retrieval as well as an act of liberation". (Singh, 133).

The novel set in a small town named Ayemenem near Kochi in the state of Kerala is a fragmentary narrative moving back and forth between 1969 and 1993 exposing the sufferings

of children, women and untouchables. The story revolves around Ammu, daughter of a wealthy Syrian Christian Ipe family and her love affair with an untouchable- Velutha. Besides Ammu and her twins-Estha and Rahel, the Ipe family comprises her parents Pappachi, Mammachi, her aunt Baby Kochamma, her brother Chacko and his wife Margaret and their daughter Sophie. Most of the events occur in 1969 focusing on Ammu and her seven-year-old twins Estha and Rahel. Baby Kochamma is a jealous old woman who failed in her love affair with an Irish missionary who now dictates the Ipe family. Ammu remained at home while Chacko went to Oxford to study there, married Margaret, an English woman and had a daughter, Sophie Mol. But soon Margaret left Chacko for Joe and Chacko returned to Ayemenem and took over their pickle factory. Meanwhile, Ammu, unable to tolerate her father, escapes Ayemenem and marries Baba who proves to be an abusive and alcoholic. But when Baba bids her to his boss in order to save his job, she is shattered and leaves him with the twins and moves back to Ayemenem to live with her parents.

Near the Ipes, lives a Paravan Family of the untouchables consisting of Velutha, his father and handicapped brother. Velutha works in the pickle factory of the Ipes managed by Chacko and is secretly in love with Ammu as she is highly influenced by his skills and love for her twins. The central events of the story unfolds when Margaret visits India with their daughter Sophie Mol for the holidays at Ayemenem. Ammu, Chacko, Baby Kochamma and twins-Estha and Rahel go to the airport to receive them. While waiting at the airport the family spend time watching the movie *'The Sound of Music'* in a theatre where Estha is molested by a vendor in the theatre named Orangedrink Lemondrink Man. Soon after, they all return to Ayemenem with Margaret and Mol. While Estha remains terrified. Fearing that 'Orangedrink Man' is after him, the twins hide themselves in 'History House', a deserted house of an Englishman across the river and soon it becomes their hiding place. Meanwhile Ammu and Velutha meet by the river and make love but the news of their secret love affair soon breaks out when Vellya Paapen (Velutha's father), informs Mammachi of his son's relationship with Ammu. Both Mammachi and Baby Kochamma are enraged and lock Ammu in her room, where she keeps crying that the twins are "millstones" around her neck. Frightened twins escape to the 'History House', with Sophie Mol by a boat near the Meenachal River. As they cross the river, their boat capsizes and unfortunately Sophie Mol dies by drowning. The fearful twins somehow reach shore, go to "History House" and fall asleep unaware that Velutha is already there. Sophie Mols' death and ensuing events enrages Mammachi and Baby Kochamma who in an attempt to salvage the family honour reach to

police station where, Baby Kochamma in front of Inspector Thomas Mathew, accuses Velutha of raping Ammu and kidnapping Estha and Rahel. He is soon arrested and beaten so brutally in front of Estha and Rahel that he dies in the police lock up after some time. After his death the Police inspector finds out that Velutha was innocent and threatens to charge Baby Kochamma of conspiring. She is terrified and soon convinces Estha and Rahel to save his mother Ammu by telling the police that Velutha has killed Sophie Mol. It so happens both Mammachi and Baby Kochamma convince Chacko to throw Ammu out of Ayemenem house. She is turned out of the house and starts living in a rented house but sends back Estha to Baba leaving Rahel with her who later moves to Boston. Twenty-three years later they are united at Ayemenem house in 1993 where Estha finds that Ammu has died of lung disease. Their personalities have changed altogether and life for them has no meaning and is shattered forever. There is no solace for both, however, they affirm their closeness by committing incest at the end of novel. The novel evidently forecasts the fear of oppression, suppression, child abuse, marginalisation, defiance and exploitation of transgressors like Ammu, Velutha, Estha and Rahel by manipulating structures of power that exploit those who are at the periphery. In fact, the exploitation begins at home and ends in the hands of the state being manipulated by different agencies for different ends embodied in Mammachi, Baby Kochamma and the police-inspector.

