Revisiting the Subaltern in Arundhati Roy's

The God of Small Things

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A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract of a Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Supervisor: Prof. Shamsad Mortuza

Title: Revisiting the Subaltern in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Arundhati Roy is one of the "most followed writers" in contemporary India whose debut novel *The God of Small Things* (1997) earned her not only the Booker Prize but also the reputation of the biggest selling book by a non-expatriate Indian author. She waited twenty years to publish her second novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017). Both novels involve silencing of the marginalized other in a society that is conscious of its class, caste, and gender privileges. They are the three big things in Roy's maiden novel that need the healing touch of small things such as love and hope. On the surface, Velutha, in *The God of Small Things* (Henceforth, *TGST*), is the most obvious candidate for the titular "god of small of things" who dared to transgress the moral codes and social space of the upper caste, and was forcibly silenced for his transgression. His lover Ammu, despite her class status, received a similar fate of silencing for her gender role in a patriarchy.

Roy's concerns for the small things, the subaltern groups, are evident in her innumerable political pamphlets, journalistic essays as well as in her two novels. Subalternity as a concept in the sub-continental context was popularized by the India-based Marxist historians who extended the original application of Gramsci and wrote under the label, The Subaltern Studies Collective (1980-1992), to address subordination of class, caste, age, gender, or any other office. Roy in her fiction and non-fiction both speak *for* the subalterns and speak *of* the subalterns. Her efforts have

been to create awareness to empower the marginalized groups. However, big in praxis, Roy refrains from any theoretical label or underpinning. I shall argue that Roy challenged class consciousness without fully subscribing to Marxist ideology, she defended gender rights without aligning herself with mainstream feminism, and she protested against the caste-system without tagging herself as an abolitionist. I shall go a step further in claiming that the unique system of caste in India does not allow Roy to fully subscribe to any pre-ordered theoretical model to analyze subalternity. Of the three big things (class, caste and gender) elaborated in my dissertation, caste for me is the greatest concern that Roy unpacks in *TGST*. The aim of this dissertation is to use various postcolonial lenses to offer a close reading of Roy's first novel to understand the causes of subalternity in contemporary India.

The dissertation also questions Roy's choice of genre. Both her fiction and non-fiction are replete with her concerns for human rights and minority issues. I shall try to understand why she needed the fictive garb to represent some factual violations of human rights. In so doing, I shall focus on the complementary role played by Roy's fiction and non-fiction in projecting her artistic arm.

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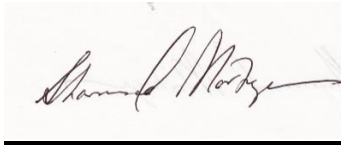
1. **Supervisor: Professor Shamsad Mortuza, PhD** 

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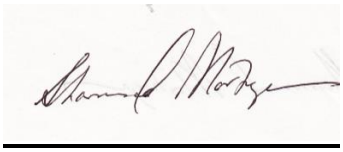
This acknowledgement will be incomplete if I do not remember all my teachers and colleagues from the Department of English, University of Dhaka, especially Professor Fakrul Alam, who many years back suggested to me to make Indian literature in English my field of research.

Supervisor's Certificate

This is to certify that the thesis titled "Revisiting the Subaltern in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things,*" submitted by Golam Gaus Al-Quaderi to the University of Dhaka for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy is an original research work carried out by him under my supervision. The contents of this thesis, in full or in parts, have not been submitted to any other Institute or University for the award of any degree or diploma or published in any form.



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Declaration

The work being submitted in this thesis is the result of my own investigation, except where otherwise stated. I have tried to acknowledge each and every contribution made by others.

The thesis has not already been accepted for any degree nor is it being concurrently submitted for any other degree. The thesis or any of its parts has not been published anywhere in any form.

(Golam Gaus Al-Quaderi)

Contents

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Arundhati Roy: The Public Interventionist

Arundhati Roy is one of the most powerful socio-political commentators and writers of our time. In her political essays she constantly critiques democracy and its failings. In her screenplays she stages strategic public interventions. By training, however, she is an architect, which probably explains her eye for structural details. Roy is most known for her debut novel, *The God of Small Things*, which won her the Booker prize. The novel stamps her authority as a writer and captures both her thought process and her motivations. The themes expounded in the novels are also reflected in many of her non-fictional works. But first, a note on her multifaceted career.

At the beginning, Roy took on a series of odd jobs, including that of an artist and an aerobics instructor, before committing herself to different types of writing. In 1989, she wrote and co-starred in the screenplay *In Which Annie Gives It to Those Ones* and later wrote scripts for the film *Electric Moon* (1992) and a few other television dramas. Her fame was dented following a review of Shekhar Kapur's film *Bandit Queen* (1995) in which she critiqued the characterization of the bandit figure Phoolan Devi as a type of Robin Hood. The controversy caused by her column included a court case, and made Roy retreat from the public eye. After two years, she made a resounding comeback with her maiden novel, *The God of Small Things.* Composed in a lyrical language about South Asian themes and characters in a narrative that wandered through time, Roy's novel became the highest-selling book by an Indian author writing in English, which eventually won the Man Booker Prize in 1998.

For the next twenty years Roy published political pieces, and brought out a number of collections of essays: *Power Politics* (2001), *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (2002), *War Talk* (2003), *Public Power in the Age of Empire* (2004), *Field Notes on Democracy: Listening to*

Grasshoppers (2009), *Broken Republic: Three Essays* (2011), and *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* (2014). In 2017 her second novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* was published. Both her novels harp on her alertness to the human rights causes. Her left leaning politics and dream of a classless society are evident in her overt support for the Maoist Naxalite Movement. Her strong political views and activism have constantly put her at odds with the authorities. She was fined and jailed for one day for her involvement in the agitation against the construction of dams in Narmada. Her remarks on Kashmir independence nearly resulted in her being charged with sedition in 2010. In December 2015, she got into trouble for supporting a professor with Maoist links. Her courage in defending humanitarian causes have earned her the Lannan Cultural Freedom Award (2002), the Sydney Peace Prize (2004), and the *Sahitya Akademi Award* (2006).

In March 2019, Roy came to Dhaka to express her solidarity with the photographer Shahidul Alam, who was detained for his political views during the road safety movement, and asked, "Is there a life after democracy?" in a *Dhaka Tribune* article. . Following the attack on the Muslims protesting India's Citizenship Amendment Act, Roy wrote an article for *Scroll.in* where she compared the violence with the coronavirus: "This is our version of coronavirus. We are sick".

Arundhati Roy has become the conscience not only of India's but also of the world's democracy. But then again, she has been accused of being selective in her rant. She has been branded as a radical, an extremist, or even a terrorist. Her long hiatus following the publication of *The God of Small Things* was also brought into the fore to question her literary merit. Many argued that she had made a transition from a fiction writer to writer activist, but she denied any such categorization, saying, "To call someone like me a writer-activist suggests that it's not the job of a writer to write about the society in which they live" (qtd. in "Reading Arundhati Roy: Beyond Lyricism & Controversies")

The purpose of this thesis is to focus mainly on the maiden novel which is rife with Roy's concerns for the downtrodden and the oppressed. The reason for choosing the first novel is purely "administrative"; my doctoral proposal was approved by the university's Academic Council before the publication of the second novel, which refrains me from bringing any change to the title. However, I shall make reference to both the novels whenever appropriate as well as to her non-fictional essays to understand Roy's motivations as a writer. While Roy's journalistic essays and interviews deal with her political concerns over local and global issues directly, *The God of Small Things* deals with them rather indirectly, and in a synoptic manner. Roy locates inequalities in societies and holds both local and global agencies responsible for creating an asymmetrical power arrangement that allows these inequalities to exist. *The God of Small Things* provides a fictional account, which, I shall argue, is deliberate as the imaginary landscape allows Roy the space to examine various material and historical conditions including class, caste, and gender.

1.2 *The God of Small Things*: Great Stories Have No Secrets

Before embarking on the discussion of the novel, let me give an overview of the novel's plot. The juxtaposition of the small things with an implied big thing, "The God," in the title sets the tone of the novel. The story involves a power nexus of "Small things" and "Big things" and their resultant struggles to liberate and establish themselves in an egalitarian state and society.

The novel recounts the story of two zygotic twins, Rahel and Estha, their mother Ammu, and their untouchable friend, Velutha. It is presented in a non-linear manner with many shifts in narration and narrative perspectives. The perspectives of the children are interlaced with those of an adult. The Big Things stand for the oppressive and exclusionary grids like gender, class, and caste, while the small things stand for the characters who are suppressed or crushed by them. Ammu is a victim of patriarchal exclusion and is deprived of a college education. Her parents are

not too eager or active about finding her a husband. Ammu realizes that she is on her own and marries a Bengali Hindu from Kolkata who works at a tea garden. Her judgment turns out to be wrong as she makes the decision more out of impulsive insecurity than on rational estimation. She was simply seeking a refuge in an antagonistic patriarchal society. The marriage gives her the twins but, sadly, no marital bliss. Her drunk husband tries to prostitute her to pacify his white manager who wanted to fire him for his tardiness at work. Ammu revolts and leaves her husband.

Ammu's father Pappachi suffers from a colonial hangover that indulges white supremacy. He refuses to believe that a white man could make such an amoral approach to his daughter. The divorcee returns to her father's home, unwelcome. She is deemed guilty for her cross-ethnic and cross-religious marriage. More importantly, her family does not like the idea that Ammu files for divorce. Back in her father's house, Ammu sees how her father's torture of her mother Mammachi is stopped by her brother, Chacko, and how he silently takes her mother's *Paradise Pickles.* She advances a helping hand to Chacko, but is never acknowledged as a partner because of the Syrian Christian Inheritance Law. Ammu thus becomes aware of multiple types of exploitation in the name of patriarchy. Her two children, Rahel and Estha, are also neglected as Half-Hindu hybrids and because they belong to the female offspring. The grand aunt, Baby Kochamma, takes a special interest in torturing them, including imposing the Missionary teacher Miss Mitten on them. The twins protest by writing and reading things backwards. However, the greatest harm that touches them is when Estha is sexually molested by the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man.

Chacko considers the twins as a burden and ignores them. He has more important things to do including teaching female workers Marxism while exploiting them. Ammu sees another kind of exploitation here of class. Time moves on and we are shown a kind of a video clip of the whole family watching a procession of workers, one of them coming close to their car and waving a red

flag at them. This figure is Velutha, the untouchable worker at *Paradise Pickles*, an apparently educated carpenter who was identified as a Naxalite by Baby Kochamma. As a young boy, Velutha used to play with Ammu. After all these years, he becomes a playmate of the twins. The family is visited by Chacko's ex-wife who comes with her daughter from another marriage. Sophie Mol is half-white and receives special attention from everyone. Unfortunately, while out on a boat-ride with the twins, the boat capsizes and Sophie Mol drowns. Velutha, who was in a tryst with Ammu at that time, is seen near the accident scene.

The twins are initially held responsible for Sophie Mol's death and the accident also exposes Velutha's relationship with Ammu. Velutha's father, Vellya Paapen, shocks the whole Ayemenem community by disclosing this sacrilegious cross-caste affair, which went against the Vedic Love Laws. Velutha is falsely charged with seduction and rape, taken to police custody, and eventually tortured to death. The "god" of small things who got himself educated, carried a membership card of the Communist Party, was a class-conscious proletariat, is vilified, demonized, and tortured for challenging the Love Laws and the caste system. He had done the unthinkable by enjoying the intimate company of Ammu, an upper caste woman. Ammu and the twins are separated and Ammu dies alone, dreaming unrealizable dreams about uniting with the twins. After many years, the twins, however, unite in an incestuous sexual union, which hits at the core of the caste-based Love Laws. All the four small things, including Velutha, thus fight in their own ways against the oldest system of social stratification in the world, the caste system of India. The "god" of small things is almost pinned to the ground rather than on a cross for rejecting caste as the cruelest system of exploitation and marginalization present even in post-independent India.

1.3 The Big Things: Gender, Class, Caste

The God of Small Things is a novel whose narrative is focused on the conflict between the downtrodden and the dominant oppressors. The society depicted in this novel is based upon certain marginalizing categories of which the three most important are gender, class, and caste. The characters can be divided based upon these categories. As a female writer with Syrian Christian heritage, the rebellious characteristics of Ammu can be identified with the author. Ammu's marginalization in a patriarchal society is one of the major issues that finds expression in Roy's novel. Whether Roy is speaking for Ammu is an issue that I shall pick up in Chapter 3.

Ammu is neglected and marginalized by her father, Pappachi, for being a daughter. She is deprived of a college education as she is not a son, while her brother, Chacko is sent to Oxford. Her father does not concern himself with finding a good match for her. Ammu finds her own match outside her community, and that marriage breaks down when her husband tries to save his job by offering her up to his boss. She finds no sympathy from her family, and although she helps her brother in the pickles factory, Chacko takes over their mother's property *Paradise Pickles*. Ammu's situation is encapsulated in the following lines of her grand aunt, Baby Kochamma, whose views ironically represent the patriarchy depicted in the novel:

> 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 an *intercommunity love* marriage Baby Kochamma chose to remain quaveringly silent on the subject. (Roy 45-46)

Ammu is thus marginalized by her father, husband, brother, mother, and even by a distant relative like her grand aunt, Baby Kochamma. Gender, particularly patriarchy, is one of the Big Things that acts as an oppressive tool in Roy's novel.

