In The God of Small Things, Roy ingeniously exposes and denounces the politics of the subaltern through questions of corporeality, gender, and race positioning. She does so, however, in a way that escapes facile dichotomous divisions and obvious essentialist oppositions. At the core of her critique is a social and cultural system that not only stifles individual freedom and social mobility but also, and above all, represses the expressions of the body and the discourses of desire. Arundhati Roy successfully builds a narrative that focuses on bodily encounters that defy authoritative discourses and function as frontiers of cultural and social contacts. “Edges, Borders, Boundaries, Brinks and Limits” (Rao, Pg. 5) are depicted as loci devised by a web of socio-historical relations that the narrative undermines and revises. Roy’s characters, both male and female, and their various forms of displacement, question the cultural inscriptions of the ‘disembodied’ body, thus giving evidence to the permeability of the corporeal entities that are inevitably socially regulated.

The maltreatment of the subaltern is one of the major issues in the novel. The term ‘subaltern’ 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, Volume I, Ranjit 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”. (34) In the third chapter of the novel entitled “Big Man the Laltain, Small Man the Mombatti” artistically symbolizes the subalternity of Ammu and Velutha. Ammu and Velutha represent the Mombatti whereas those opposing their unorthodox love affair represent the Laltain.

Roy represents the miserable and pathetic condition of untouchables in the novel. In the novel, the laws of Indian caste system broke down by the characters Ammu, the central protagonist and Velutha, an untouchable. Velutha works at the Paradise Pickles and Preserves Factory owned by Ammu’s family. He is an untouchable thus the other workers resent him and is paid less money for his work. Hindus believe that being an untouchable is the punishment of the previous birth. But by being good and obedient, an untouchable can obtain a higher rebirth. Velutha’s lack of complacency causes him various problems throughout the novel. “It was not entirely his fault that he lived in a society where a man’s death could be more profitable than his life had ever been”. (Roy 267)

In Hinduism one believes in rebirth. This is a considerable part of the caste system which explains some facts that are difficult to understand. Hindus believe that if one lives a moral and religious life and does not commit crimes or injustices one will be reborn in a superior caste. As
a conclusion one will be reborn in a lower caste if one does not respect moral and religious instructions and the law. Thus the untouchables believe that it is justified that they are ill-treated and avoided by the community and hence bear their nearly unbearable life.

Velutha, transgresses the conventional norms of the society through his affair with a woman of high caste. The ultimate outcome of this affair is the tragic death of an “Untouchable” by the “touchable boots” of the state police, an event that makes a travesty of the idea of God. God have no control over the small things rather small things have an ultimate power over god turned him to the “God of loss”. The idea of untouchability is explored at two levels: firstly, socially untouchables or Paravan, who are never, allowed basic human rights, Secondly, metaphoric untouchables in high castes. When Velutha has an affair with Ammu, he breaks an ancient taboo and incurs the wrath of Ammu’s family and the kerala police. He breaks the rigid social rules of the caste system and therefore punished by the authorities. Roy firmly describes the policemen’s violent actions as being done our of fear, “…civilization’s fear of nature, men’s fear of women, power’s fear of powerlessness” (292) The division between touchable and untouchable is so much in the essence of Kerala that Velutha seems to be as a nonhuman: “If they hurt Velutha more than they intended to, it was only because any kinship, and connection between themselves and him, any implication that if nothing else, at least biologically he was a fellow creature- had been severed log ago”. (293) Traditionally, a woman who had sex with a man from a lower caste would be expelled from her caste. Reviewer Patrick Sullivan claims that “an excellent parallel would be wealthy Southern white woman falling in love with a black man”. (Sullivan 54) In the novel, when Mammachi referring to the past, there is a part in which is said that the untouchables were not allowed to walk on public roads and that they had to wipe out their footprints so that nobody of higher caste could accidentally step into them. They had to cover their mouths while they were speaking so that nobody had to breathe in their polluted air. They actually not have given permission to exist. This non-existence is referred to several times in the book for example when Velutha does not leave footprints or ripples in the water. This makes him almost inhuman and supernatural. Despite the various forums focusing on the women’s physical, financial, and emotional exploitation together with their mental anguish, traces of oppression seem to have stayed.

When Velutha fell in love with Ammu and both of them planned to marry each other. This conversation overheard by Comrade Pillai and he is the one who used his power and the police would use its power. The touchable policemen crossed the Meenachal river and picked their way to the History House where the Desperado could be caught. They woke Velutha with their knees. And the twins were only witnesses to this brutal torture:

They heard the thud of wood on flesh.  
Boot on bone. On teeth. The muffled  
Grunt when a stomach is kicked in,  
The muted crunch of skull on cement.  
The gurgle of blood on a man’s  
Breath when his lung is torn by the
Jagged end of a broken rib. (Roy 308)

Estha and Rahel didn’t know that it was “Human nature’s pursuit of ascendancy. Structure. Order. Complete monopoly” (309) These policemen didn’t hurt Velutha to settle a personal score but “they were exorcising fear...After all they were not battling an epidemic. They were merely inoculating a community against an outbreak.” (309) Roy’s painstakingly true description of the power of the police brings out the hypocrisy of the system. This is the supreme example of the power structure of the police. Through Roy’s novel has suffered severe criticism it truly and realistically brings out the forces which vie for control over the outcastes and the down castes. “Roy’s book is the only one I think of among Indian novels in English which can be comprehensively described as a protest novel. It is all about atrocities against minorities, Small Things: children and youth, women and untouchables” (Rao 12)