The protagonist Ammu, the young daughter of the Ipe family is a victim not only of patriarchy but also of its all manifesting structures including patriarchy and police-politic nexus. She faces discrimination and marginalisation from cradle to grave; first in family, then in society and finally in the hands of state establishments. She suffers a lot in the family because “This was the trouble with families. Like invidious doctors they knew just where it hurt” (p,70) Ammu is not only subjugated and relegated to subalternity by her parents but also by her husband. Her childhood is ruined by her father when she along with her mother undergoes the ordeal of Pappachi’s endless beating and thrashing. She is deprived of higher education and all her womanly sensibilities because “Pappachi insisted that a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl, so Ammu had no choice but to leave Delhi and move with them. There was very little for a young girl to do in Ayemenem other than to wait for marriage proposals while she helped her mother with the housework.” (p, 38)

Ammu could not withstand such discrimination around her, runs away and unthinkingly marries a man. The marriage proves disastrous as she soon realises that her

husband is abusive and alcoholic who tried to prostitute her in a bid to save his job. She feels terribly betrayed and soon divorces him and with sad feelings moves back to Ayemenem house with her twins' Estha and Rahel. The Ayemenem house instantly becomes a microcosm of torture, suppression and exploitation treating Ammu and her twins badly as if she had no right of staying there. First of all, her mother Mammachi starts torturing her because she acted against the wishes of the Ipe family by marrying an outsider and sees her marriage brought dishonour to the family. Mammachi thought herself to have been a victim of patriarchy but now she unhesitatingly practises patriarchy. When Ammus' relation with Velutha is uncovered she is venomously furious and wants to crush her down at any cost because by having relationship with an outcast, " she had defiled generations of breeding" (p, 244). To her Ammu has denigrated the family name but she boasts of Chako's sexual relations with factory workers and justifies him on 'Mans Needs'. She adopts a forgiving attitude towards her son Chako. but does not spare a single chance to assault and insult Ammu and her twins. Baby Kochamma, another agency of suppression, embodies the Syrian Christians incorporation of the caste system within their religious practices, with all prejudices and double standards. Baby Kochamma despises Ammu more than anyone else in the house because she feels that Ammu is "quarrelling with a fate that she, Baby Kochamma herself, felt she had graciously accepted. The fate of the wretched Man-less woman" (p, 44-5). She takes no time to make Ammu and her twins understand that they are outsiders in the Ayemenem house. She dangerously manipulates the family members, society and police inspector against Ammu, her twins and Velutha. She would do almost anything to get rid of Ammu and Velutha that she finally managed everything in a skilled way.

Ammu is also deprived of property rights and profits from the familial property as well as business of pickles for she was a woman. Interestingly, her brother Chacko is a socialist but manifests his feudal and patriarchal mindset in treating Ammu and her children, reminding that "Ammu had no Locusts Stand I. "Thanks to our wonderful male chauvinist society," Ammu said. Chacko said, "What's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine" (p, 51) implying that Ammu along with her children is more or less a kind of parasite in the Ayemenem house. Though, she assists Chako in the family business of pickles but she never gets a share of profit in it. In the end after Sophie Mol's tragic death, she is literally forced out of her ancestral house by her brother. Her life was completely ruined by all her family members. On one hand she strives to protect her children at any cost but on the other,

she wishes to break free from the “smug, ordered world that she so raged against” (p,84) of the Ayemenem house.

Ammu’s twins- Estha and Rahel have been victimised and suppressed at different levels by different persons. First of all their rootlessness of lineage and family marks their low and subaltern status in the Ayemenem house. They had to undergo many hardships that left their lives shattered forever. They experience harsh realities of the world at an early age. At the age of seven years Estha is molested by "the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man" and after that incident he almost stops speaking. Another ordeal was his false testimony against Velutha; the betrayal keeps him haunting throughout his life. Later he is sent to his alcoholic father and a kind of melancholy casts on his personality almost turning him to a macabre. Estha too could not escape the suffering. The testimony against Velutha makes her suffer endlessly as she has the greater burden of guilt while testifying against Velutha, the closest one to her in the novel. Ammu is despised by her family but they are taken as unwanted and outsiders in the Ayemenem house. Ammu herself feels her twins are ‘the millstones’ around her neck. The alienation by her mother, Mol’s tragic death, discovery of their mother’s relation with Velutha and conspiracy hatched by Baby Kochamma inflict a great disgrace and humiliation on both. It marks the sordid state of children’s use and abuse in family and society.