After gender, we can consider class as an exclusionary grid for many characters in *The God of Small Things*. While the dominant characters are of the bourgeoisie and allied classes, the dominated characters are of the proletariat and other classes. Thus, class-wise also, the characters are divided into two groups: the victimizers and the victimized, and there is a conflict between the two types of characters. It needs to be mentioned that Roy does not subscribe to the Orthodox Marxist notion of class as historically determined in which the proletariat form the revolutionary class who aim to overthrow the bourgeoisie. The novel neither elaborates this dichotomous scheme nor promotes any simplistic signs of class struggle. In Roy's view, the issue of class cannot be separated from that of gender or caste. However, in exposing the power imbalance, she points at possible resistance. Roy's position is that of a pluralist revolutionary who believes in multiple sites of resistance against different kinds of exclusionary structures.

Velutha is an untouchable carpenter working at the *Paradise Pickles* factory. He and his family do not own any land or property and thus, he is a proper proletariat. He also has the class consciousness of being a proletariat as he is educated and has taught himself the basics of Marxism. He is disliked by Comrade Pillai, the hypocritical local Communist leader, for being a potential threat to his leadership in the area. He is a card carrying Communist and this fact really rattles Comrade Pillai. When the Velutha-Ammu love affair is exposed, Velutha seeks support from Comrade Pillai. The political leader disowns him, stating that the party does not take responsibility for the private indiscretions of its members. Mammachi, when she is informed of the affair, becomes incensed. She is angry because the love affair is a cross-caste one that goes against the

whole notion of purity and pollution that the caste system upholds. She is also upset because of Velutha's class background and his being a laborer in her factory. Of the three Big Things, caste is based on the ancient Vedic scriptures. For Marx, the political economy based on class structure does not take caste or gender into consideration. However, *The God of Small Things* unpacks the graphic and horrifying nature of caste in India. It is the invisible cause of subordination. The caste system in its original form in Hinduism is based upon the ideas of purity and pollution, and a stratified society divided between the upper and the lower castes/outcastes/untouchables based upon the ideas of Karma and reincarnation. The caste system is also basically a binary division, though the existence of many castes who are discrete and hierarchized hides this fact.

The caste system is a birth-ascribed identity which determines the actual class position of a person as hereditarily determined. We can also categorize the caste system as a kind of religiously sanctioned system of class-discrimination, but this does not fit in with the empirical reality and does not fit in neatly with the plot of *The God of Small Things*, as in this novel, the caste system is also prevalent among the Syrian Christians. T.N. Madan's definition of caste is useful:

> Caste, any of the ranked, hereditary, endogamous social groups, often linked with occupation, that together constitute traditional societies in South Asia, particularly among Hindus in India. Although sometimes used to designate similar groups in other societies, the "caste system" is uniquely developed in Hindu societies. ("Caste")

The caste system is different from class as it is hereditary and does not allow the change of profession/caste in theory. Furthermore, it was originally connected with the Hindu religion where caste is eternal. It can be conceptualized as a kind of religiously sanctioned class system in which the poor are supposed to remain poor and the rich, rich, generation after generation. Incidentally, this also connects "caste" with "race," a phenomenon and concept well-known in the west.

To some extent, the caste system can be equated with patriarchy as they are both bent on keeping a certain section of society marginalized and powerless. Thus, the caste system is intimately connected with the concept of social and economic class, and is like the concept of class and gender defined by a binary, that is, the upper caste(s) and lower caste(s) males and females.

The prevalence of the caste system in Kerala among the old Syrian Christian community who had converted from Hinduism, as well as among the original Hindus, speak of the caste system as more resilient than other social phenomenon. It shows that the facile link, conceptualized between the caste system and Hinduism, is not able to properly explain the resilience of the caste system in Kerala, India. The secret affair of an upper caste Syrian Christian and the untouchable Velutha, a Paravan, cause two cultures to clash. As Ajay Sakher has pointed out, "Caste is older than the church" (3445). This issue of religious conflicts will be dealt with in-depth in Chapter 5.

The "small things," including the small creatures, Ammu and her twins, are crushed by power-structures like gender, class, and caste. The "god" of small things, who is also "the god of loss," is sort of crucified on the soil of India for challenging caste and the caste-based Love Laws. Arundhati Roy, being a Syrian Christian, had not only mentioned but spoken of the unmentionable as these things are difficult to write about in the non-fictional mode. This provided the answer to my research question about the principal cause for subalternization.

Very few writers in India writing in English have ventured to deal with the caste issue. Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004) is among the first Indian writers to reflect on caste discrimination in his novel, *Untouchable* (1935). However, he suggested that technological innovations such as that of the flush system would erode the need of the sweepers; and in turn it would cause untouchability to vanish. This is an oversimplification of the caste problem that has persisted in India for centuries, but not too many major Indian writers writing in English have written about

the iniquitous caste system. Among Indian intellectuals in general, the reformists, led by the great figure of Mahatma Gandhi, have dominated the debate about caste, while a revolutionary abolitionist and himself an untouchable, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, has been ignored. The caste issue is normally characterized as an identity crisis in many postcolonial writings. Even Marxist critics like the famous Aijaz Ahmed, in dealing with *The God of Small Things*, have dealt with peripheral issues like the alleged misrepresentation of Comrade Namboodiripad, rather than looked for the main cause of exploitation of the Indian subalterns. As the literature review in my second chapter will show, most analyses of *The God of Small Things* overlooked caste as the main cause of subalternity.

In *The God of Small Things*, Roy points out the subversive and rejectionist nature of the act of Velutha in having an affair with Ammu, an upper caste woman. As Roy writes in "The Doctor and the Saint" regarding inter-caste love with untouchable women: "Love is polluting. Rape is pure. In many parts of India, much of this continues to this day" (qtd. in Ambedkar 15). Hence, we have the horrifying nature of the "sin" and "crime" of Velutha in *The God of Small Things*. The affair being the central incident of the novel, its significance in the caste-ridden society of Kerala is central and a direct challenge to the caste system and that is why the importance of caste in the narrative of *The God of Small Things* is supreme. The other categories like gender and class do not have the same importance in defining domination in the narrative and so we can say that caste is the defining category for subalterns in *The God of Small Things*.

While analyzing the socio-political context of Roy's novel, however, it is necessary to explain why caste seems to be the main cause of subalternity of the downtrodden in *The God of Small Things*. I shall also argue that Roy resorted to fiction because the reality of the caste question in India is too difficult to handle.

1.4 The Other Big Things and the Ideological Battle

Arundhati Roy is a writer who persistently avoids labelling. Her gender and class (including caste) consciousness has made her a strong candidate for Marxism and feminism. I shall briefly outline the theoretical basis to argue that Roy's interest lies in praxis, but the theoretical underpinnings also need cognizance.

The Marxists in *The God of Small Things* act within the communal divides and show no intentions or actions to challenge them. Comrade E. M. S. Namboodiripad is a stylish Brahmin high priest of Marxism in Kerala who became the first ever democratically elected Chief Minister of a Communist government. His disciple Chacko uses his after-work lecture on Marxism to flirt with his female workers at the factory. Comrade Pillai's Marxism is limited to arranging secret meetings in his press, singing revolutionary songs, and printing pamphlets. The Naxalite Velutha is dreaded by the old-school Marxists. It is tempting to see these Marxist elements as the championed ideology of the author.

However, Roy's ideology cannot be reduced to simple binaries of the base and the superstructure, class and class consciousness, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Her fictional representation of Kerala is more involved with the individuals. The subalterns in the text include an upper-caste Syrian Christian woman, incestuous twins stigmatized for the action of their mother, and a scheduled-caste carpenter with technological gifts. The idea of Gramsci is inadequate to explain this type of subalternity. For Gramsci, subalterns, literally meaning "inferior in ranks," include the workers or the proletariat as well as the peasants and different types of class fragments, including those from the middle classes. His concept of the subalterns was a kind of advancement upon the works of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and Lenin, prefigured like the reformulation of the peasants in the Chinese revolution led by Mao Tse Tung.

In "Retracing the Concept of the Subaltern from Gramsci to Spivak: Historical Developments and New Applications," El Habib Louai shows the transformation of the term and its appropriation by Ranajit Guha. Guha used it to denote "a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way" (vii). Such categorization allows Guha to address multiple sites of exploitation and subordination. This can be loosely applied to Roy's *The God of Small Things*.

The women in Roy's novel both support and resist patriarchy. However, none of the resistance yields positive results. These protests however help us think of Roy as a feminist, which I shall detail in Chapter 3. For now, suffice to say Roy's Feminism considers the "personal to be political" and considers the struggle for equality and justice to start with the family and all other kinds of exploitation to be connected with and extensions of this. I shall also use textual evidence to show how gender roles are constructed in society, while women are stereotyped for their essential biological features.

1.5 The Factual and the Fictive Roy

In Roy's moorings, the line that separates fact from fiction, truth from imagination is very permeable. Her depiction of the Ipe family in Kerala seems very realistic. She follows the modernist tradition in which reality is related to memory and perceptions. As a Syrian Christian, we can detect some autobiographical elements and see the facts as a product of her subjective mind. Then again, Roy uses non-linear narrative style which does not lend itself to one single reality or truth. The flashback and flashforward, the disjointed narrative makes the novel postmodernist. We see multiple perspectives depending on the way the omniscient narrator describes the state of the minds of the characters. Meaning here is contingent, and truth provisional.

Roy chose the novel form for conveying her message regarding the subalterns or the downtrodden of Kerala, India. For this, she diverged from the line of the postmodernists and self-consciously identified herself with a group of postcolonial writers, who, being kind of Marxist or neo-Marxist, produced socially committed writing. The difference between Roy and the orthodox socialist realist writers like Mulk Raj Anand is that she presents her story about class, gender and caste-exploitation, incest, cross-boundary liaisons, and marriages and divorces in an apparently postmodern narrative, but the graphic nature of her narrative keeps it grounded to the material reality. Thus, Roy's narrative is fictional in style but factual in its content.

It needs to be mentioned though that Roy never differentiated her fiction from her non-fiction. Both for her demands social commitment. Then again, we need to ask why in her long career of twenty-five years, she wrote only two novels. In other words, when and why did she switch to the imaginary mindscape to deal with reality? As a political activist, she is never shy to state the facts. But why does she need the fictive garb to tell of the love, loss, and longings of Velutha, Ammu, and the twins?

The plot shows how the innocent 8-year-old twins were separated once their mother died following the wrongful killing of Velutha. The children were too young to understand the nitty-gritty of a love affair between an caste "Paravan" and a high-caste divorced mother. They had no idea about the caste system, family values, social mores, political hypocrisy, class struggles, and political ambition. They reunite 23 years later and break the Love Laws to understand "who should be loved. And how. And how much" (*TGST* 33). Roy is therefore eroding the boundary between love and laws to suggest it is not the class but the individual that matters the most. Roy makes the love, loss, and longing of the individual more important than the social or the political. This is one idea that cannot be explained through facts. This is an element of imaginative conceptualization

that fiction can offer. While in political essays, Roy talks about violence against tribes, development diatribes, terrorism, the market-driven economy, gagged democracy, it is only on the canvas of a novel that she can unpack the individual desires and emotions. In so doing, she solidifies her position that the nation cannot be separated from its individuals. The political edge of her fiction is expressed by Roy in her book *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, where she admits, "True, *The God of Small Things* is a work of fiction, but it's no less political than any of my essays. True, the essays are works of non-fiction, but since when did writers forgo the right to write non-fiction?" (196). The complementary role played by fiction and non-fiction therefore gets special attention in my dissertation.

1.6 Connecting the Small Things with the Big Things:

1.6a Methodology

In *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, Roy lays out the plan for her novel. She writes, "*The God of Small Things* is a book which connects the smallest things to the very biggest" (36). My purpose in this dissertation is undertaking a similar role. I take the small things (that is, the small feelings, small sentiments of the subaltern groups) and try to understand their connectivity to the Big Things (that is, the social structures like caste, class, and gender). Although there have been many studies of the subalternity in Roy's novel, it is my position that not many analyses have tried to go into the deeper cause of the marginalization. The caste issue is very local and requires cultural sensitivity and awareness. Given the subtle nature of caste that constitutes class consciousness and asymmetrical power position in India, it is no surprise that Roy has adopted fiction as her artistic and political mode of expression. In revisiting the subalterns in the novel, I am guided by Roy's fictional and non-fictional works. My method is eclectic as I combine close textual reading, archival study, and contextual study to understand *The God of Small Things*.

1.6b Research Questions

In framing my argument, I shall constantly negotiate with the following research questions:

a. What are the big and small things in *The God of Small Things*, and how are they connected?

b. Why does Roy use an ancient religious law to expose the caste issue in India?

c. Why does Roy not use class as an all-encompassing term for gender or caste?

d. What is the connection between Roy's fictional and non-fictional works? Why is there a lull of twenty years between the publications of the two novels?

e. How does Roy's gender identity influence her writing? Can we consider her exploration of Ammu's consciousness as a type of *ecriture feminine*?

f. Is it appropriate to use the Subaltern Group's characterization of class as a subordinated group to explain the subalterns in Roy's novel?

g. How does Roy pit Gandhi against Ambedkar to forward her position on caste?

h. There are three exclusionary grids in her novel: class, caste, and gender. Does she privilege one exclusionary grid over the other?

i. How does her narrative style contribute to the meaning making process?

j. Why does Roy keep on defying labels? Is it legitimate to identify her as a postcolonial, postmodern, Marxist, feminist writer?

1.6c Scope of the Research

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) attracted a lot of attention on its publication and solicited a lot of critical attention. In Chapter 2, I survey the few book length studies and many articles written on Roy. Most of these analyses have focused on different thematic, stylistic, and ideational issues available in *The God of Small Things*. Many critics have dealt with the subaltern issues, and used Gayatri Spivak's coinage to claim that Roy is making the subalterns speak.

However, I think there is still scope to visit the novel to understand the cause of subordination in Kerala, and by extension, in India. Caste is a sensitive and culture specific issue that has been missed by many western critics. Not many Indian critics are comfortable dealing with this issue. Therefore, my hypothesis that caste is privileged over class and gender in Roy's novel merits due consideration.

1.6d Chapter Outline

The dissertation contains six chapters. Chapter 2 reviews the existing literature on Roy's maiden novel. It divides the literature into two broad categories of postmodernism and postcolonialism. Critics engaged with Roy's stylistic and narrative features are grouped under postmodernism, while critics dealing with identity crisis, hybridity, language issues, liminal space, trans-nationality, migration and mobility, environment, and politics are grouped under postcolonialism.

Chapter 3 analyses the text in terms of gender. In particular it looks at the male and female interactions that form gender norms in society. I shall look at the non-normative behaviors of the rebellious characters to understand their role in the novel. In addition, I shall explore whether Roy's gender identity influenced her narrative technique. Is there any element of *ecriture feminine* in the text? Of course the link between gender and other exclusionary categories will also be discussed.

Chapter 4 espouses the concept of class as evinced in Roy's novel. Loosely guided by Ranajit Guha's characterization of the subaltern, I shall try to divide the characters in terms of their power relations. I shall argue that class is not the only identity marker for subaltern characters.

Chapter 5 explores the invisible barrier of caste that divides characters in Roy's novel. The dehumanization of Velutha because of his caste is symptomatic of a social illness that Roy wants

to address. I shall argue that by dealing with one case study of an outcaste, Roy shows the cancer that pervades India.

Chapter 6 concludes the dissertation by revisiting the arguments to solidify the claim that Roy has actually privileged caste over gender and class in her textual interface.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 *The God of Small Things* in the Post-

Ever since the publication of *TGST*, critics have pointed out the novel's alignment with the subaltern school of thought. Velutha's subaltern status and the "unspeakability" of his counterpart Ammu make the text an obvious choice for scrutiny under the lens of subaltern studies, which rose to prominence in the early nineties. The term subaltern was appropriated by Ranajit Guha and the members of The Subaltern Studies Collective who loosely borrowed the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci's idea to categorize the downtrodden of the subcontinent. These categories include people who are "inferior in rank" either because of caste, class, race, gender, or any other reason, and is more inclusive and polysemic than the Marxist category of the proletariat. Because of the overlapping concerns, many critical readings of *The God of Small Things* highlight the issues of subalternity as a postcolonial feature without necessarily toeing the lines of Ranajit Guha and the Subaltern Studies.

On the one hand, the transnational setting, diaspora, and the use of English as the literary mode of expression written largely for the Anglophone audience perhaps strengthen the labelling of Roy as a postcolonial writer. In her maiden novel, however, Roy does not engage directly with the colonial power. She is rather keen on investigating the cause behind the marginalization and subalternity of the characters as well as promoting a type of resistance. In a Foucauldian manner, the novel navigates through the nexus between power and resistance, and visualizes multiple sites of resistance in the struggle of the Indian subalterns for their overall emancipation. Foucault famously wrote, "Where there is power, there is resistance" (95-96); *TGST* is an exploitation of multiple sites of resistance. Roy's insistence on viewing her fiction as an extension of her activism offers a frame to understand different types of resistance depicted in the text. The overwhelming

concerns with gender, caste, environment, politics and race have further allowed critics to read *TGST* from a postcolonial perspective.

On the other hand, Roy's innate desire to deconstruct the system assumes a modernist, albeit postmodernist, accent. The playfulness, irony, plurality of voices with which the plot is revealed as an act of textual subversion make the text a candidate for postmodernism. The following discussion surveys existing discourse on both postmodern and postcolonial groups of critics to highlight my central thesis on various types of textual and contextual exploitations available in the text. In particular, I shall survey the existing literature to identify a critical gap in the prevalent discourse that falls short of exploring the material and ideological causes behind the construction of the subaltern as social, political, cultural, and economic categories. The discussion, however, lumps the critiques on Roy's *TGST* in two broad categories of postcolonialism and postmodernism. However, I am equally aware of Kwame Anthony Appiah's point that there could be some "post" in postmodernism, which is also the "post" in postcolonial.

2.2 *The God of Small Things* in the Postcolonial Camp

Amitava Kumar in an essay "The Currency of Arundhati Roy" identifies three broad assertions of Roy's in which she distinguishes herself from many other postcolonial Indian writers in English. Firstly, Roy does not present or highlight her Indian subject matter as an exotic commodity for the consumption of the Western readers. Secondly, many of the Indian writers writing in English are trained or educated in convent schools with little or no sympathy for "the poor and the weak around" (29). Roy, in contrast, is a champion of the downtrodden. Thirdly, these writers are "rank individualists" ensconced in their shells, not interested in talking, imagining, or writing for the populace or the collective. Amitava Kumar is, however, critical of Roy's radical isolationism when she stated, "I hereby declare myself an independent mobile republic" following the testing of the

nuclear bomb by the BJP government, after coming back to power in the February 1998 elections to declare to the world that India was a nuclear power. Roy, by her declaration wanted to say that as a conscientious human being disassociated herself from the jingoist nationalists. For her freedom of thought and speech was a sacred right and human beings who were born free should not be appropriated by any organization or state in the name of nationalism or any ism.

In her assessment, Julie Mullaney focuses on Roy's feminism and globalization to characterize the brand of postcolonialism that *TGST* employs. In "'Globalizing Dissent'? Arundhati Roy, Local and Postcolonial Feminisms in the Transnational Economy," Mullaney points out that in both *TGST* and her non-fictional works, Roy presents the west and the non-west "equally in dialogue" (115). Although Mullaney recognizes the danger of conflating the author with her work, she finds it safe to claim that Roy as a writer upholds a dialogic open-ended discourse to understand postcolonialism, feminism, and globalization as well as to change the current world into a better one. Mullaney calls this act of Roy's, appropriately enough, "Globalizing Dissent." She, thus, dubs Roy as a non-conformist encompassing as well as transcending feminist, postcolonial, and anti-globalization discourses, and working for a more gender-sensitive, less class-ridden, and a casteless society in India. Mullaney, however, seemingly veers between the two poles of capitalist exploitation and patriarchal oppression without touching the issue of caste at all, which I find a serious lapse on the part of any critical reader of *TGST*.

The essay thus fails to answer one of the crucial questions about the principle cause of subalternity in *TGST*. For me, Roy does not merely use dissent as a type of resistance. Her activism relies on being specific about the enemy; identifying the enemy is the primary action for any subaltern seeking emancipation. Resistance cannot be successful without being critical of the oppressive power structure.

John Lutz in his essay identifies commodity fetish and patriarchy as the evil agencies. In "Commodity Fetishism, Patriarchal Repression, and Psychic Deprivation in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*," Lutz argues that "through characters victimized by the social order … the novel explores potential sites of resistance to capitalist exploitation and patriarchal domination" (57). After liberation from the colonial yoke, the postcolonial elites in India and other places did not disconnect themselves from the former colonial and rising neo-colonial powers. The imperialism that was ushered in with the rise of US-based capitalism is symbolically expressed in *TGST* through Baby Kochamma's obsession with TV. While watching American television shows, she finds respite in the virtual world from the semi-capitalistically regulated and male-controlled world of Kerala, India. The real world has no space for even a proactive though self-centered female like Baby Kochamma. Lutz describes the world events as "television worries" (29) and the violent conflicts as "television wars" (28) to suggest the distance between the reality of these events and their packaged representation on television. This distance contributes to Baby Kochamma's social isolation and lack of authentic engagement with the real problems confronting the world (59). She becomes complicit in the capitalist and patriarchal networks and becomes susceptible to exploitation. In my opinion, John Lutz's essay privileges class and gender as similar categories of exploitation and ignores perhaps unconsciously the more India-specific exclusionary grid of caste, and remains unsatisfactory to the general reader experiencing *TGST* directly.

The textual subordination in the name of gender within a patriarchal society appeals to many critics. Neelam Tikkha's essay, "Lo!Cus Stand I! We are not the sinners but the sinned against...," adopts a postcolonial stance to compare and contrast the fates of a sister Ammu with her brother Chacko and reveals the patriarchal prejudices in Keralite society. The powerful characters like Comrade Pillai, Baby Kochamma, and Inspector Mathews are all in tune with the entrenched patriarchy and the feudal-capitalist structures. In the story, males and females have

different roles and are valued according to their gender, but it is not impossible for a female character like Baby Kochamma to manipulate patriarchal structures and values and achieve power. Tikkha thus shows how in an iniquitous society the oppressed are presented in front of everyone as the sinned and they do not have a *locus standi* from where they can defend themselves.

Gender bias is one of the issues that has attracted many critics to *TGST*. In most cases, these critics rehash Eurocentric feminism to discuss male female relationship within a patriarchal society. For example, Madhvi Verma's essay "Women's Struggle against Gender Bias in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*" maps the power-relationships, the domination by males and the victimization of females using the insights of Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir. Such arguments, however, lack local validity.

The title of Rekha Tiwari and Vishnu Kumar Sharma's 2018 essay "The Theme of Patriarchal Arrogance against Females in *The God of Small Things*" makes no secret of its intention to highlight the prevalent male "arrogance" that subjugates female characters such as Ammu, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, and others. The writers do not explain why Baby Kochamma, who is an assertive and manipulative character to benefit from the patriarchal structures, can be a victim of "patriarchal arrogance." Her peculiarity is probably conditioned by her father's male chauvinism. The change in her can be construed as a survival strategy that both male and female beings can adopt. I cite this article to show how critics gloss over gender issues with a preconceived notion of proving Arundhati Roy a feminist. In so doing, they ignore the sophistication and complexity of the text or the progressive humanitarian causes she champions.

This becomes clear when one observes Roy's care for the humans and the non-humans alike. She is concerned not only about the "small" people in her society, but also about the "small" things that surround us. Her attention is invested both in the powerful and their domineering or

hegemonic activities, and in the resistance put up against the powerful by those who are small in stature, power, and expressions. U. R. Anusha's rather short essay "The Woman and the Non-Human in Roy's *The God of Small Things*" is quite useful where she uses the nature/culture binary to comment on the "subjectification of men and the objectification of women" (72). Referring to the organic connectivity of nature, Anusha writes "everything is connected to everything else" (72) to argue that Roy's novel propounds a kind of symbiotic relationship between the human and the non-human worlds. She is critical of the gender based discrimination in Keralite society and the objectification of women. The repressive society that Roy depicts is an unhealthy one replete with repressive exploitation, inequity, and men-women relationship.

The nuanced nature of *TGST* has allowed critics to search for multiple layers of meaning and concern in Roy's novel. One such concern involves the dehumanization of the familiar world. Recent criticism, particularly from the camps of eco-feminism, has identified the transaction between the human and non-human, the animate and non-animate worlds in *TGST*. As an environmental activist, Roy believes in the symbiotic relationship and complementarity between the human and non-human worlds. The dehumanization of women within patriarchy finds a parallel between the exploitation of the women with that of the environment. In line with eco-feminists, Roy seems to equate the condition of the females with the environment that has been objectified, commodified, and exploited. The process of such degradation begins with the colonial ventures by the white western powers that have aggravated the dual oppression on females and the environment.

Written also from the eco-feminist point of view, Susan Comfort's essay "The Hidden Life of Things: Commodification, Imperialism, and Environmental Feminism in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things"* claims that the central narrative project of the novel is "the interrogation of

the commodity logic that underlies the construction of patriarchal ideological formations under capitalist imperialism" (1). The novelist is not engaged in a critique of the culture of the West, but of "patriarchal ideologies associated with the political economy of imperialism, which involves both global and local formations of domination" (2). She quotes Marx's definition of "commodity fetishism" as "a mysterious thing [because] a definite social relation between men ... assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things" (6). Comfort refers to "the History House" as a relic from the days of colonial expansion in Roy's text to forward her argument:

> In the novel, the History House is at the center stage. It is from there that the invisible forces of oppression and violence radiate outwards in a system of exploitation that depends on multiple dimensions of patriarchal domination, from the coercive enforcement of separate spheres to the institutional violence used to put down subaltern insurgency to the perpetuation of structures of global marginalization, and the rationalization of nature. (10)

Both patriarchy and capitalism use caste, class, race and gender, and nature as sites of their power in order to ensure their safety and security. The rationalization of nature alludes to the use of "Instrumental Reason" for regulating life and thought, and thus putting everything in a carceral grid. For John Lutz, Roy, the novelist "is insisting on a re-examination of the determinate relation between large forces and small events and between the universal and the particular, according to which in dominant patriarchal logic the 'small things' and particulars are all but subsumed, destroyed or brutalized" (17).

The essay touches upon the fetishization of commodities and its connection with imperialism. However, it does not touch upon the causes behind the predicament of the subalterns. As these causes are not directly identified, the question of identifying the way of emancipation

does not even arise in this essay. The question of what is the principal cause for subalternity thus lies totally unaddressed.

Prashant Jadhav's article "Subaltern and Gender Issues in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*," however, does not shy away from the issues of women and the untouchables. He gives a realistic description of the marginalization and humiliation of these two subaltern categories in the novel. Then again, he does not address why there is subalternity in society and what is the principal cause behind it. While focusing on gender, he leaves aside the issue of class exploitation and thus presents an inadequate analysis of subalternity. The separating of women and subalterns is also surprising as the term subaltern as used by Ranajit Guha includes women in its purview. The interrelationship between the subalternities of caste, class and gender and the question of the principal cause of subalternity also remains unexplored here as in many other articles.

Gender figures prominently in Shruti Das's "Human Rights and the Knowing Subaltern: *The God of Small Things* – A Case Study." Das presents the subalterns in Roy's *TGST* as "knowing subalterns" or informed subalterns who are aware of their rights. Das shows how the different subaltern characters are aware of being deprived of their "human rights" and how they are excluded and marginalized. However, she does not treat the different kinds of subalterns separately and does not probe into the multiple causes of subalternity. Rather, in her view, Roy "appreciates the relationship between violation of human rights by dominant patriarchal norms and literary imagination" (9). Thus, this study seems inadequate in its probing analysis of the novel and the subaltern question, privileging unilaterally the question of gender.

In her essay "*The God of Small Things*: The Silent Voice of Subaltern" [sic], Shagufta Anjum uses Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" to shed light on the

silent or muted characters in Roy's novel. Anjum argues that deprived of many rights, the subalterns in the novel are even deprived of their voices. Anjum talks of three kinds of subalterns, though not very schematically: women, untouchables and the lower class people implying the proletarians and other allied classes. However, the focus in her short article is on the women and the untouchables rather than the lower class characters in the novel. Anjum brings to the fore the question of identity of the subalterns rather than the main cause of subalternity. In its slanted focus, the article leaves scope for a further, more probing study of the causes of subalternity in Roy's masterpiece.

The resistance against normative gender roles has drawn many readings of *TGST* from a feminist perspective. The relegated role of women in society makes them obvious candidates for "Small Things." However, many critics have rightly pointed out that while patriarchy is quite pervasive in the novel, it is not the only exclusionary grid of oppression. The exclusionary politics and strategies practiced by the powerful upper caste characters in the novel are dealt with by Vandita Liddle in ¨Hybridity, Marginalization and the Politics of Transgression in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*". The essayist points out the three types of power structures embodied by Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, and the policeman who ensure that the transgressors –Ammu, Velutha, Rahel and Estha – remain vulnerable and marginalized. In short, "They become victims of the caste system, gender-based inequality, and inflexible law enforcement¨ (1). For Liddle, the tussle between the power-holders and the subalterns of caste and gender are at the center of the novel. The study tends to point at the caste system and patriarchy as principally responsible for the misery of Velutha, Ammu, and the twins, without singling out any one cause as the principle one.

O.P. Dwivedi's essay "The Subaltern and the Text: Reading Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*" is one of the few articles to trace the conceptual similarity between Roy's "small

things" and Ranajit Guha's "subalterns." Dwivedi also mentions Spivak to argue that the subaltern cannot speak, and it is up to writers such as Roy to present the pitiable condition of the subalterns and to give them a voice. Being marginalized class, caste, and gender-wise, the subalterns are treated as inferiors and dominated, and they remain voiceless and muted throughout *TGST*. Dwivedi, though, misses the opportunity to reflect on the causes of subalternity as he fails to probe into the different types of subalterns like caste, class, and gender-subalterns separately.

In "Articulating the Marginal: Arundhati Roy," Murari Prasad credits Roy for giving voice to the marginalized in a Keralite society based on gender, and caste and class oppression, and cultural difference, and for showing the way to salvation of the marginalized. The novel deals with the fate of the small things, and the "God" in its title is not the God of Big Things but of the suppressed. The novel posits the liaison between Velutha and Ammu as a symbolic representation and salvation of all marginalized people. Velutha, the untouchable carpenter, can thus be considered a small "God." Citing Tirthankar Chanda, Prasad maintains that the novel ends with the word "Tomorrow," "to suggest that tragedy is provisional and complicity between the subalterns – women and untouchables – holds the key to the future" (168).Written from the postcolonial and feminist points of view with an anti-globalization agenda, Prasad's essay rightly points out the two kinds of subalterns, the women and the workers. However, it fails to expand the exterior of dependence of patriarchy on the class system as well as the complicity of patriarchy and the class system with the caste system.

Ng Shing Yi's essay "Peripheral Beings and Loss in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*¨ deals with postcolonial marginality of characters like Ammu and Velutha, and shows how in the neo-colonized world the subalterns are marginalized, eliminated, exiled, or ostracized. Shing Yi writes, "While 'small things' may ironically connote triviality, the novel is ultimately concerned

with marginality, absence and loss: in other words, the invisible narratives that are consumed by power, politics or imperialism" (1).

The conflict between the powerful and the powerless, the Big Things and the Small Things and the tussle between the "Big" narratives and the "Small" narratives make up the plot of *TGST*. The powerful characters or their agents in their brutality, insensitivity, and opposition to emancipatory tendencies exhibit their own indebtedness to colonial prejudices:

> Vellya 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 … [Baby Kochamma] said (among other things) "*How could she stand the smell? Haven´t you noticed they have a particular smell, these Paravans?"*
>
> And she shuddered theatrically, like a child being force-fed spinach. She preferred an Irish-Jesuit smell to a particular Paravan smell. (2)

This senile semi-feudal attitude of Vellya Paapen, Velutha's father, is symbolic of the attitude of those subalterns who are servile to the neocolonial politics and political order.

In contrast to the machinations of the powerful characters who have their own God, small things also have a God of their own, reminiscent perhaps of the autochthonous pre-Aryan gods, who inheres in small things: "There is a God in small things, the novel insists, embodied in the marginal Black Man of Velutha, in the hidden narratives of women, children and untouchables ..." (Shing Yi 3), that is, the subaltern beings, suppressed/oppressed by class, caste, and gender-wise powerful characters, while they are suffering from repressive insularities. Ng Shing Yi concludes by saying that history is created not by the Big Things, but by the Small Things. Although useful for my thesis, I find the essay lacking in its questioning of the nature of subalternity or the sources of subalternity.

One of the issues dealt with by Roy in *TGST* is the body/corporeality and how it is regulated in postcolonial Indian society which has a history of several millennia of the prevalence of repressive Love Laws. Roy, in her compactly written *TGST*, shows the parallelism between the corporeal body and the social body and the body politic. The exploitation at the micro level is thus connected with the exploitation at the macro level. The micro act of cross-caste sexual union between Ammu and Velutha as well as the other micro-act of the transgressive incestuous union between Estha and Rahel is connected with the rebellion against the empire and the capitalist society. This aspect of the novel has been touched upon by some critics in their treatment of the novel.

Janet Thormann's article "The Ethical Subject of *The God of Small Things*" focuses on the breaking of the incest taboo and other Love Laws as an act of rebellion of the subalterns in it: "since the Love Law at the origin of any law at all is the incest prohibition, the violation of the incest prohibition in the narrative stands as a measure of the novel's radical interrogation of the foundations of social exchange" (300). Indian society had enshrined these Love Laws as the basis of the interaction between the sexes of the different castes and sub-castes. The individual women and men were enmeshed within these two classificatory and prohibitive grids and *TGST* portrays the characters as objects caught in this net made up of two kinds of threads involving sexual and caste taboos.

The incestuous and transgressive union of Rahel and Estha questions the very foundation of love that is supposed to act as a societal glue. Thormann writes, "Incest is the violation of the basis of social exchange, of generational succession in time, and hence of history, but here it is represented to be fidelity to a betrayed desire. The incest of the novel is then a radical challenge to Law because it challenges the very possibility of social being" (304). The celebration of incest in

the novel thus challenges the very basis of Indian society as it challenges the very concept of family and the constitution of family. By extension, the novel also challenges the Love Laws which were promulgated for perpetuating casteist apartheid.

Thormann thus explains the normalization of incest by the novelist as an act of rebelliousness on behalf of the subalterns from a psychoanalytic point of view. The essay does not, however, deal with the cause of subalternity. Questions like caste, class, or gender are given less focus compared to the focus on the body and incest. In so doing, Thormann does not think of the Velutha-Ammu affair as anything more than an important transgressive social act.

Sandra Reina Goulart Almeida's essay, "Untouchable Bodies: Arundhati Roy's Corporeal Transgressions," pursues the same line of thought, but it deals with the transgression of caste, racial, and gender boundaries by different characters in *TGST* in the postcolonial milieu. Almeida mentions that Roy in an interview "For Me" claimed that her work "is not about history, but rather about biology and transgression" (46). Almeida finds Roy's text foregrounding two major corporeal transgressions that lie, on the one hand, at the core of the cultural contract and, on the other, at a specific prohibition that involves the social relations, Hindu customs and Indian society. Significantly, Roy's narrative unfolds "a time when the unthinkable became thinkable and the impossible really happened" (31). This unthinkable becoming thinkable, is reflected in the catastrophic events such as the Velutha-Ammu affair and the Estha-Rahel incestuous union.

Roy focuses on biology, rather than on gender in dealing with women characters, and thus she encompasses questions, both of gender and sexuality as well as sexual preferences in her study of caste-based discrimination in postcolonial India. Untouchability in this context becomes connected with other kinds of exclusionary frames and the body becomes the site of multiple types of conflict. Roy connects this with the concept of the body politic in post-independence India and

how the postcolonial condition does not make any differences for ancient prejudices enshrined in communal memory as sacred Love Laws. Almeida clarifies the specificities of Ammu's action, of an upper caste woman becoming the receptacle of the seed of an untouchable male according to customs, this was sacrilegious.

Ammu challenges the casteist and sexist values of Indian society, and that is why she is made the victim by even her own family members. Roy's depiction of the subalterns in this context has been vehemently criticized by the Marxist critic Aijaz Ahmad who considers the valorization of the transgressive sexual act as an alternative to radical resistance and rebellion against the power-holders in society. Almeida responds to Ahmad's criticism by saying: "To some extent, Ahmad's criticism of Roy's use of the erotic may be perceived as a male-biased view of the erotic as a sign of female inferiority and unacceptable social behavior" (270).

For Almeida, subalterns or the powerless in *TGST* including Ammu and the twins who break the incest taboos have "a regulatory status in that it is a cultural intervention in a natural system devised to ensure the social organization of a group" (268). Their non-normative behavior can be construed as either a resilient resistance or a rebellion. Almeida's essay while focusing on the struggle of the subalterns, for the purpose of my thesis, leaves the important question of the nature and causes of subalternity unexplored.

Roy's treatment of socially relevant issues such as caste, class, race, gender has made critics think of her as a successor to the socially conscious Indian writers in English like Mulk Raj Anand. Amitabh Roy forwards such a proposition in his book *The God of Small Things: A Novel of Social Commitment*.

The study by Amitabh Roy came out in 2001 in which he locates Roy's social commitment with Mulk Raj Anand whose *Untouchable* (1935) was among the first to depict the plight of a

sweeper in colonial India. Amitabh Roy focuses on the "small things" in Roy's novel like women, children, the downtrodden and the environment. Amitabh Roy discusses the subaltern categories without actually using the term "subaltern." In dealing with women, as Amitabh Roy points out, Roy interrogates the binary of male and female, and the ideas of patriarchy. For example, Amitabh Roy hints about what women like Ammu had to face regarding queries about ability: "The boy is rarely asked a question or required to prove his ability" (Arundhanti Roy 52). Rather than blaming the ancient Love Laws, Amitabh Roy blames misinterpretations and misuse of such laws and customs for female suffering. This contradicts Roy's view point on this vital issue.

Amitabh Roy's criticism focuses on the "downtrodden" without distinguishing them in terms of caste or class. He lists three kinds of Dalits or untouchables: "Vellya Paapen, Kuttapen and Velutha constitute the trio which depicts the three types of the Dalits in Indian society, namely, the docile conformist, the discontented paralytic and the rebel who moves for equality and stakes his life (Amitabh Roy 112). By thus classifying the untouchables, Amitabh Roy agrees with Roy's castigation of hypocritical communists when she writes: "We have reasons to suspect that such backward sentiments are encouraged by well-to-do classes with vested interests even when they masquerade as communists"(Amitabh Roy 113). However, he does not provide any ideological angle on the question of caste or class. He also does not get into the debate on the gradualist/reformist view of Mahatma Gandhi or the abolitionist view of Ambedkar. While Amitabh Roy discusses the question of the downtrodden and of women in some detail, he fails to do so historically and thematically.

Some recent articles emphasize on the third space that goes beyond the fixed binaries of powerful and powerless. Roy's treatment of transgressive love in *TGST* allows some critics to examine the crossing of different socio-political boundaries. Lucia Grosu's article, "A Third Space

of Love," is a case in point. Grosu deals with this love as a different category which exists and reaches fruition on a third space. This space is linguistically, politically, and culturally a unique space where the individuals are free of all kinds of debilitating, hierarchical, and oppressive grids. Questions of caste, class, religion, gender are not relevant in this space. The space is free of all kinds of identity and social markers. This space does not promote any vertical hierarchy, but offers a horizontal equality. The caste-based ancient Love Laws are not functional in this "Third Space." It is not a utopian dream but a short-lived re-enactment of free individuals of, perhaps, primitive communism when the notion of private property had not arrived. The "Third Space" is the paradise of the "small things," which are eventually destroyed by the "Big Things."

On the cultural level, *TGST* straddles two cultures, Western and non-Western. Grosu posits, "Her [Roy's] novel can be considered a hybrid text since it is simultaneously contaminated by the two contexts, the Indian and the British" (Grosu 126). This hybrid text, however, does not deal with questions like the so-called ambivalence in characters towards western or western culture. Ideas like ambivalence, so popular among writers and readers of a great number of Indian English literature in English, is given space only in characters like Chacko and other Anglophiles. The "Small Things" are unaffected by this kind of phenomenon. This is a novel focused more on the land of Kerala, India, and the product of a writer resident of India. Referring to the couples, Grosu writes: "The couples in the novel are conceived following the pattern of the love-hate relationship which represents a human bond established between individuals who are initially separated by an embedded conflict and who trespass all boundaries in order to be together" (127).

The violated boundaries include caste, class, age (as Velutha is younger than Ammu), education, etc. They break the ancient Love Laws based on the caste system, which considered the

liaison between an upper caste woman and an untouchable to be the most reprehensible kind of transgression of the Love Laws and one of the gravest sins.

Similar to the violation committed by the couple Velutha and Ammu, Ammu's twins too transgress religious and social norms. The half-Hindu, half-Syrian-Christian twins, according to Arundhati Roy, "are two distinctive individuals, yet they share a single identity which is split into two" (qtd. in Grosu 130). When the twins consummate their love, they claim the "Third Space of Love" which nullifies for themselves, and emblematically for all Indians, the ancient Love Laws. Grosu uses this as a textual evidence in support of an in-between space that is necessary for the union of the two couples, who make up the core of "Small Things" in Roy's debut novel.

Traditional postcolonial critics often ignored the environment to remain focused on issues of identity, hybridity, culture, and ambivalence. This has changed with the emergence of postcolonial eco-criticism. Rukhaya M. Kunhi and Zeenath Mohamed Kunhi, for instance, clinically dissect the Cartesian dualism to understand the role of nature and culture in *TGST*. In "An Ecocritical Perspective of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*," they identify the syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations of metaphor and metonymy that can be collaborated with the downtrodden sex, that is, the females (1). The writers convincingly claim that the female instincts of survival are portrayed through the language of ecology where the boundary between nature and culture is diminished.

Their ecofeminist lens is "anti-hierarchical" as it maintains that "life on earth is an interconnected web, not a hierarchy" (2). This also allows them to deconstruct the male/female dichotomy. They use the muted group theory to stress that the marginalized groups "do not have a voice in the culture" and that they "tend to develop alternate ways of communicating what is sometimes postulated as 'back channel' communication" (3). Consequently, in Roy's *TGST*,

"suppression manifests in terms of silence or in terms of revolt" (3). The essay explains the "unnatural union of the twins" as their silent protest against the unnatural and unjust way they were separated.

In my research, I was surprised to find that not too many postcolonial critics deal with the question of class. Tomy Priyo Utomo's essay "Social Class in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*" is an exception. Written from a Marxist point of view, the article deals with social classes and their impact upon the different characters. It asserts Marxist determinism at a superficial level, and does not explore the cause for the existence of the downtrodden or subalternity.

Ebrahim Sk attempts a survey of the cause by referring to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Sk finds an analogue between the symbolic darkness that dominates Roy's aesthetic world and the Conradesque depiction of Congo. Sk, in "Heart of Darkness in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*," reflects on Kurtz's savagery that is conditioned by the colony in which he was set. In Roy's novel, the "Big Things," starting with the British colonial masters were supposed to be kind to the "Small Things," but this is not the case. The "Big Things" exploit and marginalize the "Small Things," including the small characters like Ammu, Estha, Rahel, and the untouchable, Velutha. The powerful are privileged against those who are inferior and powerless in the society depicted in Roy's debut novel. It is as if there is a kind of internal colonialism in Keralite society with similar structures of domination, marginalization, and the powerless are like the untouchables. Although the writer does not use the popular term, the colonial subalterns of Joseph Conrad's novel have their proper counterparts in *TGST*. In this manner, a European author's novel about Africa published in 1889 and an Indian writer's novel about Kerala, India published in 1997 find strange correspondences.

In contrast, we find a refreshingly local flavor in the essay "Arundhati Roy and Arjun Dangle: Minorities in India and the Social Movement" where Jayshree Singh raises the question about Dalits. The essay comments on three important aspects of Roy's novel; "(1) Syrian Christians, (2) The role of Communism in common mass' life, (3) the caste system in Kerala" (Singh 2). The Syrian Christians are a pre-colonial community of upper caste Hindus who had converted to Christianity. This community retained certain customs of their upper caste Hindu past like the caste system and untouchability. Despite their Christian theology, they retained the ideas of purity and pollution. The second issue of communism came to Kerala with a promise to deliver social justice and eradicate inequalities. They were implemented by characters such as Comrade Pillai, Chacko, and other Communist leaders, but no substantial changes were achieved. The communist leaders equally failed to address the third issue of caste in Kerala. Singh observes that Roy "shows individual-society conflicts unresolved and friction at all levels produce only hate, malice, jealousy, intricate relationship, social interaction turns into debauchery, ostracism, alienation, frustration and fragmentation both mentally and physically" (Singh 2). The article offers an incisive analysis of the prevalence of debauchery, alienation, mental and physical frustration, and fragmentation in Keralite society and also of the minority/untouchable question.

Priyasmita Dasgupta and Titir Chakravorty's "Gender and Caste in the light of Socio-political Changes in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Other Writings" comes close to my project of explaining the presence and impact of gender, class, and caste in Roy's novel. The article is critical of the lack of freedom available to the marginalized groups even after more than sixty years of India's independence in 1947. The writers explain their position by also dealing with Ammu and her rejection of the millennia old Love Laws based on the *Manu Smriti*.

The survey of the literatures on postcolonial readings of Roy's *TGST* notice a clear shift from their earlier focus on hybridity, ambivalence, and identity formation to a recent assertion on the environment. In the former analysis, gender, class, and caste are subsumed under the generic mission of othering, while in the latter the subversion in nature and culture are seen as a democratization of social hierarchy. The reliance on Eurocentric theoretical tools often restrict the readings to isolate the unique feature of caste in the Indian context. This is even more visible in postmodernist readings where style dictates the discussion.

2.3 *The God of Small Things* in the Postmodern Camp

Postmodernism is both a period term and a phenomena. It contains a plethora of features, some of them contradictory. It oscillates between being plain playful to showing dark humor. The deconstruction of received truths as well as monolithic concepts of history, usually written from the perspective of the powerful and the victors, can credit postmodernism for its emancipatory potential. Indeed postmodern narrative can fracture essential categories such as race, gender, and class.

Lyotard's definition of postmodernism as an "incredulity towards meta-narratives" offers another frame to challenge the multiple sights of exploitation in the name of caste, class, gender, race, ethnicity, and age. Roy's titular god is a grand-narrative which is sabotaged by small things, explained through Lacan's *objet petit a* (small objects). Of course, as already mentioned, we can always employ Foucauldian power/knowledge nexus to understand the resistance of the small people referred to in Roy's novel as "small things." It is no surprise then that Roy's novel has attracted many Postmodernist readings. I shall survey some of these articles and books to argue how such apolitical readings are symptomatic of a post-ideological age. The resistance that postmodernists take part in is, in that sense, that of rebels without a cause. Frequently, the

postmodern analyses tend to swerve towards stylistic issues and stylistic innovations in literary texts. While there is some overlapping between postcolonialism and postmodernism, the focus on activism and a kind of "strategic essentialism" probably makes a text like *TGST* more postcolonial than postmodern.

Jonathan Collins' essay title makes no secret of his verdict. In "Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* as a Postmodern Novel," Collins provides a list of postmodernist features in Roy's novel. He begins by referring to the "several beginnings" of the novel (Collins 1). These multiple beginnings point at the alternate/multiple linear stories or histories that the postmodernists think of. Quoting Benoit, Collins mentions the chronological feature of the novel as its second postmodernist feature. The novel, we are told, can be divided into "chronological (the timeline of the narrative) and a-chronological (the time relating to history within the novel's context, e.g. the History House, the caste system, religion, the Love Laws, etc.)" (Collins 1). Thus, there is no definite end in *TGST* and the reader can end the novel as he or she wishes. The third feature that Collins points out is the putative use of magic realism. However, Collins admits that since interconnectedness is a prominent feature of the novel, it is probably useful to borrow Elleke Boehmer's term to label Roy's narrative as "extravagant realism" (also qtd. by Julie Mullaney in her book, 72). The fourth feature that Collins points out is intertextuality – a feature also present in postcolonial texts. The fifth postmodern feature is the absence of a singular narrative and the simultaneous existence of two parallel histories. The "official" history and the "unofficial" history intertwine and form a historiographical metafiction. Collins also mentions the language game and the dual narrator (an omniscient narrator and a child narrator).

The symbolic use of space is detailed in Sara Upstone's "The History House: The Magic of Contained Space in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things.*" For Upstone, the houses may

be seen as "metonymic of wider oppressions" (73). The different characters in the novel, including Baby Kochamma, try to quarantine themselves from the world, but the world encroaches on her isolation and sweeps through the houses. None of the houses is a safe domestic space that can be called a home. Ayemenem House is especially significant among the houses in the novel. According to Upstone, "It is explicitly imperial, a 'symbol of colonial authority' as the 'Heart of Darkness' and the house of an 'Englishman' with 'Map-breath'd ancestors'. It is also reflective of India's 'communal divisions and conflicts', where organized power in the form of the police force utilizes both neocolonial authority and patriarchal male physical strength" (75). Roy thus insists on narratives but not metanarratives, thus not accepting all the points of the postmodernists and many histories and not one "History" which was considered official. As *TGST* is a novel, Roy perhaps cannot deny the necessity of a grand historical narrative altogether and proposes an opening up of spaces for the small narratives and small details in the manner of The Subaltern Studies Collective and many postmodernists. However, her acceptance of the need to have a kind of grand narrative, no matter how fragile, along with the smaller narratives, places her in a peculiar position, making her novel amenable also to postcolonial readings as we have seen.

Upstone's apolitical reading once again fails to address the fundamental question of why there are "Small Things" and if there is any way of salvation for these "Small Things." This essay does not even mention who the small people of Ayemenem really are. It creates an awareness of the exploitative role played by "History," written, defined, and interpreted by "Big Things" or rather Big People. For my own project, I am interested in the complicit nature of "History" in the capitalist system to understand why the caste system has survived the millennia, or why there have been also gender-subalterns from the days of the promulgation of the Love Laws. This essay prioritizes class as a very important cause for the subalternity of the characters as it focuses upon

late capitalism as the oppressive system which creates misery and suffering, and even tortures the subalterns. I find this functionalist rather than materialist approach a shortcoming. For instance, Velutha is presented as a member of the working class, but he is not a mere cog in the wheel. His skill in carpentry is reminiscent of the pre-capitalist artisanship that an apolitical reading overlooks.

The figure of Velutha is analyzed in detail in Devon Campbell-Hall's chapter on "Dangerous Artisans: Anarchic Labour in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and *Anil's Ghost* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*" included in Murari Prasad's *Arundhati Roy Critical Perspectives*. Velutha, in Campbell-Hall's words, has "peerless manual skills, a tendency towards silence, and a stubborn insistence on maintaining personal integrity even amidst domestic violence and war" (45). Another epithet that Campbell-Hall uses for Velutha is ¨Christ like," which makes him not only a sacrificial figure but also a salvific one. Velutha's skills make him an agent, an autonomous or independent agent for change or movement within the novel, that is, a *deux ex machina*, a disruptive catalyst and an anarchic agent. As a carpenter with a German sensibility, Velutha could have been an engineer. His education makes him a complex figure as he transgresses his class and caste-identity. The hybrid Velutha also challenges postmodernist globalization and uniformitarian agendas. The amalgamation of contradictory characteristics like passivity and rebelliousness, masculinity and childishness make Velutha a truly paradoxical figure and a true thorn in the eye of the powerful and the dominant. Velutha inhabits "a liminal space" conceptualized by Bhabha and a hybrid figure with anarchic potentials not unthinkable in a figure of resistance against "Big Things." By focusing on the figure of Velutha, Campbell-Hall identifies two causes of his subalternity: caste and class. He, however, does not probe into their interconnections or privilege one cause over the other.

