

# THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS: VOICE AND EXPRESSION TO THE SUFFERINGS OF SUBALTERN

**Mohd Ishaq Bhat**

Ph.D. Scholar,

Department of English, University of Kashmir,

Hazratbal, Srinagar, J & K.

Email: [Bhatishaq17@gmail.com](mailto:Bhatishaq17@gmail.com)

**Yasmeena Jan**

Ph.D. Scholar,

Department of English

Baba Ghulam Shah Badshah University, Rajouri, J & K India

**Abstract:** Literature is a vehicle of ideas and views. The progressive ideas of a fictional genius spread through his/her works of literature. These works later on become classic and deserve immortality. They are universally received. These fictional works attain eternity through the ages. Great literature should tell us about social realities as class exploitation, injustice and above all the insult and abuse the subaltern. The experiences of women are shaped by absence and invisibility: what does not get noticed, discussed or included. In the orthodox and conservative society like ours, women have always been undervalued due to patriarchal assumptions. They have been tutored that their greatness lies in their sufferings and therefore, happiness of others is always prioritized to their own. In fact, their perceptions of their aspirations and expectations are within the framework of Indian social and moral commitment. The paper seeks to study the work of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, as a text of the silent voice of subaltern. It throws light on some important things of life. It has universal appeal because it voices the hidden and suppressed emotions of subaltern. It is a panorama of Indian social life. It shows the endless struggle of women and untouchables for carving their identity in this cruel, conservative and elite dominating society. They are vulnerable and deserted too so have to suffer at the hands of law makers. Being a social activist she raises the existential questions of subaltern and quest for their identity with a silent voice in a modern, democratic and complex world. The paper presents the constant struggle of women for their identity through the main characters as Ammu and Velutha who have feeble voice lost in the cacophony of life.

**Keywords:** Subaltern, Gender, Identity, Patriarchy, Stereotype, Cacophony, Quest, Conservative, Panorama.

## 1.0 About The Author:

Arundhati Roy, recipient of Booker prize for her Magnus opus debut novel *The God of small things* was born on November 24, 1961 in Shillong, Meghalaya, India. Her full name is Suzana Arundati Roy. Her mother Mary Roy, well known as social activist is from Kerala and her father a Bengali Hindu tea planter. She spent her crucial childhood years in Ayamanam a small town near Kotlaya, followed by the Lawrence School, Lovedale, in Bilgris, Tamil Nadu. She then studied architecture at the school of planning and Architecture, Delhi, where she met her first husband, architect Gerard da Cunha. Roy met her second husband, film maker Pradip Krishen, in 1984, and played a village girl in his award winning movie *Massey Sahib*. It was a fruitful association for she soon got involved in preparing T.V.

Serials for Doordarshan and got attention for TV also. Roy is a cousin of prominent media personality Prannoy Roy, the head of the leading Indian TV Media group NDTV. She lives in New Delhi.

Ms. Roy has a number of works to her credit. She is originally a social activist-turned writer. She has produced the essays concerning universal threats, politics and society which include *New nukes: India, Pakistan and Global Nuclear Development*, *War is Peace*, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, *The End of Imagination* and *The Greater Common Good*. The Booker Prize winner, Ms. Roy keeps herself concerned with several causes regarding dalits, environment protection due to Narmada Dam. *The God of Small Things* rotates round the oppressed characters. The novel reflects the sage of oppression on one hand and on the other; it depicts deep sense of protest.

In the novel, the female characters refuse to let themselves be caged in the rules and laws set by an extremely conservative society. Ammu, the protagonist of the novel, belongs to a reputed Syrian Christian family from Kerala and she marries a Bengali Brahmin in open defiance of her family. One day, her husband loses his job but his English boss says that he would work something out if he lets him sleep with his wife Ammu. He presents this indecent proposal to Ammu and beats her when she refuses. So she divorces him and returns to his parents' home. Ammu's returning back to her parents' home deprives her of any social position or prestige, of any right. She is treated as an unwelcome guest in her very own house where she was born and brought up.

However, the free nature of Ammu forces her to rebellion. She is fully aware of the conservative mindset of the members of her family and the society of which she is an integral part. Still she enters the forbidden territory to love and being loved by an untouchable- Velutha. At this act, she becomes unpardonable and makes herself susceptible to the deliberate humiliation to which she is subjected by the police Inspector as well as her own family.

Ammu was the most important female character in the God of small things. She was a bourgeois woman and a divorcee, with two children, Estha (son) and Rahel (daughter). Since her childhood as a little girl she had to face lots of anxieties and fears. She had seen the cruelty of her father Pappachi who usually beat her and her mother Mammachi with a brass vase and they used to hide beside the Mehandi hedge. She was also deprived from education because her father was against the girl's education. He believed that higher education was not useful for girls as it corrupts them so he sent Chacko England for higher education. Due to his male ego he tyrannized his wife and daughter. "A college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl". (The God of Small Things 2002 P.N. 38) Ammu's father believed that marriage means male's domination over woman who was born to serve man that should be the ultimate goal and destiny of women. Roy portrayed Ammu as a girl who had knowledge about the Ayemenem people who had no care about women and their feelings and wishes so when she went Calcutta at her relative to join wedding reception there she met with her future husband. When he proposed Ammu, she did not think but said yes as her acceptance seeing the redness in his eyes as his love for herself (Ammu). Getting him she thought that she had searched her identity but soon her dream shattered when her husband forced her to go to Mr. Hollick to save his job. Even then, "he launched at her, grabbed her hair, punched her and then passed out from the effort." (The God of Small Things 2002 P.N. 42 ) Soon she found that she had jumped into fire from the frying pan.

Leaving her husband she returned to her parental house in Ayemenem with Estha (Son) and Rahel (daughter) at her father's house she was not welcomed but commented by her aunt Baby Kochamma who disliked the twins. "She considered them doomed, fatherless waifs. Worse still, they were half Hindu Hybrids home no self - respecting Syrian Christian would ever marry". ( The God of Small Things 2002 P.N.45) This society did not accept the manless woman and did not tolerate the fatherless children. A divorced daughter from love marriage had no position in her parent's home. She found her parents indifferent to her and her children. So she felt welled up whenever she saw her children, "like a pair of small bewildered frogs engrossed in each other's company lolloping arm in arm down a highway full of hurtling traffic." (The God of Small Things 2002 P.-43)

She was not welcomed on her returned to her father's house. Here Roy tried to unveil the Indian society which was only designed by men for their own good life. Baby Kochamma herself felt, "The fate of the wretched Manless woman" and told Ammu "A married daughter had no positing in her parent's home".(The God of Small Things 2002 p.45)But on the other hand Chacko was welcomed as inheritor of family's wealth. It was also surprising when Chacko flirted with women he was encouraged by his mother Mammachi but on Ammu's part all this was against the love laws and traditions so she was beaten and closed in a room. Her borther Chacko tried to marginalize her because of her violation of the cast, class and religion turned her rebellion and transgressor against this social boundary. Aijaz Ahmad also calls her "A women of great grit" (Prasad, 2006 P. 39)

Ammu, the female protagonist breaks the boundaries that confined and threatened her very existence and walks out of the unbearable circumstances. Thus, she moves from the feminist phase to the phase of displacement and self-identification. To escape the dictates of the patriarchy, the new woman comes out in more prominent contours. The new woman of India resorts to divorce as the only means of retrieving her lost life. That is what Ammu does in the novel.

At Ayemenem, Ammu felt like a captive lady. She is forced to quit her education because Pappachi felt that college education for a girl is an unnecessary expenditure. She gradually begins to grow desperate. "All day she dreamed of escaping from Ayemenem and the clutches of her ill-tempered father and bitter, long suffering mother. She hatched several wretched little plans. Eventually, one worked. Pappachi agreed to let her spend the summer with a distant aunt who lived in Calcutta (P38-39).

Ammu is not a fallen woman. She is pained to see the inability of her husband to protect her self-respect and therefore, decides to leave him. She returns to the same dark cellar Ayemenem from which she wanted to run away. Destiny, once again, brings her to the place of perpetual suffering. This reflects the sensitivity of woman who tolerates everything merely for her children's sake.