The God of Small Things throws light upon hierarchical structures of power, oppression at various levels in patriarchial societies. Arundhati Roy explores how these differences of caste, gender, race, class, function through social institutions and the way they affect human interactions and relationships. The ‘Big Things’, the things in power, indicating in the end that the God of small things is an absent God, a God of loss. Untouchable or Dalit women are the most deprived of all. Velutha, the untouchable is the worst affected of all. The policemen are deftly used as tools of the system, a part of the coercive machinery which keeps things in order. Although they are supposed to stand for “Politeness, Obedience, Loyalty, Intelligence, Courtesy, efficiency” (Roy 304). They perform duties only for those in power. Their brutality to Velutha springs from the fact that they didn’t consider him a fellow being. “They were History’s henchman sent to square the books and collect the dues from those who broke the laws... They were not arresting a man... they were merely inoculating a community against an outbreak... They were exorcising fear”. (308-309) When Velutha was taken to the police custody, he was severely beaten by the police to such an extent that he died in the custody. The torture of Velutha by the Police is heart rending:

Blood spilled from his skull like a secret. His face was swollen and his head looked like a pumpkin, too large and heavy for the slender it grew from. A pumpkin with a monstrous upside-down smile. Police boots stepped back from the rim of a pool of urine spreading from him, the bright bare electric bulb, reflected in it (319-320)

Velutha is the extreme transgressor of rules. So he is “abandoned by God and History, by Marx, by man, by woman and by children” (310) He pays the price of disobedience. He is referred to as ‘The God of Small Things’. The Big Things being poles apart from each other, The God of Small Things is bound to be separate from the God of Big things.

Is Ammu and Velutha’s sad love story a representation of subaltern speech or subaltern muteness? According to the newspapers, Velutha dies in custody, charged with kidnapping and murder. Comrade Pillai is interviewed in the same newspaper, claiming that the “management had implicated the Paravan in a false police case because he (Velutha) was an active member of the Communist party” (286) and therefore they wished to eliminate him. Neither of these two explanations of what had taken place was true. Thus in a way Velutha’s speech act- that is his attempt to have a relationship with an upper-caste woman- failed and was never officially recognized. Spivak gives a similar example in Can the Subaltern Speak? of a young woman, Bhubaneswari Bhaduri, who committed suicide in 1926. She was secretly part of a militant
liberation group and had been charged with the task of a political assassination, which she felt unable to perform. She decided to commit suicide but it bothered her to know that her family would interpret her action as the result of an illegitimate pregnancy. To prevent this dishonorable reputation Bhubaneswari waited she had her menstruation before she hung herself and she also wrote a letter to an elder sister about her reasons. However, during Spivak’s research about the story, it becomes clear to her that not even Bhubaneswari nieces had understood the real reasons for her suicide. They only thought it was “case of illicit love” (63), an assumption that made Spivak write in despair that ‘the subaltern cannot speak’, since Bhubaneswari, did not get her message through, however hard she tried. The similarity with the death of Velutha in Roy’s novel is of course that the speech act failed in the sense that the official version is totally different from what really happened, which in itself is sad. The good news, however, is that he truth behind Velutha’s death is made known by Roy’s novel in the same manner that Bhubaneswari’s story is made known through Spivak’s work. Spivak and Roy speak for them, and their story is being told, the truth about their actions is made known and recognized and in that respect their speech act succeeded after all. And in the case of Ammu and Velutha, there is a strange beauty in the fact that they actually dared to admit their love to each other in Roy’s own version of Romeo and Juliet.

The scene in which he is physically tortured by the police is graphically described in repulsive details intended to shock. It shows the infliction of bodily pain by emblematically opposing the silence of the corporeal subject being tortured and the voice of the speaking subject, the torturer:

If they hurt Velutha more than they intended to, it was only because any kinship, any connection between themselves and him, any implication that if nothing else, at least biologically he was a fellow creature- had been severed long ago. They were not arresting a man, they were exorcising fear. They had no instrument to calibrate how much punishment he could take. No means of gauging how much or how permanently they had damaged him… They were merely inoculating a community against an outbreak. (293)

In this scene the narrative voice intentionally focuses on the thoughts, deeds and conversation of the Touchable police and entirely suppresses Velutha’s consciousness and voice. Since torture has the power to destroy language, throughout the violent scene until his death in the next episode, Velutha himself remains mute and vacant, completely absent from the narrative and the official version of history that is released afterwards. Only his maimed, shattered, delegitimized body is exposed in its destruction in graphic details. The dynamics of this opposition between the torturer and the tortured in terms of voice and body is an enactment of the power relations portrayed in the novel. As Bakare Yusuf observes, “For the torturer, the awareness of voice confirms his power, his existence, the presence of a world; for the sufferer, the absence of a world, the awareness of the corporeality, the limit of his/her extension in the world” (316) Faced with the issues of power, the character Velutha express the potential of resistance through his body. It is his attempt to reject that which has been responsible for his demise and destruction as human being.

Arundhati Roy has projected the Indian dalit as a whole class in her novel. The presentation of caste consciousness in her novel is authentic, credible, and realistic. She analyses in her novel the lives of dalit, in particular, along the axes of class and gender. Although The God of Small Things takes place in 1969, the caste system is still present in India. Before
Independence, untouchables were discriminated against and were provided with separate priests and churches. They were never measured an equal scale of humanity. Freedom of the nation had not brought much relief to them. 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... we are still caught up in the business of disproving the white world’s definition of us”. (Roy 13) Roy does not make us cognizant of the colonial past, but also makes us look at the shadow of an older pre-colonial history. 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”. (Spivak 308) It is a real pity to see how inferior class and sex have been mistreated both in the pre-colonial and as well as the post-colonial era.

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 and untouchables. 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. To conclude, one can say that Arundhati Roy’s treatment of the subaltern in her novel triggers the mnemonic of a colonial India. Nevertheless, she urges them to shatter all conventions of the traditional society in order to fetch an identity for themselves. 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.

Works Cited: