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GENDER AND CASTE CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE NOVEL *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*: A SUBALTERN PERSPECTIVE

AVDHESH KUMAR SUMAN¹, Dr. VIBHASH RANJAN²

¹Research Scholar, Patna College, Patna University, Patna

²Research Supervisor & Assistant Professor, Patna College, Patna University, Patna



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Abstract

Arundhati Roy's novel, *The God of Small Things*, is a seminal work depicting different issues of society. This paper will study the gender consciousness in the novel *The God of Small Things* through the characters of Ammu, Mammachi, Rahel, Baby Kochamma, and Margaret Kochamma and caste consciousness through the Velutha and Vellya Pappen. Through the scholarly discourse of Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak and the scholars of Subaltern Studies this paper will analyze the characters' consciousness, they possess in the novel *The God of Small Things*. This paper will decipher how the demeaning nature of patriarchal society's stringent system of caste, regulations, and dogmas that existed in society for a long time influences the mindset of a particular group of society. Some characters are rebellious and show resistance to the cruel society's system and some remain dormant in their outlook. Do they conform to the pre decided role or they resist in order to escape from day-to-day discrimination?

Keywords: Consciousness, Subaltern, Resistance, Caste, Gender, Patriarchy

There could be no revolutionary movement in a society unless its distinctive forms of consciousness and subordination were accurately identified, objectively understood, and critically appraised by those who aspired to transform it (Arnold 1984).

This statement of David Arnold is inspired by a great scholar of subaltern theory, Antonio Gramsci. It was Antonio Gramsci who first gave the term 'subaltern' to a particular group of peasants who were subject to domination under hegemonized society. In Gramsci's opinion, the subaltern group is prone to domination. This group

needed what he called 'common sense' or in simpler terms 'consciousness' to resist any kind of hegemonic actions. Then comes the Scholars of Subaltern Studies group, in which Ranajit Guha was a prominent one. The group's main concern was re-writing the history of decolonized India. The discourse of subordination and resistance were limited to the peasants until Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak bring this into the field of literature and applied it to various group of society. Spivak gave wider meaning to the term 'Subaltern'. In an interview with Leon De Kock, she puts the idea of the subaltern as follows:

Subaltern is not just a classy word for oppressed, for Other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie...In postcolonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to cultural imperialism is subaltern – a space of difference. Now, who would say that's just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It's not subaltern...Many people want to claim subalternity. They are the least interesting and the most dangerous. I mean, just by being a discriminated-against minority on the university campus, they don't need the word 'subaltern...They should see what the mechanics of the discrimination are. They're within the hegemonic discourse wanting a piece of the pie and not being allowed, so let them speak, and use the hegemonic discourse. They should not call themselves subalterns (Kock 45).

Before coming to the analysis of *The God of Small Things* one must know the meaning of 'consciousness'. "Consciousness which justifies our self-aware...as an attempt to understand our past, present, and possible future" (Hall 2004). Consciousness, is an abstract idea, which is common to human beings but often the question is asked do all human beings possess consciousness? Descartes says 'I think, therefore, I am'. This statement less or more is true to existential beings. But when it comes to questioning the consciousness of subaltern communities or individuals, it becomes vague. Subaltern entities are aware of their existence but they are not aware of being hegemonized or dominated by institutions or authorities. Their consciousness is suppressed by a typical social construct. Such as; Velutha, Ammu, and Vellya Pappen, the lower caste people and subordinated women. These marginalized people have their consciousness but are repressed by the patriarchy, social institutions, and stereotypical mindsets of society as a whole.

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Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak remarks that the subaltern group is unable to speak and if they speak their voice is not being got heard but those who have the desire to transform their life can make them

heard through narration or re-representation. Arundhati Roy is one of those writers who want to transform the life of subalterns. Social activist, writer, and critic, Arundhati Roy, is known for her outspoken attitude towards the government and system as a whole. In her writings, especially novels, one can find every sort of people; women, men, children, third gender, elderly, etc. In her novel incorporating every aspect of people's lives is the peculiar quality of her writing style. Especially, she writes about marginalized, oppressed, downtrodden etcetera. Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* (1997) is one the novel which is peculiar in highlighting stereotypical social sayings which force peripheral people to obey societal norms and dogmas, especially women. And a woman like Baby Kochamma has inculcated those misleading ideas and their behavioral conduct is commendable by the majority of the people. The gender roles which are decided by the society and their system are followed blindly by the women. Even these days many prevailing stereotypical social sayings has given in the novel *The God of Small Things* as follows:

She subscribed wholeheartedly to the commonly held view that a married daughter had no position in her parents' home. As for a divorced daughter – according to Baby Kochamma, 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. As for a divorced daughter from inter-community love marriage – Baby Kochamma chose to remain quaveringly silent on the subject (Roy, 2002).

