

CAN THE SUBALTERN SUBVERT? FEMINIST RESISTANCE IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*

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ABSTRACT

*This paper is an attempt to show whether and how the subalterns can subvert the system that subalternises them. In the postcolonial feminist parlance, women are gendered subalterns peripheralised by patriarchy. While in many feminist novels, these subalterns seek to attain voice in their resistance against patriarchal hegemony, in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, they seek to subvert the edifice of patriarchal power. Here Roy records a different kind of feminist resistance, for patriarchy is projected as sheer power rather than an insidious agency. The victim is too overwhelmed by the onslaught of power to use her resistance as a means to an end. Therefore, resistance becomes a subalternist subversion. The rebel is forced into being, in Roy's words, a 'suicide bomber'. In the novel plays out the age-old drama in which the powerless are pitted against the powerful. Predictably and plausibly, the powerless are crushed. What makes Roy's one of the foremost protest novels is her making the subalterns subvert rather than surrender to the system. Their boldness is as subversive as its futility, poignant.*

Keywords: Subaltern, postcolonial, feminist, patriarchy, hegemony, power, subversion

Power is not limited to the oppressor. The oppressed have power to react and resist.

-Paulo Freire

In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy's is a postcolonial feminist position as she sets out to critique patriarchy as power and culture as colonizer. The novel probes the plight of a woman in a society where patriarchy rules, of a Dalit who is treated as subhuman by the upper caste, and of two children who are at the receiving end and whose childish innocence is ruthlessly

[Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Review \(AJMRR\)](#)

ISSN 2582 8088

Volume 2 Issue 4 [August - September 2021]

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crushed by the adult ways. The novel chronicles the sad saga of the woman and her twin children who lose everything including the man, a Dalit three of them love - a god of the small things that they are, as they are pitted against the big things - the dominant ideology and culture upheld by the powerful. The novelist as the third-person narrator uses the perspective of one subaltern, one of the twin children to picture the predicament of the two other subalterns- Ammu, a woman and Velutha, a Dalit, who are the protagonists of the novel.

The novel reads like an epic of subalternity. The novelist looks upon women, dalits and children as the ultimate subalterns, of gender, caste and age respectively. Generally considered a kind of a feminist, the author does not focus on the question of women severed from other subalterns. In her novel the women are represented as subalterns along with the untouchable Velutha and the children Rahel and Estha. And it is through her novel that Roy endows them with voice even though it is shown to be eventually silenced by power. The subalterns thus end up not as voiceless victims but as aware martyrs.

Born into a Syrian Christian family in a conservative town named Ayemenem, now part of Kottayam in Kerala beside the Meenachal river, Ammu, the protagonist, despite her quest for freedom and identity, is a victim of male hegemony. The first perpetrator of patriarchal cruelty in Ammu's life is her father, Pappachi. An authoritarian Anglophile and misogynistic male, Pappachi beats his wife, Mammachi and daughter, Ammu:

Ammu had endured cold winter nights in Delhi hiding in the Mehndi hedge around their house (in case people from Good Families saw them) because Pappachi had come back from work out of sorts, and beaten her and Mammachi and driven them out of their home. (Roy 181)

He would not hesitate to flog Ammu at the slightest provocation, and Ammu still remembers the violence with which Pappachi had shredded her favourite gumboots. He dislikes a woman who is vocal and has a vocation for herself. The alienation between Ammu and her father is

complete as he is shown to have ‘... looked at her with cold, flat eyes, and rocked and rocked and rocked’. (Roy 181)

Pappachi’s facade of being a perfect husband and father hides his abusive tendencies towards his wife and daughter:

In her growing years, Ammu had watched her father weave his hideous web. He was charming and urbane with visitors He donated money to Orphanages and leprosy clinics. He worked hard on his public profile as a sophisticated, generous, moral man. But alone with his wife and children, he turned into a monstrous, suspicious bully, with a streak of vicious cunning. They were beaten, humiliated and then made to suffer the envy of friends and relations. (Roy 180)

