A Study of Marginalised Voices in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract

The concept of marginalization is a very novel in the contemporary literary practice. It is an approach used to study the literature, giving emphasis to the voice of marginal people in the society. Today marginal people are socially, politically, economically and legally deprived of their ‘rights’ as a human being in every society. The aim of this essay is to critically consider Arundhati Roy’s novel *The God of Small Things* from a postcolonial feminist perspective, with a special focus on how she models different representations of women, taking as a background the discussions within postcolonial feminism about subalternity and the representations of women from the so-called Third World in theory and literature, as well as the concept of agency from Cultural Studies. This purpose is reached by studying and comparing three main female characters in the novel: Mammachi, Baby Kochamma and Ammu, centering on their different ways of relating to the male hero of the novel, Velutha, an Untouchable in the lingering caste system of India.

Keywords: Marginalization, Male dominated society, Marginal Characters, Female Marginalization

The purpose of the present paper is to exploring how Roy fictionally constructs marginalized female voices will be reached by studying and comparing three main female characters in *The God of Small Things*: Mammachi, Baby Kochamma and Ammu—centering on their different ways of relating to Velutha, the male hero of the novel. These three women relate to and respond in different ways to Velutha, who is a Paravan, the lowest caste among the Untouchables. Depending on how they relate to him, different aspects of their characters are revealed. The story revolves around Ammu, a woman who is a helpless victim, tormented by the patriarchal society. She was not given the privilege of higher education by Pappachi, her father, while her brother Chacko was sent to Oxford for higher studies. When her family is unable to accumulate sufficient dowry for a marriage proposal, she becomes desperate to escape her abusive father and bitterly tormented mother. The protagonist of novel is woman. She was divorced from an alcoholic husband, mother of twins, has disastrous love affair with untouchable. She violates the ‘love laws’ which were constituted by age old casteist. Her unusual love affair results into her banishment by her family. In the end of the novel she was found dead alone in a grimy room in lodge at age of thirty one. In short Roy truly reflects the marginal Indian woman in her novel *The God of Small Things*.

The novel *The God of Small Things* directly deals with the marginalization of three generations of women in orthodox Syrian Christian family in Kerala. These three women are Mammachi, who is representative of old generation of women. Ammu, is representative of second generation and Rahel is a daughter of Ammu, representative of third generation of women in same family. These three women are forcefully placed on the margin of society and intentionally deprived of human rights. They are severely marginalized by male dominated society. Social institutions like family, marriage, religion and government are responsible factors for their marginalization. Mammachi, is significant character in the novel, representative of old generation of women. She is mother of Ammu and Chacko. She is brutally faced marginalization. The man who is responsible for the marginalization of Mammachi is no other than her own husband Pappachi. She was victim of her husband’s brutality throughout her life.

In the case of Velutha it is obvious to see that he is marginalized and subordinated; being a Paravan and an Untouchable the society he lives in still regards his kind as inferior and uncute. Roy gives us a somewhat euphemistic picture of his status when the narrator shows us how Velutha appears in Ammu’s dream: “He left no footprints in sand, no ripples in water, no image in mirrors” (206). Velutha is encouraged to go to school though not together with Touchables but to a special school for Untouchables only. But as time goes by, Velutha crosses several lines; apart from learning how to read and write, he becomes a trained carpenter, when traditionally a Paravan should stick to simpler activities like toddy tapping, picking coconuts and so on. He secretly becomes a member of the communist party and participates in a political march.

Ammu’s marginalization is also quite obvious; she is a divorced woman with two children to take care of. As a teenager, Ammu does not conform to the expectations on her that she should wait
obediently in her parent’s 18 houses for a suitable husband. Instead she more or less escapes her parents and marries the first man who proposes to her, outside her parent’s religion and without their consent, and after a couple of years she decides to divorce him as well. If Ammu is on the margin, her children are even more so. Ammu is, like Velutha, a transgressor of boundaries, a person unwilling to submit to the role models presented to her.

Mammachi and Baby Kochamma are both Syrian Christians, a proud minority group in Kerala. In the social hierarchy of Kerala, they are ‘upper-caste Syrian Christians’, separating them from the lowlier ‘Rice-Christians’ who joined the British colonialists Anglican Church encouraged by a little food and money. These characters are also became marginalized in one way or another. Mammachi is submissive towards people whom she considers to be superior to her, like her husband, and oppressive to people she regards as inferiors, like Ammu and her children. Mammachi seems to be perfectly fine with Untouchables educating themselves and working together with other Touchables of lower status than herself. The last thing Mammachi says to Velutha before he leaves is: “If I find you on my property tomorrow I’ll have you castrated like the pariah dog that you are! I’ll have you killed!” (269). These utterances show how strong the ideology of caste and difference is to Mammachi, overriding by far her religious beliefs. Baby Kochamma is in her youth quite rebellious in the sense that she both opposes the tradition of arranged marriages by independently choosing a man, and then even converting to Catholicism against her father’s will. Baby Kochamma does not spare any chances to make Ammu and her twins understand this, but in her own, insinuating manner. She is perhaps also jealous of their relationship with Velutha, who has become something of a father figure to them and reproaches Rahel for being “over-familiar” with Velutha (175).

If Velutha has an enemy in Baby Kochamma, he definitely has an ally in her niece, Ammu. Ammu carries the feeling that her life has been lived and that she really has not much to lose. She discovers a potential companion in him who ought to be as angry as she is, and she wishes that “under his careful cloak of cheerfulness he housed a living, breathing anger against the smog, ordered world that she so raged against” (167). Ammu is in fact the only person in the family who reacts openly to Chacko’s flirtatious ways and illicit relationships with the female factory workers, a lifestyle that is accepted by for instance Mammachi as we shall see later. Ammu’s attitude towards the late Pappachi during the same scene is definitely one of disregard. When Ammu’s and Velutha’s relationship is finally exposed, the different expectations upon men and women become as clear as day and this is perhaps best displayed in Mammachi. Without any sense of shame she openly demonstrates her double standards in condemning her daughter harshly for her affair while at the same time vindicating her son for his illicit relationships. Mammachi never even confronts Chacko about his female visitors, she simply adjusts to it. She sees to it that a separate entrance to Chacko’s room is built so that his female visitors will not have to pass through the house. She even gives the ladies money secretly, an act that allows her to think of them as whores instead of as lovers.

Mammachi’s responsibility is quite clear in the story; she acts openly according to her beliefs when she is told about the affair. Even if she is described as submissive in relation to her husband and suffers a great deal from being so, she is all the same not portrayed as a victim who is unaware of her values and beliefs. She is able to run a small business and towards the end of her marriage she is freed from Pappachi’s violent company and may relax more. Mammachi’s agency is of course heavily socially constructed and her identity is a unique mix of casteism, religion and culture, but she is nevertheless depicted as fully responsible for her actions.

The ‘small things’ represent the marginalized world of Ammu and Velutha that is overshadowed by subjugation, oppression, violence and injustice. Baby Kochamma’s foreign education enhances the cultural differences between her and others in the colonized world, while Mammachi and Ammu are victims of domestic violence. Roy presents several different female characters in her novel The God of Small Things, all in different ways trapped in a system of oppression but also with a substantial degree of agency. Arundhati Roy used marginalization as a medium to show the miserable lives of women in orthodox Indian society. Through the marginalized characters like Ammu, Mammachi and Rahel, Roy has presented sufferers, pain, physical and sexual violence of women in male dominated society.

Works Cited