The hermeneutics of *TGST* is investigated by Pramod K. Nayar in a book chapter "Crypto-secrets: Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*." Nayar charts the secrets of burrowed places, crypto-secrets, in the novel, pointing out,

> Every character in *Things* is drawn into the conflagration symbolized as secret-crypt-death. Estha and Rahel are especially doomed to recall a "terror," "buried in a shallow grave," in the History House. Their selves, desires, pasts are buried beneath names and dramatization. The places inhabited by the characters become "crypt-like." (79)

The plot of the novel, according to this essay, presents a land that is like death. Although it talks of the death-like landscape, it does not question why the land has become like this. The descriptive nature of the essay is typical of some other essays where the real life and death questions like subalternity and its main cause are not searched for.

Nandini Nayar's "Twin (Un)Certainties: Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*" depicts two worlds: the world of geographical/topographical localities and the imaginary world of Estha and Rahel, the two children. The inhabitants of both the worlds live a life of uncertainty regarding which world is real. This uncertainty, according to Nayar, is what makes the lives of Estha and Rahel so tragic. The essay deals with the novel's themes and characters, and presents a contradiction in the narrative, from a postmodern perspective. Nayar's essay, while focusing on two subalterns, that is, the twins, does not connect their miseries with their perspectives, and does not explain their suffering, like the other downtrodden characters, in term of their caste, class, or gender.

The aesthetic focus of postmodernist fiction in order to subvert some traditional ideas characterizes M. Dosan's essay "Arundhati Roy Hits the Socio-Political Ball." The essay uses the Kathakali male dancers masquerading as females as its point of departure. The actual dance slips

into a performance of a different kind: “the Kathakali men took off their make up and went home to beat their wives. The description becomes ironic when she writes even Kunti, the soft one with breasts did the same” (34).

The essay reveals how the capillary of power operates in a patriarchal system. The performative aspect adds freshness to the reading. It is different from the typical thematic study of the novel written from the modernist liberal humanist point of view. K.V. Surendran’s ¨*The God of Smal Things* – A Saga of Lost Dreams” lists different kinds of disappointments of the different characters including that of Baby Kochamma. Some of the essays are a bit lengthy and some are very short. These essays are written from different theoretical perspectives and they are not like chapters in a book. They are miscellaneous lot. That is why I have treated the articles separately.

K.K. John’s essay “A Band of Masqueraders: A Study of Some Characters in Arundhati Roy’s Novel, *The God of Small Things*” describes some of the chameleon-like figures such as Comrade Pillai and Chacko. Interestingly, John includes Velutha among the masked figures despite the fact that he does so to avoid being recognized as a subversive character. The essay seems to be another simplistic reading from an apolitical, liberal-humanist, and modernist point of view.

Because of the problematic mention of communism in the novel, Marxist critics have taken up arms to engage with Roy’s novel. Foremost among them is Aijaz Ahmad. Aijaz Ahmad’s essay “Reading Arundhati Roy *Politically*” analyzes Roy’s treatment of Communism and the Communists, especially the veteran leader of Kerala, Comrade E.M.S. Namboodiripad (popularly known as EMS). According to Aijaz Ahmad, “intermeshing of caste and sexuality is indeed the ideological center of the book, and it is precisely the transgressive claim in this domain that will account for much of the popularity of the book” (35). Ahmad takes Roy to task principally for

presenting the private erotic act between Velutha and Ammu as having the significance of a rebellion. In short, Ahmad accuses Roy of abandoning the real battlefield of class struggle and focusing upon popular topics like caste oppression and sexual transgression. However, as a theorist who has tried to re-orient postcolonial studies, Ahmad acknowledges the excellence of Roy as a novelist but thinks that she has overshot the matter.

Ahmad thinks that Roy has not given due importance to the question of class but rather has valorized caste and eroticism by presenting Velutha and Ammu's sexual act with excessive importance in the novel. In this way, she has privileged the individual self above the class and community, and has thus played into the hands of the bourgeoisie, like many postmodernists. Ahmad also implies that Roy, in creating a cocktail out of a transgressive sexual act and inter-caste liaison, skirted more substantial issues like class disparity and exploitation, which really drives characters like Comrade Pillai and Chacko: "About caste she writes with devastating precision; about class she seems not to be particularly concerned with those aspects which are not tied to caste" (43). Ahmad recognizes that, for Roy, caste or gender is probably more important than class in determining the subalternity of the characters. But what he does not point out is the fact that Marx focuses on class and considers it a universal category. So , in terms of understanding caste, which is primarily an Indian phenomenon Marx is not very relevant.

Archana Bhattacharjee's essay "Indian Societal Values: A Study of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* from Postmodernism Perspective" mentions the "societal values" with reference to the transvaluation of values ascribed to Nietzsche. The plot of the novel shows how the societal values are upheld at first by the "Small Things" in the first part of the novel, until they find the transgressing of these values by the "Big Things" or the comparatively powerless characters are transgressed upon by the powerful characters. In this conflict, the subalterns

transgress the boundaries of caste, class, and gender, and we find Ammu, Velutha, Estha, and Rahel transgressing the millennia old Love Laws being challenged and prototypically subverted. Bhattacharjee's comments in the penultimate paragraph is noteworthy. She writes that the postmodernist knowledge, which is not a tool in the hands of the powerful, gives us the ability "to tolerate the incommensurable" (Bhattacharjee 3). She further comments that in the case of *TGST*, the "incommensurable" may be related to the idea of "Small Things" (Bhattacharjee 3). The rejection of metanarratives leads to the privileging of "Small Things," small or little narratives. In this sense, Roy successfully navigates the plot of the novel in the postcolonial-postmodern narrative.

The issue is dealt with in "The Inevitable Failure of Metanarratives in *The God of Small Things*" by Mushfique Mahmood and Fahmida Haque. The writers point out the metanarratives in Roy's novel (for example, Love Laws, Christianity, feminism, Marxism) and how they are ultimately negated or discarded by Roy. In "Narrativity in Postmodern Text: A Study of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*," the researchers Hariharasudan and Thavabalan deal with issues of certainty and narrativity. The article details the major postmodernist features like Black Humour, Irony, Parody, Pastiche, Intertextuality, Metafiction and Historiographic Metafiction in *TGST*.

Roy's *oeuvre*, the endless, circular conflict between power and powerlessness, is illustrated in "Hyperreal Power Patterns in Roy's *The God of Small Things*: A Postmodern Analysis". The authors, Mohsin Khan and Ghulam Mustafa Mashori, locate the "Hyperreal Power patterns," a condition in which the viewers cannot distinguish between reality and the simulation of reality in *TGST*. The power projection in society does not necessarily correspond with actual power. Khan and Mashori apply this concept to scan the aura of power that Chacko and Comrade Pillai project.

Deep down these two seemingly powerful characters are fragile. The authors present Kerala as a technologically advanced society, which, in reality, it is. The novel's progress is of such a kind that Chacko thinks of modernizing the domestic Paradise Pickles factory of his mother and turning it into a proper capitalist enterprise, with loans, machines, and so on. However, there is a gulf between postmodern European or American societies and a village in Kerala, India, even in the late nineties. While the article is full of references to theoretical texts of postmodernism, *TGST* and the context of Arundhati Roy cannot support the hypothesis put forward by the two authors as viable. Roy is certain or convinced that emancipation of the downtrodden is possible, even though the Communist Utopia has turned out to be a nightmare in the Soviet Union, a veritable dystopia, and the Indian experiment at democratic transition to Socialism has been riven through with hypocritical leaders and the inability in providing an answer to caste. Roy's quest for praxis and theory, in this order, is emblematic of her whole trajectory of life. This is punctuated by her important writings and activism, like in her second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, and her travels through the jungles with the Maoists.

A review of the secondary sources on Arundhati Roy's *TGST* shows that a majority of the scholars opt for a postcolonial point of view in their readings. It is perhaps natural, considering the fact that Roy is perhaps, primarily an activist, and secondarily a writer of non-fictional and fictional prose in English. My principal research question is: what was the main cause for subalternity in Roy's *TGST*? None of the research articles reviewed here deals with this question directly as if subalternity could not have any main cause. Some of the articles deal with the effects of caste, class, and gender on the characters, but not the cause of their subalternity. One possible reason is while class and gender discrimination are universal, caste is peculiarly an Indian phenomenon. The

critics were divided broadly into two groups, those who were postcolonially inclined and those who were postmodernists.

As the survey has shown, Roy has been lauded for her aesthetic brilliance, her artistic choices, and political commitments. Roy's engagement with putative "anti-communism" is a relatively less discussed topic. For me, there is still scope to understand the real cause of subalternity of the downtrodden characters in *TGST*. My thesis, thus, is an attempt at such an investigation.

CHAPTER 3: THE ROLE OF GENDER IN *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*

"Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing."

– Arundhati Roy

3.1 Love, Loss, and Longing in *The God of Small Things*

At the core of *The God of Small Things* there is a deep-rooted sense of love, loss, and longing in various characters. In a blog for Culturetrip, Shikhar reminds us of Roy's reaction to the whistleblowers such as Edward Snowden and Danielle Ellsberg who have no place left to go. Roy writes, "Daniel Ellsberg's tears made me think about love, about loss, about dreams – and, most of all, about failure" (qtd. in "Reading Arundhati Roy: Beyond Lyricism & Controversies"). Shikhar convincingly argues that the same phrase can be used to understand the emotional bedrock of Roy's novel. He adds:

> The book unravels like a personal tragedy, with a sense of impending doom throughout. It involves 8-year-old twins innocently grappling with losses they can't even understand, carrying their pain for 23 long years as they slowly come to terms with it; it involves a love affair between a low-caste "Paravan" and a high-caste divorced mother of two that ends tragically; at its kernel, it constitutes of a love mangled in the labyrinth of caste system, "familial values," hypocritical societal mores, communism and political ambition.("Reading Arundhati Roy: Beyond Lyricism & Controversies")

While the Ammu-Velutha affair is an enactment of thinking the unthinkable, the novel unfolds the way the twins are trying to make sense of their surroundings threatened by the twin danger of the advent of Communism and the residual impact of the caste system even though it has been officially annulled in 1950. Repeatedly, the twins try to escape into the History House, which was once inhabited by an Englishman who went native, Kari Saipu. Their uncle Chacko told them about this house, "to understand history … we have to go inside and listen to what

they're saying. And look at the books and the pictures on the wall. And smell the smells" (*TGST* 51). And later, "we can't go in … because we've been locked out. And when we look in through the windows, all we see are shadows. And when we try and listen, all we hear is a whispering" (*TGST* 52). Even as children, the twins realized that they have been locked out of the symbolic History House. They can see through the windows to get certain glimpses of shadowy truth or certain sound-bytes of the narrative, but never the whole truth. They are the outsiders. The story of Ammu and Velutha's tryst are set by this shadowy history. They too are locked out. Roy's feminist project for me involves finding a room of their own, finding a story of their own. Such a story is informed by desire that is born out of loss and the love it gains.

This explains why *The God of Small Things,* despite its stylistically difficult features, remains so popular in so many languages. Mullaney estimated in 2002 that the novel had been sold in over six million copies in forty different languages (77). Roy's sincere portrayal of love, loss, and longing experienced by almost all the characters strike a raw nerve in her readers. These emotions are relatable across cultures. Roy is at her best in both coding and decoding human emotions, in revealing and hiding passions. Her lyrical language, use of literary tropes and poetic metaphors give us rare insights into the mindscape of her characters, and how they respond to their landscape.

The gender role of the characters in the novel is defined through interactions tinged with trauma, memory, abject, subordination, (m)othering, sexism (hostile, benevolent, and internalized) within patriarchy, victim blaming, and the male gaze. The feminist overtones in the novel are obvious, yet, in my opinion, it is difficult to reduce Roy to simply a feminist as her artistic project is more overarching than that. As I have been arguing, Roy's first novel is definitive in the sense that it includes the activism available in her non-fictional works. For Roy, gender is one of the

exclusionary grids. Having said that, it is also important to notice the alternative future that she considers, as is evident in the epigram: the god she ultimately aspires to have is female. I shall discuss the issues of her feminism in the Indian context towards the end of this chapter. Given her environmental concerns, recent criticism on eco-criticism has also been applied to understand her gender construct. I shall begin with a general commentary on Roy's characterization of female characters before moving on to the central character Ammu, and her relationships with her lover and children, to understand the role of gender in *The God of Small Things.* For the purpose of this chapter, it is important to reflect on the representation of women, gender relations, and the embedded sexual differences.