Pappachi is opposed to the idea of sending a girl for higher education: “ Pappachi insisted that a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl.” (Roy 38) His son, Chacko, on the other hand, has been sent to London for higher studies in biology as a Rhodes Scholar. Despite his English education and ostentatious modern manners, Pappachi remains a conventional patriarchal male. He deprives his daughter of something he grants his son. With her dreams of making a career dashed following the denial of higher education to her, Ammu feels immured in the Ayemenem House. All she has to do now is attend to household chores and wait for marriage proposals. Commenting on the patriarchal perception that marriage is the be-all and end-all of a woman’s life, Simone de Beauvoir remarks: “There is a unanimous agreement that getting a husband - or in some cases a ‘Protector’- is for her (woman) the most important Undertaking.” (Beauvoir 352) No proposals come Ammu’s way as her father does not have enough money to raise a suitable dowry. All this drives her into a state of desperation for an escape from Ayemenem and the clutches of her ill-tempered father and bitter, long-suffering mother.

Fortuitously, Ammu gets an opportunity to exercise her freedom of choice. Ammu meets her future husband, Baba, in a wedding reception of her relatives in Calcutta. He proposes to her

five days after they have met. And she accepts the proposal. The haste and rashness clearly suggest something other than love. The author comments:

Ammu didn't pretend to be in love with him. She just weighed the odds and accepted. She thought that anything, anyone at all, would be better than returning to Ayemenem. She wrote to her parents informing them of her decision. They didn't reply. (Roy 39)

What the man offers her is not simply marital bliss but an outlet from her cooped-up existence in Ayemenem House. When an onslaught overwhelms, all that the victim longs for is an escape route. For Ammu, therefore, what she escapes to matters less than what she escapes from.

Ammu is too unfortunate to taste happiness. An elaborate Calcutta wedding with a well-built, pleasant-looking Assistant Manager of a tea-estate later, all her expectations of her husband are belied. The man who rescues the damsel in distress turns out to be a monster. A full-blown alcoholic, her husband is threatened by his English boss to be dismissed from his job due to his drunken ways. He stoops to agreeing to his boss' proposal of sleeping with his wife as a price he must pay in order to secure his job. When Ammu resists, she is beaten up by her husband. His tyrannical ways force her to realize that she has fallen from the frying pan into the fire. Violence in her maternal home, which Ammu has tried to flee from, follows her into her marriage. Victimized by her father initially and later by her husband, Ammu appears to be a 'scapegoat' who leaves behind one master, her father and chooses the other one in her husband. When his bouts of violence include her twin children, she decides to leave her husband. Ammu returns with her twins, unwelcomed, to her parents in Ayemenem. Pappachi refuses to believe her story as he strongly believes that an Englishman would never covet another man's wife. Her life appears doomed in a vicious circle of violence, lovelessness and apathy. She is like a caged bird bruising itself in futile attempts at breaking the cage.

Apart from her father and husband, the two other agents who perpetuate patriarchal repression on Ammu are, ironically, two women - Mammachi, her mother and Baby Kochamma, her paternal aunt. In *The God of Small Things*, Roy does not present subordination as a stable, unproblematic condition from which resistance, necessarily, proceeds. Mammachi and Baby

Kochamma apparently seem to submit without any hesitation to patriarchal social norms as pointed out by Antonio Navarro-Tejero in her article titled, “Power Relationships in *The God of Small Things*”: “The first generation of women in the novel give extreme importance to patriarchal social norms, indeed they succumb to them....” (2005: 105). Mammachi acts as a cold custodian of patriarchal mores while for Baby Kochamma, they serve as the means for her sadistic agenda.

If Baby Kochamma’s hideous envy towards Ammu has made her antagonize Ammu, Mammachi’s possessiveness towards her son, Chacko has made her apathetic towards Ammu: “Chacko was Mammachi’s only son. Her own grief grieved her. His devastated her.”(Roy, 5) Baby Kochamma has made Chacko her accomplice while Chacko has made Mammachi his, in the vengeance launched by the trio against Ammu. Such is the power of patriarchy that it turns its victims into its accomplices. The way in which Mammachi discriminates against her daughter and in favour of her son reeks of sheer patriarchal prejudice.

