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Historicising Subalternity: Recuperation of Subaltern History and Identity in Arundhati
Roy's *The God of Small Things*

Abstract

In Antonio Gramsci's parlance 'subaltern' refers to "those groups in society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes...groups (peasants, workers and other) denied access to hegemonic power." Hence, subalternity denotes subordination or marginalisation in terms of class, caste, gender, race, language, culture and the resultant centrality of the dominant- dominated relationship in history. So the subaltern emerges not as a positive identity but as a product of a network of differential, potentially contradictory identities. The subversive centrality of the 'subalterns' in the postcolonial narratives is nothing but displaying of a growing critical distance to see through colonial propaganda on part of the colonised subjects and refutation of the ideological manipulation involved in such hegemonic practices. Arundhati Roy's postcolonial novel *The God of Small Things* hence historicises subalternity in terms of situating 'untouchable' Velutha and 'gendered subaltern' Ammu at the centre of the novel and thereby records the existential predicament of the peripheral subalterns through the characters like Velutha and Ammu, both representing subalternity on the social and gendered planes respectively. The paper therefore studies the ways Arundhati Roy historicises subalternity and the subalterns' desire to construe their selves and identity in *The God Of Small Things* under the aegis of Ranajit Guha's reflection on 'subaltern' as peripheral others and Gayatri Spivak's tenet on 'gendered subaltern' whose voice has been denied any ear in the official history of India. As the historical record has consistently written the peripheral others out of history the paper also attempts to analyse how in the novel Roy attempts to recuperate a space for these invisible mass by critiquing the stereotypes of gender,

politics of caste and class exposing hypocrisy of the social hierarchy and the irrational tortuous limits they impose upon the “small things”-the subalterns, both social and gendered.

Key Words: Gendered-subaltern, hegemony, history, postcolonial, subaltern, subalternity, untouchable.

Linda Hutcheon sees the so called subversive centrality of the ‘subalterns’ in the postcolonial narratives as agendas acting as “the rhetoric of (this) post-colonial liberation.”(Hutcheon,p170). Likewise the subaltern studies project led by once a Marxist and a full time activist in the Communist Party of India Ranajit Guha points at dismantling of the recorded, official historiography of the ‘elite’ in the South Asian region and at upholding the ‘little’ narratives and history of the oppressed, marginalised classes who have been denied any room in nationalistic historiography, constructed by the ‘elite’. On the other hand in her influential essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Gayatri Spivak explains the ‘gendered subaltern’ and her position as something “even more deeply in shadow”- a shadowy figure on its margin who does not ‘speak’ here. Ann Heilmenn and Mark Llewellyn views the revisionist attempts of some postcolonial women novelists and their preoccupation with historicising subalternity as assertion of “a sense of historical locations” by means of reclaiming lost histories of such dominated ‘shadowy’ figures and recreating personages from them as subjects and participants in their fictional accounts. This history- fiction interface in most of the postcolonial/postmodern novels accentuates Lyotard’s words “postmodernism symbolises the death of centres, displays incredulity towards metanarratives and is characterised by a social formation in which the maps and status of knowledge are being de-centred, re-drawn and re-described” (Lyotard: 1984). Linda Hutcheon labels such novels as ‘historiographic metafiction’ in terms of their granting for myriads of subaltern / marginalised voices as a corollary to which “what has surfaced is something different from the unitary, closed, evolutionary narratives of historiography as we have traditionally known it: we now get the histories of the losers as well as the winners, of the regional as well as the centrist, of the unsung many as well as the much sung few, and of women as well as men.”(66)These ‘unsung many’ happen to be the subalterns and as in Spivak’s belief the “subaltern cannot speak” for the oppressed to speak and make their voice heard “the representational systems that make them silent must change, and critics should question the oppressing discourse itself” (McLeod 194). So to ‘bear on questions of marginality’ (Quayson) attempts have been

on where with Postcolonial writing and literary theory many postcolonial/postmodern writers with their subversive historical fictions try to verbalise the silenced histories of marginalised groups by means of refracting the already accepted interpretation in order to force it out of the centre and to recoup the peripheral histories of the ex-centric subalterns.

Arundhoti Roy's postmodernist/postcolonial revisionist historical novel "The God of Small Things" (1997) also resonates with the issue of subalternity and historicises subaltern crisis and identity in two planes: one is the 'social subalternity' shown through race positioning (represented by untouchable Velutha) and the other is the 'gendered subalternity' shown through gender corporeality (represented by Ammu). Highly acclaimed for its sensitivity to social injustice and its feminist politics the novel adroitly represents the 'small' people-the subaltern and their predicaments simultaneously going to the extent of idealising rather deifying a subaltern character Velutha as "God of small things". Set in Ayemenem, Kerela the novel questions the validity of the grand narratives such as patriarchy, religion, culture, colonialism and even Marxism which are projected as the ways of 'emancipation and betterment' of society but ironically happen to be the agencies of discrimination and exploitation. The novel critiques the traditional values of the caste-ridden, gender-biased Kerelite community where 'Small man the Mombatti' (p88) is under the grip of 'Big Man the Laltain' (p88). By dexterously entwining the 'small things' (submerged characters in official history) with the 'large things' (the official or political narratives) the novel uses the personal to contest the political eventually leading to lay bare the upshots of physical (dis) location upon the marginalised subjects. Amidst all the tirades about progress, secularism, equal rights and justice the novel actually reveals how these ideologies are imperilled and how the subalterns (dalits and women) are fated to a marginalised and constricted life of humiliation and persecution.