The depiction of the characters in the novel is intricate and realistic, but the readers feel that none of the relationships is simple. The relationships are subjected to a three-way-pull between familial love, social responsibilities, and personal dislike. This is true about the Ipe family. The most negative character of the family, Baby Kochamma, becomes treacherous to her family because of her desire for social approval and her dislikes. Outside the Ipe family, Vellya Paapen, prefers social approval over fatherly /familial love and offers to kill his own son, the Untouchable, Velutha, for sleeping with Ammu. This tension between familial love and social responsibilities is the cause for most of the conflicts in the novel.

Roy, as has been stated earlier, is an activist-writer and there is no visible tension between her two selves. She portrays in *The God of Small Things*, among other things, the opposite pulls towards society and family, and the tension created by it. Gender role in a patriarchal society is one source of tension. The women of the Ipe family are impacted upon by societal laws, customs, and values. While Ammu and Rahel try to resist the inherent sexism and othering, representing the position of Arundhati Roy, other characters such as Mammachi and Baby Kochamma comply with

patriarchy's sexism. The conflict between familial bond and social duties is one that can also be categorized as a conflict with patriarchy and other regressive forces, as it is one of the oldest power-structures in human society.

3.2 A Room of their Own

Ammu's story is tragic. Hers is a story of being imprisoned in a patriarchal society with an effort to find freedom and dignity. Death ultimately mutes her, but Roy allows death as a speech-act[1]. Her death speaks for her gender; she is the subaltern who speaks. She is the one who reminds us that another world is possible where a Syrian Upper Caste Touchable can fall in love with a Paravan Untouchable. Her gender role is defined through her interactions not only with male characters but also with the female characters such as her mother and aunt.

Ammu's family is well-off enough to send Chacko to Oxford. She was sent to Delhi. But her father Pappachi does not see any value in her education: "Pappachi insisted that a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl, so Ammu had no choice but to leave Delhi with them" (39). Her Rhodes Scholar brother Chacko returns from the UK without a degree. Instead of being reprimanded for his failure, he is pampered by his parents. Meanwhile Ammu is left to her own resources to find herself a husband as the family was unwilling to pay the dowry needed for an educated woman. She moves to a tea garden in Assam with her Hindu husband whom she marries because "She thought that anything, anyone at all, would be better than returning to Ayemenem" (*TGST* 39). Her choice of a Hindu man, someone who does not belong to her religious caste, turns out to be wrong. She soon realizes that her husband's father is a fraud while her

[1] "Speech Act theory was first introduced by J.L. Austin in *How to Do Things with Words* and further developed by American philosopher J.R. Searle. … Since 1970 speech act theory has influenced ... the practice of literary criticism. When applied to the analysis of direct discourse by a character within a literary work, it provides a systematic ... framework for identifying the unspoken presuppositions, implications, and effects of speech acts [that] competent readers and critics have always taken into account, subtly though unsystematically" ("Speech Act Theory")

husband is both abusive and a drunkard. She shows her defiance by divorcing her husband who wanted to pimp his wife to his employer Mr. Hollick in order to save his job at the tea garden. And so, Ammu returns to her family as a divorced woman.

The treatment she receives from her family is symptomatic of sexism that persists in the Keralite society that Roy depicts. Interestingly, the men in the family, despite their western education and overseas exposure, have little sympathy for women's rights. When posted in Austria, Pappachi, the entomologist, comes to know from his wife's violin teacher that his wife was "potentially concert class" (*TGST* 50). Pappachi becomes jealous and immediately terminates her music lessons. He starts torturing his wife every night to ventilate his own frustrations, which include not being able to patent a moth that he has discovered. The other reason is, as Roy tells us, "Pappachi, for his part, was having trouble coping with the ignominy of retirement. He was seventeen years older than Mammachi and realized with a shock that he was an old man when his wife was still in her prime" (*TGST* 47). Perhaps Ammu's exposure to such a toxic relationship damaged her faith in men of her own community.

After returning from Oxford, Chacko stopped his father from abusing his mother. He once twisted his father's hand when he was about to beat his mother: "'I never want this to happen again,' he told his father. 'Ever'" (*TGST* 48). Pappachi's role as the alpha male in the family was compromised, and the frustrated figure of male chauvinism stopped communicating with Soshamma, known to Rahel and Estha as Mammachi, for the rest of his life. Chacko's protectionism may appear like benevolent sexism as he is privileging his mother over his father, however, his treatment of his sister as well as his flirtatious behavior with the female factory workers will prove otherwise. His libido is justified as "Man's needs" (*TGST* 168), suggesting the inherent patriarchy in society.

Chacko's support for his mother turns out to be the turning point for the Ayemenem House as after this the family is run by the matriarch Mammachi. Mammachi's privileges come through the silencing of her husband who was 17 years older than her. Her power position is established through her founding and running of the pickles factory. Mammachi produces an unlawful banana jam in her factory; it is unlawful because the condiment occupied a liminal space between jam and jelly – and the food control authority remains confused about its identity. Similarly, Mammachi's supposed power position is both confusing and excitedly utopian, as is suggested by the name of the factory Paradise Pickles.

Women are allowed to have symbolic emancipation in their own paradise, but not in real life as Ammu will realize the hard way. The factory becomes Mammachi's room of her own, a place to preserve her memory of her musical days; the place to forget the trauma of her abusive husband. The pickles, figuratively, suggest both the spices and the preservation that she lacked in her marital life. The paradoxical state of this paradise is further elaborated by Roy:

> They used to make pickles, squashes, jams, curry powders and canned pineapples. And banana jam (illegally) after the FPO (Food Products Organization) banned it because according to their specifications it was neither jam nor jelly. Too thin for jelly and too thick for jam. An ambiguous, unclassifiable consistency, they said … Looking back now, to Rahel it seemed as though this difficulty that their family had with classification ran much deeper than the jam-jelly question … They all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tampered with the laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much. The laws that make grandmothers, uncles uncles, mothers mothers, cousins cousins, jam jam, and jelly jelly. (*TGST* 30-31)

The factory symbolically stands for a site that produces all those relationships. It is the site that gave them relational identity. I use this long quote to suggest how Roy illustrates gender construct. In non-fiction, one can see facts and details. Only in the imaginary landscape of fiction, facts can be felt. *The God of Small Things* is making relationships because there is love and unmaking them because there are laws. Laws without love will always be an antagonistic force. Mammachi excels in her business because she breaks rules out of her love for the place. In her treatment of her daughter she adheres to old laws without showing any love. Hence, the mother-daughter relationship disintegrates.

After the death of her husband, Mammachi strengthens her role as the matriarch of the house. She, however, remains tied to the patriarchal norms of ethnic and religious prejudices against the Hindus as well as against divorcees. She blames Ammu for divorcing her Hindu husband. As a mother, she shows no sympathy for the plight of her daughter. Despite being a modern entrepreneur, her cultural allegiance to the ancient Love Laws found in the *Manu Smriti* goes on to show how women themselves can be barriers in changing patriarchy. The women harbor and execute the male prejudices against divorces. This is spelt out by Baby Kochamma:

> 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 an intercommunity love marriage – Baby Kochamma chose to remain quaveringly silent on the subject. (*TGST* 45-46)

Roy's use of oxymoron is suggestive of the tension: quavering silence. Silence here is a strategy for Baby Kochamma. But the underlying implication is that it is a taboo that should not be discussed. The silencing comes from the age-old practice of the Love Laws, which holds love

marriage to be wrong. A daughter who has been involved in love marriage and consequently divorced is considered an outcast. Being doubly guilty of being involved in an inter-community love marriage, Ammu's role in the family is reduced to nothing. Two factual points need mentioning. First, when Ammu invited her parents to her wedding, they did not attend or intervene. Secondly, Ammu's courage to walk away from an abusive marriage is overlooked by her family. These are small things compared to the big thing of Love Laws in the novel. Love Laws is big enough to encapsulate questions of caste, class, religion, and gender, and contains the power to trample small things such as love or sentiment.

Once Mammachi takes over control of the house, she shows her clear favors for Chacko over Ammu, partly because her son has earlier "saved" her from the torture of Pappachi, and mainly because the son has more privileges in a patriarchal society. The mother's apathy towards her daughter generates a sense of hostility towards Ammu and her twins. Chacko calls the twins a burden on his shoulder. Even Baby Kochamma, despite being a distant relative and a dependent lodger, dislikes them and considers them intruders. Miss Mitten, their tutor, believes that the twins could change their fate by mastering English language, but they revolted by writing everything backwards.

Ammu knows how unwanted she is in her own house. She does not have what Virginia Woolf called a room of her own. She is allowed to stay on sufferance. As Roy describes, "For herself – she knew that there would be no more chances. Only Ayemenem. A front verandah and a back verandah. A hot river and pickle factory. And in the background of constant, high, whining mewl of local disapproval" (*TGST* 43). According to Hindu inheritance laws in India, which are the State laws, she has no claim to the assets. Roy allows her activist self to seep into the fiction to remind us, "Legally, this was the case because Ammu, as a daughter, had no claim to the

property" (*TGST* 57). Ammu can resort to sarcasm, "Thanks to our wonderful male chauvinist society" (57), while Chacko's can coldly and unashamedly confirm, "What's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine" (57).

As a mother, it is difficult for Ammu to see how her children are treated. The house becomes her own prison where her childhood trauma of being bullied becomes her constant companion. Once Ammu sees her childhood friend Velutha, she relapses to an earlier time to escape her present ordeal. The untouchable Velutha becomes the illusory retreat.

Ammu and Velutha were childhood friends with Velutha being three years younger than her. Even as a child Velutha was artistic. He used to make little wooden toys for Ammu. However, as an Untouchable, he was not supposed to touch the upper-caste Syrian girl. Hence, he would put the toys in her outstretched palm without touching her. Ammu became fond of him and eventually stopped reaching out her palm to accept the toys, allowing Velutha to touch her. Even as a child, Ammu ignored the social taboos to enjoy the small things of life. What stands in the way of touching the untouchable is a set of rules that goes back hundreds of years, the Love Laws. Roy points out the oxymoron in these ancient set of rules prescribed in Vedic scriptures that decides, "who should be loved, and how. And how much" (*TGST* 33).

Velutha first appeared in the text when the family was on its way to the Cinema. He was parading with his comrades, donning a red flag. He had returned to Ayemenem to work in Mammachi's pickle factory as a carpenter. The physical change in Velutha is remarkable. The omniscient narrator reveals how Ammu's appreciation of his physique involves longings of a sexual nature:

> She saw the ridges of muscle on Velutha's stomach grow taut and rise under his skin like the divisions on a slab of chocolate. She wondered at how his body had changed – so

> quietly, from a flat-muscled boy's body into a man's body. Contoured and hard. A swimmer's body. A swimmer-carpenter's body. Polished with a high-wax body polish. He had high cheekbones and a white, sudden smile. (*TGST* 80-81)

Ammu's attraction for Velutha is driven by her bodily needs, her libido. While Mammachi approves Chacko's "Men's Needs," she has no concern for her daughter's "woman's needs." When the affair becomes public, Mammachi is disgusted by her daughter's behavior. She describes the act thus: "Like a dog with a bitch on heat" (*TGST* 257-258), and "locked away [Ammu] like the family lunatic in a medieval household" (*TGST* 252). Ammu thus becomes the madwoman in the attic, whose madness is related to the hysteria, the wandering uterus. Luce Irigaray, in her *Speculum of the Other Woman*, has shown how historically patriarchy uses biology to justify women's destiny, starting with Plato who explained hysteria is a womanly disease that originated from lust.

However, the language used by Roy to speak-act Ammu's desire can be construed as a deconstruction of phallocentric patriarchy. Helene Cixous, for one, has taught us that with the use of language one can break the shackles of binaries that patriarchy imposed on the second sex: active/passive, high/low, parole/ecriture, and so on. Cixous demands a new kind of language for female writers to express their femininity. Language should not privilege linear rational argument or logocentrism and initiate a new kind of writing , ecriture feminine or feminine writing.

Roy's explicit sexuality has been dubbed as obscene. The male readership is not used to seeing such candid articulation of sexuality. But once we look at the way Mammachi, empowered with patriarchal agency, revolts against sexual thoughts, we realize that Roy is using her language strategically. Her choice of diction is deliberate, as Ammu reminds Rahel that careless words

"make people love you a little less" (*TGST* 112). I shall come to her view on feminism towards the end of this chapter.

In fact, Mammachi's thought of Ammu having a sexual act with Velutha provides an interesting contrast of how sexuality is viewed. She expresses her abject, as Julia Kristeva would have it, by mentioning that the thought was so repulsive that she would vomit. But a close analysis of the graphic nature of her thought reveals a suppressed sexuality that she never had in her marriage. Mammachi visualizes:

> She thought of her naked, coupling in the mud with a man who was nothing but a filthy coolie. She imagined it in vivid detail: a Paravan's coarse black hand on her daughter's breast. His mouth on hers. His black hips jerking between her parted legs. The sound of their breathing. His particular Paravan smell. Like animals, Mammachi thought and nearly vomited. (*TGST* 257).