The life of Ammu's mother is sandwiched between inhuman cruelties of her husband "Pappachi" and her responsibilities. That is probably the reason she embarks on a business of pickles. Thus, the novel presents an endless story of distress, pain and anguish that continues to the next generation of Rahel, Estha and Sophie Mol. Margaret fell for Chacko's irresponsible, optimistic ways but soon is tired of the same. She rushes into marriage with him and very soon divorces him and marries Joie. She loves her daughter Sohpie Mol very much. After the accidental death of Sophie, she becomes a hysteric patient. Thus, the pressures, obligations, bindings etc of the women characters can be clearly noticed.

Velutha, the son of Vellya paopen, is a talented young man, who has a spirit of protest. Ammu sees a great personality in him because he articulates everything which she could not herself express. She feels he is the God of small things. On the basis of this realization and being the victims of the oppressed and marginalized, both Velutha and Ammu seek solace in each other's company. But for this very act, Velutha is put to death and Ammu is separated from her children. At the age of 31, she eventually leaves for her heavenly abode.

The novel also depicts that the fight against gender oppression leads to resistance against caste, class oppression and stimulates anti-colonial thoughts. Such rebellious attitudes are vividly expressed through the marital and inter-gender relations of Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, Ammu and Rahel. The openly rebellious transgression of these characters outside the institution of marriage were very much practiced in post-colonial India and the Love laws lead to a questioning of the basic values and structures of the post-colonial Indian society.

Though Ammu is a middle class educated divorcee with two children, she is not welcome on her return to her father's house. She is marginalized by her very own brother Chacko a kind of an elite leftist. She is also confined by the family structure and inheritance laws typical to the Community of Syrian Christians. Ammu is infatuated with Velutha and goes against the Love Laws which her community has inherited from their Hindu past. Her transgression of the caste, class and religious boundaries mounts a revolt that marginalizes her as a woman. She is treated as an outcast not only in her own family but also in the society of which she is an integral part. But, Ammu is a bold woman; she does not succumb to the pressures of the family and the society. She, in fact, rebels against such social structures and challenges the very institution of marriage though she, later on dies exiled. She, thus becomes an epitome of all subalterns, especially women, who challenge the power structures of the social order.

Ammu is faced against a system where her Marxist brother Chacko exploits the poor women labourers in his factory, both financially and sexually and goes unchecked. She sees characters like Mammachi, being appropriated by patriarchal domination and be smothered and distorted by it. She sees Velutha being accused of the accidental drowning of Sophie Mol. Ammu's father is skeptical of the fact that her Bengali Hindu husband wanted to prostitute her in order to entertain his white boss. Thus Ammu a subaltern woman who is economically and socially marginalized, challenges the authority of colonial rulers. Asphyxiated by social injustice, Ammu rebels against the very social norms that constitute the Syrian Christian community in Kerala. This rebellion is an act of resistance against the very foundations of this society.

Thus Ammu defies oppressive and repressive social and political structures. Though she does not succeed in bringing about any noticeable change, she makes a bold attempt towards realization of her dreams. Her efforts towards subalterns may not be deliberate but her actions definitely contribute to the liberation of subalterns.

Mammachi too exhibits some kind of resistance against patriarchal domination and marginalization. She is also a physically and psychologically abused wife, who undergoes extreme torture and trauma but never speaks out. She is not only a passive victim but is also the target of the jealousy of her entomologist husband. When Mammachi's music teacher informs her husband that she was "exceptionally talented" and "potentially concert class" her music lessons stop abruptly. (Roy, 2005, p.67) Mammachi's strategy of utilizing patriarchal authority herself does not help her even in dealing with her son Chacko who takes away the pickle-factory from her as a kind of a consequential sequel to his saving Mammachi from her husband's beatings. Chacko replaces her and reclaims the role of the patriarch as it belongs only to the men in the family. Mammachi, in losing her factory to her son, is marginalized in terms of class and gender. A descendant of upper class Brahmins, she, however, is not a victim of caste prejudice. Marginalized by her son in old age and facing an economically disadvantaged position, Mammachi is a subaltern in more than one way. Her submission to patriarchal traditions and values are a defensive gesture rather than an honest agreement with hegemonic powers. In the Indian society, evils of caste and class and patriarchal oppressions feed and depend on each other even today. Ammu resists patriarchy and caste and class bigotry in public and pays her life.