Ammu and Chacko are progenies of the same parents. Both marry out of their community, Ammu, a Hindu man and Chacko, a British woman. Both the marriages end in divorce. But while Ammu has to suffer the humiliation and deprivation of a divorcee, Chacko enjoys a lot of privileges since he is a man. She is resented whereas he is sympathized. Mammachi considers her daughter’s estrangement from her husband as the result of her rebellion and her son’s estrangement from his wife as his misfortune. The son’s promiscuity is indulged while the daughter’s is indicted. Roy brings this out in vivid detail. When Baby Kochamma brings up the subject of Chacko’s libertine relationships with the servant girls of the factory, Mammachi says: “He can’t help having a Man’s needs.”(Roy 168) On the other hand, when Vellya Pappen tells Mammachi about the sexual escapades of his son, Velutha with Ammu, her daughter, Mammachi is shocked. The novelist presents Mammachi’s perspective thus: “She had defiled generations of breeding.....and brought the family to its knees.” (Roy 258) Mammachi, the mother to both, subscribes to the double standards of the society by recognizing Chacko’s ‘Man’s Needs’ and has a side door specially built to her son’s room to facilitate the entry of the working women. She even secretly gives them money. On the other hand, she considers the same failing in Ammu, her daughter, an irreversible violation of moral codes - a

blot on her family's escutcheon. Profligacy in the son is encouraged in the name of 'Man's Needs' whereas the identical behaviour in the daughter is condemned, she being locked up in a room and tortured. Thus, what is facilitated in the case of a man is branded blasphemous and sinful in the case of a woman.

However, the issue here is a little deeper than discrimination. It is not simply that a son enjoys certain privileges denied to a daughter. It is also more than the mere fact that someone from the lower caste is chosen as the partner for sex. If Ammu does it with a paravan, an untouchable, Chacko does it with low-caste servant girls. Mammachi's perspective on the matter points to the crux of the matter:

Mammachi had built a separate entrance built for Chacko's room,.....so that the objects of his 'Needs' wouldn't have to go traipsing through the house. She secretly slipped them money to keep them happy.....The arrangement suited Mammachi, because in her mind, a fee clarified things. Disjuncted sex from love. Needs from Feelings. (Roy 169)

Chacko got himself purged of his libidinal needs while for Ammu, they were the means of cherishing her feelings. His act did not threaten to annihilate the family's honour but hers did, as an act of sex can be kept a secret but a love affair cannot. He conformed to the phallogocentric perception while she revolted against it thereby inviting the ire of Mammachi and Baby Kochamma. Chacko maneuvered the system for his interests while his sister rebelled against it. Manipulation of the system does not threaten its perpetuation; rebellion against it does. This explains why Chacko is a victor and Ammu, a victim.

Ammu defies the "Love Laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much." (Roy 33) She loves Velutha, an untouchable. Scott Trudell asserts:

The Love Laws represent the strict confines on human behavior – the caste system, social pressures, and political restrictions that horrify people beyond expression when they are broken. The central action of the novel

is about breaking them, and the tragedy that results from breaking them.
(Trudell 165)

What Ammu does, in effect, therefore, amounts to a double rebellion - one against patriarchy and the other against the caste prejudice of the powerful. The first, by entering into an extra-marital affair, a patriarchal taboo for women and the second, by loving an untouchable transgressing the caste laxmanrekha. However, Ammu's love for Velutha was not a manless woman's urge for male company. Nor was it a means of rebellion against the established social order. It was unalloyed love between a woman and a man unhindered by marital compulsions and caste considerations.

Ammu's attraction for Velutha springs from her concern for her fatherless children who literally starve of love and affection in their maternal grandmother's home. The novel presents a heart-rending portrayal of how the children are subalternised by the adults. They are inflicted by the vice and ugliness of the adults at an age when they are too young to comprehend the probability of the existence of these forces in people around them in a family. The twins mistake apathy for affection, antagonism for strictness. The novelist comments on Ammu's helplessness for her love-deprived children thus: "Ammu loved her children (of course), but their wide-eyed vulnerability and their willingness to love people who didn't really love them exasperated her..." (Roy 43) It is at this juncture of their life that Velutha appears as the pied piper for the children. An oasis in the desert of their life. A god of the small, unwanted and uncared-for things.