The state too fails in its duty to protect the fundamental rights of the deprived, the outcasts and the subalterns. When Ammu goes to the police station to prove Velutha’s innocence she confronts police inspector Mathew who lustily stares at Ammu and calls her ‘Vashya’ that the “Kottayam police does not take statement from Veshyas (prostitutes) and their illegitimate children.”(p,58). The behaviour of police-inspector exposes the fact that police use their power only to oppress the subalterns and exhibits its patriarchal attitude towards women, as “it was a premeditated gesture, calculated to humiliate and terrorize her.” (p,123)

Ammu had transgressed the societal norms by falling in love with an untouchable Velutha. How could she escape without paying the price of her ‘transgression’? Now she must pay for the crime that she committed by having a relationship with Velutha. And she pays all it in one instalment. Velutha is killed and she is rendered homeless by her protectors, leaving her soul tormented forever. She remorsefully recounts the events that if she had never ventured into the relationship with Velutha he would still be alive; her words “I’ve

killed him” ( p, 6) bring out the sordid state of her subalternity. Humiliated, alienated and sick, she is one day found dead in a room in Bharat Lodge in Alleppey. But humiliation did not end even after her death as the church authorities refused to bury Ammu. Finally she is cremated in an electric crematorium where only derelicts, homeless and beggars are cremated. The sufferings in Ammu’s life, itself is a fact that women are still severely marginalised by the social institutions like family, society, religion and police.

The family of Paravans is another victim of the societal and political hegemony. Velutha -a Paravan has been referred as “The God of Loss” (p,125) who is one of the lowest kind of the subalterns living with his father and brother nearby the Ayemenem house. He is referred to as inferior, polluted and without any history. The subalternity of Velutha’s and his family revealed though the old days when “[p]aravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan’s footprint” (p, 71). Velutha’s subalternity is revealed through Mammachi’s insulting abuses, Baby Kochamma’s evil designs, and Comrade Pillai and Chacko’s double cross-dealings. They all become active once Velutha violates the ‘love laws’ of the elites. They take it as an act of his rebellion and transgression against the hegemony of the powerful structure of caste and class. Chacko is furious about the loss of ‘family honour’ while Comrade Pillai, an opportunist, considers Velutha as his future competitor in the party, both conspiring against him. They are united to set him aside when they get a chance to do so. Pillai s public representative refuses to stand by his fellow comrade when Velutha is in police lock up on rape charges. He not only refuses to stand by him but accomplices the police inspector in Velutha's brutal death. Police inspector Thomas Mathew supposed to protect the rights of downtrodden turned out to be a sympathiser of upper Syrian Christian landowners who wanted to "... instill order into a world gone wrong” (p, 123). The way Velutha is beaten in the police custody and his brutal death thereupon proves the fact that police is not a neutral agency. It does not protect the rights of innocents and underprivileged but an instrument in the hands of local politicians who use it for their own purposes. Velutha is not only used, abused and mistreated by this unholy nexus of police and politics but he and his family have been relegated to the margins of the society that “left no footprints in sand, no ripples in water, no image in mirrors.” (p, 125) It brings out the fact that even after independence, the dynamics of suppression and exploitation did not change and the police brutality, administrative indifference and political intervention still inflicts pain on the subalterns.

Velutha's father Vellya Paapen belonged to the world of old parvans when "Pappachi would not allow Paravans into the house. Nobody would. They were not allowed to touch anything that Touchables touched." (p,35). He accepts his fate and humbly accepts the charity shown by the Ipe family. He is faithful to the extent that he himself endangers the life of his son by informing Mammachi about the Ammu-Velutha love affair that finally leads to the brutal death of Velutha in police custody. It shows he is unable to speak against the atrocities of class and caste and accepts his state of subalternity questioning none. Velutha's paralysed brother, Kuttappen is the most stratified kind of subaltern who screams throughout the novel. His scream becomes a symbol for the voices of subalterns that echoes unheard in the family, in the society and in the state.

#### **4. Summing Up:**

The text underlines the irrational treatment meted to the subalterns in the society, the family and in the state which is inexorably connected with the desire to dominate the weakest, a kind of colonial legacy. Colonialism manifested multifold evils of class and racial hegemony in the colonised nations particularly in India that fostered caste clashes and religious separatism. The postcolonial reality addressed such issues by articulating unheard voices that suffered oppression and suppression for the centuries. The fatal love story of Ammu and Velutha represents the voice of those criss- cross caste and class relationships who transgress the very dividing line of social norms and thus, exposes the hegemonic system of caste, class and racial superiority. However, the postmodern reality has articulated the voices of subalterns, untouchables and women who are now excelling in all walks of life through constitutional provisions and societal acceptance but still a lot needs to be done for those who are still left at the margins in the tight compartments of their own caste and class divisions- a new kind of subalterns.

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