Baby Kochamma, though converts to the Roman Catholic faith but does not dare to challenge the traditional ideas of love and marriage prevalent in post-colonial India. She does not run away to fulfil her dreams. She does not overtly believe in the rights of women as well as subalterns and makes a distinction between her self-interest and those of other women. In stark contradiction to her personal subversion and transgression of patriarchy and oppressive structures, Baby Kochamma partners with the exploitive actions against Ammu. She is responsible for tortifying the minds of Mammachi and Chacko, fabrication of a false case against Velutha, deceiving the children into betraying Velutha, advising Chacko to return Estha to his father and forcing Ammu to leave. All these manipulations isolate Baby Kochamma to a wretched life where her only companion is TV. As a subaltern, she belongs to the lower middle class in terms of her power and is quite unstable in terms of class loyalty. Her abandonment of the Syrian Christian community and joining Roman Catholicism, for the sake of her love for Father Mulligan and adhering to that faith even after Father Mulligan's newly appropriated avatar of a Hindu Sadhu as well as her adoption of celibacy, speak of her interrogation of the post-colonial Indian social order apparent in Kerala.

Estha and Rahel too are subalterns in the sense of being rootless economically, financially, in terms of family, lineage and culture. Being deprived of fatherly love and a stable economic base, they have to fall back upon each other. They have a battered childhood because of their father's "drunken violence followed by post-drunken badgering". The two children had a double stigma of mixed parentage attached to them, both "religious because their father was Hindu and mother Syrian Christian and ethnic their father being a Bengali and mother, a Keralite." (Roy, 1997 P N. 91) Moreover, they were the children of divorced parents. They were deprived of conventional parental love.

After Ammu's death, Estha is sent back to his father and the twins face the pain of separation. Thus, they spend their childhood in an altogether different manner, learning "how history negotiates its terms and collects its dues from those who break its laws." (p. 55) Rahel faces a tough time in school and is expelled three times. Thus, she is marginalized because of her religion/community, gender, class and age and can be truly labelled as the subaltern. Her acts of non-conformity can be considered as acts of resistance through which she wants to bring about some kind of change. The most important act by Rahel is that of accomplishing her incestuous love for her twin brother, Estha, which though an act of personal self-assertion, is also extremely political and challenges the local inequalities in post-colonial India.

Thus, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, Ammu and Rahel, question the indigenous norms associated with patriarchy, class, caste and feudal-capitalist economic structures. Surprisingly, these women do not support global inequality veiled as globalization. Ammu refuses to be a prostitute to the white boss of her husband. Mammachi feels threatened by whatever happens on the television. Baby Kochamma does not accept every change in the identity of Father Mulligan. She accepts Roman Catholicism for his sake but does not switch back to Hinduism, when Father Mulligan, becomes a Hindu Sadhu. Rahel looks forward to the arrival of her twin brother Estha and tries to heal him of his dumbness and fractured existence and accomplishes their childish but incestuous love- an act of complete denial of the restrictive permissive sexuality of the West that binds sexuality with business, transaction and money. Thus, Rahel challenges the global inequalities and domination camouflaged as globalization.

**2.0 Conclusion:** To sum up Roy exploits common everyday issues in her novel. Her story involves sorrow, grief, problematic marital relationships, non-marital affairs, and violent punishment for breaking social rules involving incest, the caste system and so forth. We also see personal challenges, courage to stand against the taboos, women seeking their identity as human beings, as individuals, but the dominant masculine voice is suppressive that these women are silenced in various ways. The novel depicts women as subalterns, some of whom try to confront the existing social inequalities in order to bring about a change. This novel was a revolutionary attempt on the part of Arundhati who tried to open the eyes of Indian Community towards the Callousness of treating women as objects. Women thus treated are considered soulless beings, sub-human and playthings for men. This imbalance in society explains much of the unhappiness prevailing in our families and the battered lives of children who are exposed to this very partial and unjust view of life. The end result is a paralyzed society unable and unwilling to grow.

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