Velutha showers on Ammu's children what they have been hungering for. He has created for her children an alternative world of "hooked fingers and sudden smiles" (Roy 176). Ammu desires to escape from the hypocritical world around her to their world of sudden smiles and laughter. Therefore, the woman who gets drawn towards Velutha is an obliged mother. But then, who she gets drawn to is a man. Ammu surrenders to the lure of the irresistible lovability of Velutha, a woman rotting in an embittered existence as she is. Roy very appositely delineates this streak in Ammu in the following words:

What was it that gave Ammu this Unsafe Edge? This air of unpredictability? It was what she had battling inside her. An unmixable mix. The infinite tenderness of motherhood and the reckless rage of a suicide bomber. It was this that grew inside her, and eventually led her to love by night the man her children loved by day. (Roy 44)

Ammu has experienced emotional insecurity at the hands of her husband and, therefore, is always in search of someone to hang on to. Her feeling of dejection, loneliness and futility of life makes her look for someone who serves as an anchor to hold on to. She realizes that she has no space of her own, no identity, no chance of happiness, unless she strikes out again on her own. So she clings to a lover who brings back to her what she thinks she has lost - love. In Velutha, Ammu finds a man desirable and loving, a male different from her snobbish haughty vicious father, ignoble and degenerated husband, and selfish brother with his “bullying power” (Roy 226). He symbolizes, for Ammu, rebirth and transformation. Upon her union with Velutha, “Seven years of oblivion lifted off her and flew into the shadows on weighty, quaking wings ... And on Ammu’s Road (to Age and Death) a small, sunny meadow appeared.” (Roy 337)

Velutha and Ammu are inevitably drawn towards each other as rebels. She finds in Velutha a kindred soul, and she imagines that like her he also hides in his mind a rage at the smug social order. This attraction culminates in a mutual physical longing. At one poignant moment they become aware of each other as man and woman:

The man standing in the shade of rubber trees with coins of sunshine dancing on his body, holding her daughter in his arms, glanced up and caught Ammu’s gaze ... In that brief moment, Velutha looked up and saw things that he hadn’t seen before. Things that had been out of bounds so far, obscured by history’s blinkers. (Roy 176)

The surge of longing for each other is simultaneous in both Ammu and Velutha, in a fatal coincidence, as it were. It is an epiphany for both when ‘centuries telescoped into one

evanescent moment'. (Roy 176) Ammu, who is grateful to Velutha for his small gifts of wooden boats, boxes and windmills to her children which make them happy, suddenly thinks that she can also reciprocate by giving gifts to him. The gift is the surrender of her body. What Ammu is taken hold of at the moment is an irresistible desire to merge into the spring of love that Velutha promises to be in her loveless life. Trudell contends:

When [Ammu] recognizes that Kerala's social code is in the process of forcing her down Baby Kochamma's path of bitter, joyless confinement to the house until death, she acts in perfectly understandable desperation and attempts to find some brief joy with Velutha. (Trudell 165)

What, however, cannot be lost sight of is that Ammu's amorous affair with Velutha is engendered more by her emotional deprivation than by her need for sexual gratification. For a second time in her life, what she runs away from explains why she chooses to. She defies the love laws upheld by the dominant culture. The injustice meted out to Ammu all through her life has not only given her the pangs of helplessness but also triggered her explosive anger at it. The woeful woman has become a ruinous rebel. And subversion is her means of rebellion. She has sought to subvert the edifice of patriarchy twice, first by choosing to marry someone outside of their community and the second, by seeking sexual gratification outside the institution of marriage, only to her own detriment. If her failure makes her a pathetic figure, her mission makes her a powerful feminist. She is a veritable suicide bomber destroying the target including her. Her rendezvous is reported to her mother and aunt. The caste identity of Velutha as well as Ammu's divorcee hood and motherhood renders her relationship with him highly repugnant to her family and the society. Ammu cannot recuperate from the resultant tragic situation she has been driven to. She is literally thrown out of Ayemenem house by her brother spurred by her aunt: "Get out of my house before I break every bone in your body!" (Roy 225) Her cozy world with her twins is shattered, with three of them separated. And her lover Velutha is mercilessly murdered. Agencies of power - patriarchy, police and politics - collude to wreak vengeance upon her.

Ammu and Velutha, despite their daring to defy the code of the dominant culture, appear to be small things before the juggernaut of power. They are 'entirely oblivious of what trucks can do to frogs'. (Roy 43) Annihilate them beyond trace is what the society does to them eventually. Roy elaborates the mortal injuries inflicted on Velutha by the police:

His skull was fractured in three places. His nose and both his cheekbones were smashed....The blow to his mouth had split open his upper lip...Four of his ribs were splintered, one had pierced his left lung... His lower intestine was ruptured and haemorrhaged ...His spine was damaged....the concussion had paralyzed his right arm and resulted in a loss of control over his bladder and rectum. Both his knee caps were shattered. (Roy 310)

Velutha does not survive through the night. A Dalit's transgression is trounced. His rebellion is nipped in the bud. He dies a grim reminder of the consequence of the confrontation between the powerless and the powerful.