The most suffered victim of male-dominated society is Ammu and she was also different from the rest of the women characters. While most of the women characters were preoccupied with household chores and engaged in typical womanly behavior Ammu tried hard to run away from mundane tasks. She is constantly reminded that she owns nothing, no material property, and not even the respect the male gets in the households and society. Once Chacko told the twins (Rahel and Estha) that Ammu had no locusts stand I and Ammu replied:

Thanks to our wonderful male chauvinist society,

Chacko said, 'What's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine (Roy, 2002).

The Ammu's replied words show her resistance as well as consciousness that she belongs to a society that provides insularity to male privilege. She was well aware of her gender role assigned by the society but she never tried to conform with those set rules of gender stereotypic. She wanted to overcome the limitations but was unable to do so. Ammu was brought up in an upper-middle-class family but never got the right to speak up for herself. She didn't get the same treatment as her elder brother Chacko. Pappachi, Ammu's father is even worse as he always treated Mammachi and Ammu like utensils of his home. Ammu was beaten harshly by Pappachi. Ammu got married to Baba, she thought it was an escape from the cruel world of Ayemenem but it turns out even worse than Pappachi. She suffered from alcoholic abusiveness of Baba. Later she divorced Baba and started living as a single mother of twins; Estha and Rahel. Living as an independent woman shows her defiance of the strict social norms and shattering the well-conceived notions that a women cannot live alone. That she must follow at least one male companion. She was never ashamed of her divorce but the patriarchal mindsets of people made her living miserable. And this misery got worse when she got involved with Velutha, an untouchable. The relationship between Ammu and Velutha represents resistance to the prevailing societal norms. As the narrator says: "They all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory. They are all tempered with the laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much" (Roy, 2002).

Both of them were conscious of their illicit relationship and its consequences but they were helpless in the hand of their desire. They were afraid of oppressive societal norms but they opted for copulation because they hated and had a desire to break a socially forbidden act. The act of divorce with Baba and her daring relationship with Velutha suggests that she never intended to submit to the laws of patriarchy. After the scandal of Velutha and

Ammu was revealed in the family by the Vellaya, the father of Velutha. Pappachi would never bear the truth that Ammu has cross caste affair. He informed the Kottayam police station. Consequently, Velutha was cuffed and taken to the police station. When Ammu went to the police station to set things right but she was assaulted by the police stating: "Kottayam police does not take statements from vaishyas (prostitutes) and their illegitimate children" (Roy, 2002).

Ammu knows the consequences of the entering police station although she went there and faced institutional torturing as well. She returned helplessly after being brutally maltreated by police. She knows that no one is going to listen to her deep suffering neither family nor constitutional institution. Ammu was not only the victim of a male-dominated society and institution but also in the hands of conservative females such as Baby Kochamma, Ammu's aunt. Baby Kochamma's character is shaped by traditional beliefs. So, she resented Ammu and her twins. Even her mother Mammachi tried to mold her from the beginning of her childhood according to the traditional beliefs. Mammachi as she has herself programmed in household chores wanted Ammu to be her best version. Since childhood, Ammu never got used to the established norms of society. She keeps herself silent most of the time to just live under the conventional laws. She wanted to rebel against the patriarchal setup but the stringent system never allowed her to speak for herself. her father, mother, brother, and relatives wanted her to behave in the accepted ways of society but she always tried to resist, and one day when she was outcasted from the Ayemenem she died alone in the hotel room from prolonged illness.

Mammachi, an aged old woman, is the wife of Pappachi and mother of Ammu and Chacko. She was a typical lady of a household in which she operates as a de jure leader. But she has had no consciousness at all as compared to her daughter Ammu. She never questions conventional laws of patriarchy or society. She endures Pappachi's brutality without questioning it. Her beliefs and habits are conformed to the patriarchal notions of society. Her endurance to the perpetual beatings of

Pappachi by brass flower vase is evidence of the fact that she accepted those beatings as part of life and never questioned it. It was not that she wanted to be beaten but the fear of being ostracised from the family relegated her to only fits in those conventions of society. If Pappachi is a coercer of patriarchal notions then Mammachi is the bearer and follower of those notions. She is first generation woman who keeps busy herself in pickle making and playing the violin. Her hobby or outside activities, other than household and taking care of her husband, are implicitly conveying that she tries to keep busy herself. She started her own business of jams and pickles making but her Husband never liked it because her jealous husband can't bear that he is growing old, while his wife is still vital and prosperous. Mammachi wants other women in households to adhere to patriarchal norms. Such as, if Amu wanted to do something which is against societal norms, she restricts her to act accordingly. She hated Margaret Kochamma, the wife of Chacko as she was the daughter of a shopkeeper.

Baby Kochamma, ex-nun, and incumbent baby grand aunt of Rahel and Estha seem to assist in subordinating and marginalizing the other women of society though she is herself marginalized to an extent that she could not speak for herself or she could not express her desire to marry a person outside her social status. The best description of her mindset is revealed in these lines:

She was aware of his libertine relationships with the women in the factory but had ceased to be hurt by them. When Baby Kochamma brought up the subject, Mammachi became tense and tight-lipped. "He can't help having a man's needs," she said primly. Surprisingly, Baby Kochamma accepted this explanation, and the enigmatic, secretly thrilling notion of Men's Needs gained implicit sanction in the Ayemenem House. Neither Mammachi nor Baby Kochamma saw any contradiction between Chacko's Marxist mind and feudal libido (Roy 168).

Patriarchal practices have so much ingrained in the mind of the women of Ayemenem households that the illegal activities of males are censured by

the women giving the reason for their man's needs. Mammachi was brought up in the rigid system of patriarchy so is the case with Baby Kochamma. She has grown bitter over time because her desire of living her life in their condition never gets fulfilled. The way Mammachi accepted her fate in the family, Baby Kochamma acted in the same way. Baby Kochamma wholeheartedly accepted the commonly held view of the position of women in society. In the view of Baby Kochamma, the right thing to do in society is to follow its conventions. Roy puts her point of view in these lines: "She had managed to persuade herself over the years that her unconsummated love for father Mulligan had been entirely due to *her* restraint and *her* determination to do the right thing" (Roy 45).

She followed the values and norms as instructed by Mammachi and prevailing societal norms because those were the right thing. And whenever other women who do not follow those norms become victims of her jealousy and conspiracy. In the words of the author: "Baby Kochamma resented Ammu because she saw her quarreling with a fate that she, Baby Kochamma herself, felt she had graciously accepted" (Roy 45).

Baby Kochamma never liked Ammu and her twins. In her perspective, Ammu was bypassing all those norms and rules laid down by society for women and living a which is her own not dictated by society and that's the thing Baby Kochamma does not like in Ammu's defiance. Baby Kochamma could not resist the upward forces of patriarchal notions so she becomes bitter over time and developed thoughts of being remain in those social restrictions. She hates Velutha, an untouchable who has a communist association. Once in she was got humiliated by a marching mob of Marxists in which also Velutha was seen having a red flag in his hand. So, from that moment Baby Kochamma focused all her fury to humiliate him. Her conspiracy of getting Velutha and Ammu in trouble and manipulating Estha and Rahel to give false statements against Velutha are key moments that show how insecure she is when it comes to social status.

Another woman is not mentioned much in the novel but her character is quite interesting to

observe. It was Margret Kochamma, ex-wife of Chacko and mother of Sophie Mol. Being born in a different culture, Margret Kochamma has had a different upbringing. Her parents wanted her to be independent, face the real world at a young age, earn her bread and all those things which were never allowed in the Indian context of society to women like Ammu, Rahel, Baby Kochamma, etc. Women of Ayemenem have had certain desires but they were not allowed to perform outside the limitation of the patriarchal society this is not the case with Margret Kochamma, she moved out of her parent's house to be independent. In the following Roy describes how she was brought up and the person she wants to be as follows:

Having made the move, Margret Kochamma found herself becoming exactly the kind of girl her parents wanted her to be. Faced with the Real World, she clung nervously to old remembered rules and had no one but herself to rebel against (Roy 241).

She was the only woman in the novel *The God of Small Things* who has self-conscious and rebelled against all obstacles but fate tested her at every stage of her life. He married Chacko, and when she realized that things between them not working, she divorced him. Later she married Joe but he died in an accident which forced her to visit Ayemenem to take solace where she also lost her only child Sophie Mol.