The novel debriefs Christianity and Marxism and the ways in which they impact on Paravan lives and eventually questions the caste system, particularly that of untouchability intricately permeating in the social life of Kerela. In Christianity, it is believed that there is no stratum in human being on the basis of caste; but Roy has shown how even among the established Syrian Christian also such rules and customs are practised vehemently. "In the colonial period, many lower castes were converted to Christians by the European Missionaries but the new converts were not allowed to join the Syrian Christians" (Wikipedia on 'Untouchability'). According to the Mandal Commission Report (1980) "The Christians in Kerela are divided...into various ethnic groups on the basis of caste background...even after

the lower caste converts continue to be treated as Harijans (the untouchable) by all sections of society including the Syrian Christians.” This upsetting duality made Dr. B. R. Ambedkar to ponder, “Has Christianity been able to save the converts from the sufferings and ignominy which is the misfortune of everyone who is born an Untouchable?” Arundhoti Roy attempts to “set the record straight” by challenging the constructed history which effaces and corners the ‘disruptive’ and ‘contaminating’ voiceless to present the history of the voiced and resurfacing the untold/unheard versions of history.

“When the British came to Malabar, a number of Paravans and Pulayas (among then Velutha’s grandfather, Kelan) converted to Christianity and joined the Anglican church to escape the scourge of untouchability. As added incentive they were given a little food and money. They were known as the Rice-Christians. It didn’t take them long to realise that they had jumped from the frying pan into the fire. They were made to have separate churches and separate priests...After independence they found they were not entitled to any Government benefits like job reservations, or bank loan at low interest rates because officially, on paper, they were Christians ,and therefore casteless. It was little like having to sweep away your footprints without a broom. Or worse, not being *allowed* to leave footprint at all” (p74).

How the caste system is operative in fixing the Paravans to nothingness get expression in the novel when Mammachi says that she still remembers a time when the “Paravans 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...Paravans were 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” (p73-74).

Amitabh Roy documents that Arundhoti Roy conveys a generally perfect picture of the dalits with the varying responses of the three special characters namely VellyaPaapen and his two sons Kuttapen and Velutha to the caste oppression. According to him, “VellyaPaapen , Kuttapen and Velutha constitute the trio which depicts the three types of dalits in Indian society, namely, the docile conformist, the discontented paralytic and the rebel who moves for equality and stakes his life”(p112). Hence, Velutha being an untouchable and falling in love with an upper caste Syrian Christian Ammu has to face the “Inevitable Consequence of Necessary Politics” (p14),a tragic death of an ‘Untouchable’ by the ‘Touchable’ boots of the state police. In the novel Velutha who belongs to the untouchable Paravan caste is

represented almost exclusively in positive terms. He is highly intelligent, sensitive and friendly with a remarkable look which makes him a *God* but an untouchable “God of Loss” who leaves “no footprints in sand, no ripples in water, no image in mirror”(p265) or rather not allowed by the regulatory social order even the basic human rights. Being an ‘Old World Paravan’(p76), VellyaPaapan, father of Velutha, shows his utmost loyalty to his oppressors. His gratitude to Mammachi and her family is ‘as wide and deep as a river in spate’(p76). His indebtedness grows when Mammachi pays for an artificial eye for him when he loses his eye which debases him more to a “Paravan ..with mortgaged body parts”(p256). But Velutha dares to transgress the touchable-untouchable rim by starting a relationship with Ammu and this very act of breaking the “order of things” that the touchable society carves out, he becomes the immediate target of the Touchable rule makers and Policemen’s anger, hatred and fear. The atrocious torture inflicted upon him by the Police for an fake Sophie Mol murder case leading to his death is nothing but as Roy says, “...civilisation’s fear of nature, men’s fear of women, power’s fear of powerlessness”(p292). O.P. Dwivedi comments on this actuality saying “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?” Velutha’s punishment is justified as “history lesson for future offenders” (p336) by Baby Kochamma, Ammu’s aunt, another preserver of so called social norms.

Arundhati Roy in the novel adroitly exposes the maltreatments of the subalterns, their geographical dislocations politicised by the caste system of India and how the Untouchables have to lend both their labour and lives to the Touchables. By verbalising the unheard voices of the subalterns, unearthing the hidden narratives, concealments, divisions and contradictions that exist between the Paravans and the Touchables Roy attempts at centring these peripheral ‘other’s. The novel ‘humanise’s the Paravans by illustrating their pains and hopes, anguish and desires. Again by allowing Velutha to focalise on the deceitful stance of Comrade Pillai the novel makes the reader aware of the severity of the (suppressed) Communist betrayal of the Paravans. When Velutha goes to his party for assistance being a card-carrying member the party rather helping him tries to discipline him which means marginalising him, taming his actions, his emotions and mostly his sexuality. The plotting against him to prove him the culprit for Sophie Mol’s death, the indifferent attitude of the communist leaders towards his plea for help, the inhuman brutality with which the ‘touchable boots’ of the policemen treat him-all lay bare the wretched ‘subaltern’ status of Velutha in

particular and the dalits in general. The severity of Velutha's torture in the policemen is metaphoric of the afflictions of the society enforced upon the marginalized.

“They (Estha and Rahel) 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.”(p308) Thus Roy shows whenever a social subaltern dares to speak he is “abandoned by God and History, by Marx, by man...” (p310). M. Dasan remarks in his essay “Arundhoti Hits the Socio-Political Ball”: “Velutha is placed on the borders of society, caught in between right and wrong; sanity and insanity; morality and immorality. This untouchable master craftsman floats on the periphery of the society yearning to be accepted, confided and recognised like O'Neil's Black protagonist, Yank, in *The Hairy Ape*.”(p56)

While Velutha represents subalternity at the social level, Ammu is the representative of the ‘gendered subaltern’ – one of the ‘smallthings’, creatures of marginality and near invisibility. A divorcee daughter of the Ipe family with two children Estha and Rahel Ammu is the archetyped image of a woman marginalised in a patriarchal society. Through her character Roy conveys the fact that for a woman the sense of her peripheral yet invested position within a male - dominated culture leads her to various experimentations in terms of complicity and resistance so as to make herself heard and construe her identity. Ammu is the site of denial of woman's space inside her own family with far reaching implications in terms of affection, attention and education opportunities. She is a victim of all laws- the family law, inheritance laws, social laws, ‘Love Laws’. As a child she experiences discrimination when her ‘Anglophile’ father deprives her right to pursue higher education considering it as “an unnecessary expense”(p38) while her brother Chacko is sent to Oxford for higher education. Ammu's divorce and her return to her paternal home with her children makes her liminality more burdensome. Baby Kochamma holds the common view of the society that “a married daughter had no position in her parents' 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” (p 45). This sense of belonging nowhere and possessing nothing are reiterated again and again by Chacko in his boastful assertion of “my house, my pineapples, my pickle”. Quaderi and Islam call Ammu as “a subaltern/woman resists oppressive and repressive social and political structures. She does not succeed in bringing about any tangible change but puts up a brave fight for realising her dreams.” By falling in love with the Untouchable Velutha she breaks the “laws that lay down who should

be loved and how. And how much”(p31) and this relationship between a Syrian Christian woman and an Untouchable man shakes the respectability of the social stricture so much that they have to ‘pay the cost of living’- as Rahel calculates the ‘price’ they have to pay, “Two lives, Two children’s Childhoods”(p336). At the Police Station, Ammu gets from the police officer, the most humiliating experience which bruises her not just physically but the core of her womanhood and human dignity is wrecked. The helplessness of Ammu is unmistakably the plight of the subaltern woman in the hand of administration and bureaucracy. Inspector Mathew’s behaviour with Ammu is a jeopardy to a gendered subaltern’s body-“Inspector Thomas Mathew came around his desk and approached Ammu with his baton. Then tapped her breasts with his baton. Gently. Tap, Tap. As though he was choosing mangoes from a basket”(p8).

The question arises when the subaltern male and the subordinated female become comrades-in-arm in a losing battle against the forces of oppression, can their love story be called a representation of subaltern speech or subaltern muteness? Velutha’s accepting of punishment mutely and the official version of his death which is untrue shows that Velutha’s speech act-that is his attempt to have a relationship with an upper caste woman fails and has never been officially recognised.

The God of Small Things thus happens to be a significant text which blends the small things with the big things to retell the stories of the marginalised and the enfeebled which have hitherto been distorted or occluded in the official history. Here the author exposing the peripheral identity of the subaltern also expresses her disillusionment with the social conditions of the postcolonial world which still control the individual with the pre-colonial rules and regulations. Madeleine Bunting in the *Mail and Guardian*(2001:24) comments on the novel’s preoccupation with subalternity in the following terms- “almost every page of *The God of Small Things* reverberates with the fragile vulnerability of the small...(which) reflects a fierce protectiveness towards the small and powerless.” O.P. Dwivedi’s observation on the subaltern predicament in *The God of Small Things* is pertinent here. According to him, “Arundhati Roy’s treatment of the subaltern in her novel, triggers the mnemonic of a colonial India. 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. Nevertheless, she urges them to shatter all conventions of the traditional society in order to fetch an identity for themselves.”

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