Ammu, too meets with a tragic end. Driven out of her maternal house and separated from her children, Ammu struggles in strange cities to get a decent job so that she can earn enough to fend for herself and her twins. Despite her travails, she never gives up hope. But she has had to give in to her dwindling health:

Ammu died in a grimy room in the Bharat Lodge in Alleppy, where she had gone for a job interview as someone's secretary. She died alone. With a noisy ceiling fan for company and no Estha to lie at the back of her and talk to her. She was thirty-one. Not old, not young, but a viable, die-able age. (Roy 161)

Ammu fought alone, suffered alone, and died alone. She lived and died a rebel, which is why 'the church refused to bury Ammu'. (Roy 162) Her dead body was incinerated in an electric crematorium where 'nobody except beggars, derelicts and the police-custody dead were cremated'. (Roy 162)

What exalts Ammu to the status of a martyr is her relentless struggle against forces fettering her. In her ceaseless and courageous efforts at self-realization, she becomes a symbolic personification of all subalterns, especially women, who challenge power structures of the social order as is also pointed out by Murari Prasad:

At the heart of Roy's astounding book is the conflict between the characters excluded from institutional power and their hegemonic counterparts... Brinda Bose points out that Ammu's conscious decision to embrace Velutha is a forbidden cross-caste liaison of radical significance within the novel's given social imperatives... Brinda Bose links these violations to Roy's robust commitment to the autonomy of the self-the freedom of small things. Thus, the feminist reconceptualization of politics in Roy's novel, as Bose notes, is profoundly subversive. (Prasad 2006 p.21)

As an answer to the patriarchal pampering of Men's Needs, Arundhati Roy, as a true feminist, has foregrounded the justifiability of Women's Needs.. The dominant culture, however, specifically rules out an independent female sex drive. The patriarchal power structures articulate a sexual system in which sex is valid for women only for the purpose of reproduction. Ranjana Harish focuses on the feminist theme in the novel that celebrates "feminist assertion of female body as a female estate or to be precise, feminist rejection of man's ownership of the female body" (Her Body 47). Ammu asserts her right over her body through her marriage out of her community, her refusal to succumb to the demands of Mr. Hollick and her husband, and later through the way she seeks her loved one. When she falls in love with Velutha she reclaims her right over her body. In Brinda Bose's opinion:

In asserting her own 'biological' desire for a man who inhabits a space beyond the permissible boundaries of 'touchability,' it appears that Ammu attempts a subversion of caste/class rules, as well as the male tendency to dominate by being, necessarily, the initiator of sexual act. ("In Desire" 92)

It is through her sexual transgression that Ammu has subverted the love laws of her society.

Ammu as a subaltern/woman resists oppressive and repressive social and political structures. She falls prey to power but her fight against power brings out, in Roy's words, 'civilization's fear of nature, men's fear of women, power's fear of powerlessness'. (Roy 308) Ammu is a dispossessed gendered subaltern in confrontation with patriarchy colluding with police and politics. Her battle is doomed by its very nature, an unequal fight as it is. In the novel, patriarchy acts not as an insidious agency but as an overarching power that appalls with its suddenness of onslaught. It is this suddenness that renders women unable to weave their evolution as rebels. As a consequence, women are left with two choices: they either perish or fight and perish. That Ammu does the latter shows her as a feminist rebel. In Ammu, Roy portrays not a woman who overcomes patriarchal power but one who is overwhelmed by it.

Patriarchal culture has colonized Ammu while patriarchal power has thrashed her resistance against it. Ammu, however, has never yielded to patriarchal power; she has been crushed in her rebellion against it: "The way she rattled on and her hysterical behaviour, her wishful thinking, her battle with destiny, her frantic and frenzied effort to live and love make her the most pathetic figure in literature". (Ray 58) Ammu, thus, emerges as a martyr of patriarchy whose resistance against it is registered through her act of subversion and the resultant suffering.

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[Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Review \(AJMRR\)](#)

ISSN 2582 8088

Volume 2 Issue 4 [August - September 2021]

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