It was Mammachi who appointed the handyman Velutha to fix the machines in her pickles factory, even though the other touchable workers were not willing to share the workplace with an untouchable. Mammachi's sexually charged description is limited by her sense of righteousness depicted in the ancient scriptures. Love Laws is the Althusserian Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) that endorses patriarchal views in Indian Society, whereas, the second generation Ammu has the courage to transgress Love Laws and act on her impulses to think the unthinkable. The repressive state apparatus of society including the Police reacts to the scandal by making sure that Velutha receives the severest punishment for this act of transgression. Velutha was first arrested for the disappearance of Sophie Mol.

Mammachi lodges a complaint against Velutha for the kidnapping and raping of Ammu. But the instigation came from Baby Kochamma who hated Velutha for being a Naxalite, someone

who made her wave a red flag in a rally. Once again, we come to a position where women themselves are barring another woman from responding to her biological urges. Ammu tries to offer an alibi as at the time of Sophie Mol's death she was with him. But she is called a "veshya" (prostitute) by the police. After Sophie Mol's body is found and cremated, Ammu is called back to the police station for further enquiry and abused by the officer: "He said the police … didn't take statements from *veshyas* or their illegitimate children" (*TGST* 8). Baby Kochamma forces Estha to offer a different story supporting Mammachi's original complaint. Velutha is brutally killed in police custody. In this manner, Baby Kochamma becomes the instrument that ends Velutha's life.

Ammu remained defiant and unapologetic of her relationship with Velutha. Her tragic end once again reminds readers of the space denied to women in society. Chacko expels her from the house, leading to her slow death:

> Ammu died in a grimy room in the Bharat Lodge in Alleppey, 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. (*TGST* 161)

Ammu does not even get the proper ritual that she deserved as an upper-caste Christian. Instead, Chacko covers her body in a pale bed-sheet, puts her on a stretcher, and takes her to an electric crematorium for the final rites. Ammu did not have the Church space she had while attending Sophie Mol's funeral. Even at that time she was not allowed to stand with the rest.

By giving agency to Mammachi and Baby Kochamma, Roy does not necessarily present them as empowered women. They are also subjected to patriarchal norms. They are puppets in a society where they can only promote its inherent sexism and biases. Ammu and Velutha die because of

the hidden morality of patriarchal interpellation in society. They are the victims of a hypocritical society that has its double standards. We are told how Pappachi, the Imperial Entomologist, was admired in society for his donations to orphanages and leprosy clinics. But the same man, "alone with his wife and children [would] [turn] into a monstrous bully, with a streak of vicious cunning. They were beaten, humiliated and then made to suffer" (*TGST* 180). We are told how Chacko can maintain illicit affairs with factory women out of his "Man's Needs." "Neither Mammachi nor Baby Kochamma saw any contradiction between Chacko's Marxist mind and feudal libido," but the same duo denies his sister Ammu such freedom (*TGST* 168).

3.3 Body Politics

It is men's perverted need that is responsible for much of the chaos in *The God of Small Things*. The plot of Roy's novel can be explained through chaos theory, the proverbial butterfly on the wheel, where the slightest denomination can change the motion of an object leading to total chaos. The molestation of Estha is one such incident. When the Ipe family went to watch a movie before picking up Sophie Mol, Estha was attracted by the juice being sold by the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man. The man was a pedophile who forced Estha to masturbate him, and later hands an ice-cream to him saying that he knows where the child lives. Estha is traumatized and wants to escape his fear by crossing the river to go to another house far away from the clutch of the pervert. The boat capsizes, killing Sophie Mol and exposing the Velutha-Ammu affair. Thus, the apparently simple act has a lasting impact on the tragic outcome of the novel. The Orangedrink Lemondrink Man can also be a candidate for the god of small things. His molestation of the body is an act of terror that not only violates social norms but also damages an individual for good.

Seen from another perspective, this molestation shows how, in a patriarchal, modern capitalist society, children, even male children, are vulnerable. Secondly, a patriarchal capitalist

state treats its women and children as components and elements of a system and the state itself is a sort of mechanical-contractual organization which does not have a human face. Thirdly, in such a capitalist state and society, sexuality is regulated so that it does not lead to any challenge to it and this means that this kind of a state and society is basically repressive which contributes to incidents of women and child molestation. Roy seems to be indicating that the existing type of gendered state and society needs to be replaced to minimize if not eliminate the kind of abuse that Estha had to suffer.

The Ammu-Velutha union is another butterfly on a wheel moment that is responsible for the chaotic world of Roy's novel. The action that takes place between individual bodies affect the entire community. Unable to accept the touchable/untouchable relationship, the patriarchal machinery uses the political system to bring accusations of rape and kidnapping against Velutha. Putting the affair and the union at the center of *The God of Small Things*, Roy and many of the critics in their readings of the novel have not just catered to the desire for sensationalism. They have perhaps pointed at two of the oldest types of crime, larceny and rape. They are connected with two kinds of possessions – material possessions and the female body. Perhaps, from very early on, wealth and the female body have been thought of as sites for conquest and possession. Velutha, as a low-caste, has no right over the body of an upper caste woman. Baby Kochamma and Mammachi want Velutha to be punished for his desire to occupy Ammu's body. As a communist, private ownership is not Velutha's objective. As a proper proletariat, Velutha does not believe in the concept of private property, and that also contributes to the non-exploitative, non-coercive union between Ammu and Velutha. Subverting this truth, their enemies accuse Velutha of kidnapping and attempted rape. On the other hand, when Ammu goes to the police station, the policemen there call her a veshya, a prostitute. Ironically, Ammu walks out of her marriage because

her husband wanted to prostitute her to a white man. The conflict between the powerful and the powerless that Arundhati Roy talks about has this gendered aspect.

The violation of the female body is symbolically used to represent the violation of the social body. It becomes obvious when Roy connects the assault on Ammu and her children by her Bengali-Hindu husband with the Liberation War of Bangladesh when millions of innocent women and children had to escape from their home, to seek shelter at the advent of violence: "When his bouts of violence began to include the children, and the war with Pakistan began, Ammu left her husband and returned, unwelcome, to her parents in Ayemenem" (*TGST* 42).

Sometimes the body can be colonized with thoughts. Baby Kochamma is a case in point. The odd spinster early on in her life falls in love with a Roman Catholic priest, Father Mulligan. She converts to Roman Catholicism to be close to him. Once Father Mulligan is transferred, her father sends her to America to do a diploma in Ornamental Gardening. She returns to India after the death of her father and starts living with Mammachi. Baby Kochamma gradually becomes fixated on watching wars on TV. Her cruelty can be attributed to her unrequited love and longing. The inherent violence that she carried inside is morphed into cynicism with which she acts against Velutha.

3.4 The Muted Subaltern

After the loss of their mother, the twins learn to live their adolescent lives on their own. There is no parental guidance to support them through the rites of passage to adulthood. They just had the memory of a maternal space, a promise that they made to their mother that they would always love each other – which in a way influences their metamorphoses.

The transfiguration of the body is an important theme in *The God of Small Things*. We have already seen how Velutha and Ammu defy their gender roles. Ammu's revolt within a patriarchy

can be construed as masculine, while Velutha's strong masculine physique is complemented by his softer feminine side. He is quite natural with children. He has been Ammu's playmate as a child, and later as an adult, he acts as a playmate of the twins. The twins see him as an equal in the way he associates with the world of toys and imagination. The role reversal is true for Mammachi who assumed a patriarchal role while managing the factory. Rahel and Ammu show their independence in choosing their partners, and both of them initiate the sexual act. Ammu approaches Velutha: "A luminous woman opened herself to a luminous man …. He sailed on her waters" (*TGST* 336-37). Rahel approaches Estha, which is described by Roy thus: "They were strangers who had met in a chance encounter … There is very little that anyone could say to clarify what happened next" (*TGST* 327-28).

Joëlle Célérier-Vitasse makes a list of textual instances in which Rahel wants to reject her female identity. She wanted to do so when her teachers "whispered to each other [it was] *as though she didn't know how to be a girl*" (*TGST* 17). In addition, Célérier-Vitasse adds, "in the Abhilash Talkies … she identifies herself with the film actor in *The Sound of Music* whereas Estha compares himself with Julie Andrews … later on, she starts looking like Estha when their great-aunt 'noticed the same eerie stealth, the ability to keep very still and very quiet that Estha seemed to have mastered'" ("The Blurring of Frontiers").

Comparing Roy's style with Kathakkali dance-drama, Célérier-Vitasse notices the blurring of gender borders in Estha too. He terms Estha as an effeminate man:

> Estha, the wardrobe-master, "the draping expert," excels in the art of disguise: they "looked like three raccoons to pass off as Hindu ladies" (189); he has got "a nun's voice, as clear as clean water" (101), "a clear soprano" (197), and he does not jib at doing the housework

at his father's: "He did the sweeping, swabbing and all the laundry. He learned to cook and shop for vegetables" (11), refusing masculine privileges. ("The Blurring of Frontiers")

Rahel and Estha, the twins, are also victimized by the big figures in *The God of Small Things*. They are marginalized in their grandmother's house by Mammachi; her son, Chacko; the maid servant Kochu Maria; and all other members of the house. When Margaret and Sophie Mol come to visit them, people in the house show special favor to the half-white child: "There would be two flasks of water. Boiled water for Margaret Kochamma and Sophie Mol, tap water for everybody else" (*TGST* 48). The divorced Margaret would still be called Kochamma, as if she was still the daughter-in-law of the house. As a white woman, her status seems to be different from the other divorcee in the house – Ammu. Estha gets molested by the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man at the movie theatre. Instinctively, the child knows that no one will protect him, and his condition is no better than his neglected mother. The trauma of being molested, followed by the threat from the pedophile perpetrator, causes Estha to behave strangely.

Only Rahel, deeply attached to him, understands the wounds that he carries. The twins reunite twenty three years later, after the death of Ammu and after Estha is returned by his father before migrating to Australia. The patriarchy in Keralite society does not provide shelter to Estha, while the matriarchy at Ayemenem House ignores him. Rahel frees herself of the encumbrance of a husband in America and returns to take care of Estha in Ayemenem House. This union does not mean a family union only, rather it speaks of the muted subalternity. The incestuous union is a protest against the Love Laws that killed Ammu and Velutha.

The affair between Ammu and Velutha lasted for about two weeks, a lunar cycle, before being found out by Vellya who saw his son standing "skin to skin" with Ammu in the moonlight (*TGST* 255). He shares this with Mammachi out of fear. His initial tears turned to terror as he

became scared of the outcome of such a transgression. But the lovers had no concern for their future. They knew that there was no future for them, as the narrator tells us: "Even later, on the thirteen nights that followed this one, instinctively they stuck to the Small Things. The Big Things ever lurked inside. They knew that there was nowhere for them to go. They had nothing. No future. So they stuck to the small things" (*TGST* 338).

It is no coincidence that all four subalterns in the novel reverse their gender roles to challenge the male authority, the big things that rule society in the name of the father. Ammu, Velutha, Rahel, and Estha are the small objects, the Lacanian *objet petit a*, to challenge the big things. The stories of Ammu, the twins, and Velutha are the stories that occupy an ideal space. Their togetherness, the time they spent together, is devoid of domination and repression. The four members of this family are playmates of each other. The relation between Ammu, the sympathizer with all kinds of subalterns, and Velutha, the "God of Small Things," is non-hierarchical. Ammu and Velutha challenge the powerful through their liaison and forming this family of the excluded and the marginalized, and thus try to resist the domineering ones. Rahel and Estha challenge and resist the powers that be through their incestuous union and creating their own micro-family, against the taboo of incest, enshrined in the Love Laws.

These two generations of forbidden lovers speak up against their subordination through their action. That for me is the basis of Roy's feminism. She envisions a society that is gender-sensitive. However, the plurality of repressive structures requires a multifaceted liberationist system, one that will physically unite not only the touchable Ammu and untouchable Velutha, but also the twins and their emotional needs.

Roy's overwhelming concern for the caste system cannot be described under the Eurocentric feminism. Maybe we need to look at a type of female space in the Indian context which takes both the local culture and nature into consideration.

3.5 Alternative Female Space

Roy as an Indian feminist works within the parameters of Indian civilization and culture. It is the whole human personality of a woman that is targeted for emancipation by Roy and not only women's financial/social condition. This approach of Roy's is both holistic and culture specific. Velutha, Ammu, and the twins are victims of the society, yet their resistance is passive. Their non-violent approach is akin to Gandhian Satyagrahis[2]. In the fictional space, Roy presents three generations of women dealing with different types of abuse. Mammachi frees herself by establishing a pickles factory, Ammu frees herself by getting into an intra-community marriage and then by the sexual act with an untouchable, while Rahel does so by filling her emotional void with her love for her twin.

The factory that Mammachi was running so successfully is ruined once Chacko tries to make it profitable. He becomes the symbolic Satan in the paradise to cause its fall. The view that the patriarchal world order is detrimental to our environment is the mainstay of eco-criticism. This is the other alternative space in which the characters can be set. Kunhi and Kunhi illustrate the point in their eco-critical reading of Roy's novel by identifying the connections between human beings, plants, and animals. