

Reclaiming Voices on the Margins in Arundhati Roy's the God of Small Things

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ABSTRACT

Arundhati Roy is one of the gifted Indian novelists in the art of writing and her novel *The God of Small Things* bears testimony to her God's gift. This is the only novel to her credit as on date and yet it is considered to be one of the most accomplished novels technically in recent years in Indian Writing in English. It is a beautiful amalgamation of fact and fiction. The aim of this paper is to critically consider Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* from a postcolonial feminist perspective, taking as a background the discussions within postcolonial feminism about subaltern and the representations of women from the so-called Third World in theory and literature. The term subaltern, although somewhat disputed, is commonly used in a general sense to represent "subordinated classes and peoples" in short marginalized groups and the lower classes, especially in formerly colonized, Third World countries (Young 6). Postmodern in its handling of time, the plot circles between the 'present' and the past, digging deeper and deeper into the tragic secrets of Rahel's life with an effect similar to that of a detective story, keeping the reader anxious and curious about how things really happened to the very end. The novel itself has given the fictional Ammu and Velutha, as representations of thousands of cross-caste relationships in the real India, a voice that resonates all over the world.

INTRODUCTION

Arundhati Roy won booker prize for her novel *The God of Small Things*. Her novel is a blend of nature and characters and she has written her novel in unique manner that they complement one another. Arundhati Roy is one of the gifted Indian novelists in the art of writing and her novel *The God of Small Things* bears testimony to her God's gift. This is the only novel to her credit as on date and yet it is considered to be one of the most accomplished novels technically in recent years in Indian Writing in English. It is a beautiful amalgamation of fact and fiction. The aim of this paper is to critically consider Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* from a postcolonial feminist perspective, taking as a background the discussions within postcolonial about subaltern and the representations of women from the so-called Third World in theory and literature. 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. The paper argues that Roy has contributed with diverse representations of subaltern women in the 'Third World' who—despite their oppressed and marginalized status display agency and are portrayed as responsible for their own actions. Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* received mixed reactions after being published in 1997. The main events in *The God of Small Things* take place during some December weeks in 1969 and the setting is Ayemenem, a town in the equatorial south Indian state of Kerala. Haunted by memories from the past, the novel is something of an excavation of a trauma; Rahel looks back at her life to examine it.

Due to the author's Indian nationality, some critics hailed her as a female Rushdie, "establishing . . . the cultural striking

back of the once-peripheral." (Boehmer 165) Meanwhile, in some parts of India there were violent public riots due to its caste transgressive content, and some left-wing critics chastised Roy's (negative) portrayal of the communist party in the novel (Mullaney 71). The aim of this paper is to critically consider Roy's novel from a postcolonial feminist perspective, with a special focus on how she models different representations of women, taking as a background the discussions about subaltern 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. The term subaltern, although somewhat disputed, is commonly used in a general sense to represent "subordinated classes and peoples" in short marginalized groups and the lower classes, especially in formerly colonized, Third World countries (Young 6).

Postmodern in its handling of time, the plot circles between the 'present' and the past, digging deeper and deeper into the tragic secrets of Rahel's life with an effect similar to that of a detective story, keeping the reader anxious and curious about how things really happened to the very end. Roy weaves her plot, thread by thread, into a colorful, multifaceted story; added to the narrative are different cultural references to Shakespeare, The Sound of Music, Kathakali (traditional drama-dance) and the music of The Rolling Stones which create a patchwork of associations and connotations. But the novel is not just a beautiful and intricate postmodern saga; it is definitely an intervention into (especially Indian) culture with its close, almost overdone description of caste transgressive intimacy, and its critical account of the local communist leader and Kerala communism in general. And to this we may add that it is a novel written by and seen through the eyes of a Third World woman and almost all of the central characters are Third World women. When reading a text from a feminist point of view

(regardless of what branch of feminism you belong to) they suggest that we should look at “how it represents women, what it says about gender relations, how it defines sexual difference” (Belsey and Moore 1).

A common goal in both post-colonialism and feminism is “challenging forms of oppression” whatever they look like, and each context has its own, unique structures of oppression (McLeod 174). In Roy’s description of Kerala in the novel, there are several layers of oppression stemming from colonialism, patriarchy, religion and caste. These structures are often intertwined and serve as a complex oppressive system that is sometimes difficult to dissect. Another thing that is interesting to bear in mind while reading this novel is the relatively high status of women in Kerala (compared to the rest of India) possibly due to earlier matrilineal kinship systems (Encyclopaedia Britannica). Within the postcolonial literary discipline there has been an ongoing discussion about First World feminism in relation to Third World women (McLeod 174). However well-meant, universal claims of a global womanhood always run the risk of marginalizing someone and of leaving culturally specific patterns of power and oppression unseen. Chandra Talpade Mohanty criticizes western feminists in her essay ‘Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses’ and accuses many of them for unconsciously reproducing the unequal power relations that already is at work politically and financially, within their analysis (Mohanty 17-42).

Mohanty shows how Third World women are often described in sweeping terms as religious, family-oriented, illiterate and domestic, placing them in a position as ‘the other’ in contrast to the allegedly more progressive and modern women in the First World. Furthermore, Mohanty reacts against how western feminists tend to refer to a monolithic, global patriarchy that “apparently oppresses most if not all the women” (19) in Third World countries and they tend to describe women as powerless exploited objects and victims as opposed to the assumed powerful male exploiters. She concludes: “Sisterhood cannot be assumed on the basis of gender; it must be forged in concrete historical and political practice and analysis” (24).

Mohanty also notes that the relationships between women are often ignored, as well as different kinds of relationships between women and men. This is why Roy’s novel is particularly interesting because it focuses on how women relate to other women but also to different kinds of men. There is no standard male-female dichotomy in the novel but rather a plurality of relationships. Hopefully it is by now clear to the reader how far-fetched it is to assume that all women share the same cultural or political interests only because of their similar bodies. Women as a group are more likely to be deeply divided by boundaries like class, ethnicity, and nationality. Roy’s novel actually addresses the problems connected with representing subjects individuals at one point in the story, through the voice of the local communist leader K.N.M. Pillai. When Chacko (a factory owner) reveals his intentions to organize the factory workers into a union to Comrade Pillai, Pillai’s answer is: “comrade, you cannot stage the revolution for them. You can only create awareness. Educate them. They must launch their own struggle. They must overcome their fears” (265). Hence, Roy seems to be aware of the problems connected with representing individuals from diverse socio-economic habitats. India is traditionally regarded as a male dominated society. For ages, the women have been suppressed, oppressed, confined, within the four walls of house with no identity of their own.

Their wishes and desires were not taken into consideration by the patriarchal society. But in Post- Independence India, when women’s education had already commenced and life had started changing, then the new woman started emerging. This education inculcated a sense of identity and individuality in women. They began to acknowledge their rights and became economically independent. And among these women, there was a striving for the realization of one’s own self. They began to redefine their roles in society. C.D. Narasimhiah comments that the concept of the new woman “is a Western import born of Western compulsions”(P 245-257). The new woman, however, is a compulsive emergence out of the traditional Indian scenario. The emerging new woman paves her own path and marches ahead to catch up with the rest of the world. According to the patriarchal society women identifies the real status in the society- as a mother, wife, and daughter. Ashok Kumar remarks: “In modern times she is accepted as a professional, but when she protests against injustice and exploitation, she is grudgingly termed activist and seen as a rebel or as a deviant” (P 21). The new women challenge the traditional notions and are aware of their own rights. Arundhati Roy’s efforts can be noticed in her novel *God of Small Things* by the way she depicts the desires, needs and agonies of women as well as the hypocrisy and double standards of men. This is the story of Ammu who leaves her home along with the twins when she discovers the moral character of her husband. This novel deals with the important issues of gender discrimination and feminism in a patriarchal set up where women have no voice to speak in the total happiness of the family, where they are seldom allowed to be educated and where men always dominate over women. Ranga Roy in his scholarly paper rightly observes: “Roy’s book is the only one I can think of among Indian novels in English which can be comprehensively described as a protest novel. It is all about atrocities against minorities, small things: children and youth, women and untouchables” (P13). This novel portrays a true picture of the sufferings of Indian women and their cares and anxieties and their submission and humiliation in the patriarchal society. It also portrays their struggle to seek a sense of identity in a totally envious society. Actually, women in these societies in the novel are treated as chattels by their male counterparts.

CONCLUSION

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. In the spirit of ‘strategic essentialism’ she has ventured to give voice to some of those who are seldom referred to in the official history writing of India. From a postcolonial feminist perspective Roy has contributed to make the representation of the Third World subaltern woman more diverse, through giving us various portraits of women that, despite their oppressed and marginalized status, are not depicted without agency or responsibility. The woman who most clearly rejects the intricate system of oppression in the story, Ammu, is punished severely by her mother and aunt. But as one of the main characters in Roy’s novel, Ammu represents people who actually dare to do ‘the unthinkable’, to transgress the very line that upholds the system of difference that casteism inherently maintains. She represents all those who have suffered due to transgressions against the ‘Love Laws’ and gender-specific expectations imposed upon them, sometimes even by paying with their own lives. The novel itself has given the fictional Ammu and Velutha, as representations of thousands of cross-

caste relationships in the real India, a voice that resonates all over the world.

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