Rahel Ipe, one of the twins and protagonist of the novel, is inadvertently affected by society's rules and regulations, though she was rebellious like her mother, Ammu. Rahel has always been a rebellious woman of Ayemenem households. In her childhood, at age of eleven, she was expelled from Nazareth convent school and consequently from other two schools. The following lines show her rebellious nature:

Rahel grew up without a brief...so as long she wasn't noisy about it, she remained free to make her own inquiries: into breasts and how much they hurt. Into false hair buns and how well they burned. Into life and how it ought to be lived (Roy 17).

She was a self-assertive lady of Ayemenem households. Unlike other women in society, she demonstrated independent behavior. Rahel's resistance to the conservative tradition of rules governing India's culture implicitly shows that she was a woman of self-consciousness. In her childhood, she experienced many adverse circumstances. She saw how her mother was treated when she was caught having a relationship with an untouchable. She witnessed the death of her cousin, Sophie Mol. She observed that women are not given the freedom to achieve their desire. So, when she comes to age, she started to live life in her condition. She got enrolled in an architect program but never finished it. She married Larry on a whim but later she divorced him and started working on a petrol pump. Though she lived a life on her condition when she returned to Ayemenem she restricted herself to society's norms. She was conscious of her position in society but she got controlled by the manner patriarchal setup wanted her be.

The depiction of untouchables in the novel *The God of Small Things* is one of the major concerns of Arundhati Roy. A clear demarcation between Paravans and other mainstream communities has been drawn in Kerala. The Paravans were given less freedom and fewer rights. Among them, two major characters; Velutha and Vellaya Pappen belongs to the Paravan community. When it comes to self-awareness, Velutha is more aware than his father, whereas Vellaya Pappen doesn't about his circumstances and position in society. Vellaya Paapen blindly obeys the set rules of society whereas Velutha has a rebellious spirit. Contrary to his father, Velutha was an educated untouchable, passed the High School Examination, and learned the art of carpentry. Vellaya Paapen is completely tamed by the caste system of the society. He could not take any step or decision without considering the consequences. When he comes to know that his son has an affair with Ammu, he got terrified and decided to tell Mammachi instead of saving his son.

When the Terror took hold of him, Vellaya Paapen went to Mammachi. He stared straight ahead with his mortgaged eye. He wept with his own one. One cheek glistened with tears. The other stayed dry. He shook his

own head from side to side to side till Mammachi ordered him to stop it but he couldn't because you can't order fear around. Not even a Paravan's. Vellaya Paapen told Mammachi what he had seen. He asked God's forgiveness for having spawned a monster. He offered to kill his son with his own bare hands. To destroy what he had created (Roy 78).

The system of caste is so much ingrained in the mind of Paapen that he can't imagine his son can have an affair with upper caste women and even offer to kill his son. So, Vellaya Paapen has no consciousness at all and has been subjugated by the cruel system of caste. Even if someone's near dear one tries to cross the boundary they were punished by the elder, who followed the system without question. But Velutha is a natural rebel. He joined the communist party, hold a red flag, and marched with protestors to register his presence against the cruel system of caste. Velutha's life is the outcome of social prejudices and beliefs which shaped his childhood and adulthood. He works for Ayemenem house, especially for Pappachi who doesn't allow Paravans into his house. "They were not allowed to touch anything that Touchables touched" (Roy 73).

Other Untouchables avoid taking any steps which infuriate Brahmin or Syrian Christian but in the case of Velutha, his many steps and decisions transgressed the established norms of the caste system. In the Ayemenem House, Paravans were given a separate gate to enter the house. They are not allowed to touch anything. First, Velutha not only touched but even played with twins Rahel and Estha. His daring and audacious action against the caste system was when he has a relationship with Ammu. Despite the inconspicuous threat from the caste system, she loved Ammu and Ammu loved him. Both knew the consequence of this act of love-relationship from the caste and patriarchal-ridden society. Velutha, in a gingerly manner, took this step and remain high-spirited but he had to pay with his life in the end. His death at the hand of the police was shaped by the cruel caste system, just as his life was.

III

In the novel *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy narrated the life of the women and Untouchables in a manner that shows the instinct of their conscious self and unconscious self. Some characters such as Baby Kochamma and Mammachi do not show any self-awareness on behalf of themselves, whereas some characters such as Ammu, Rahel, and Margret Kochamma reflect consciousness in their actions though they were reluctant in direct opposition to the societal norms. Caste's consciousness is reflected in Velutha's actions and decisions whereas Vellaya Paapen has a lethargic mindset.

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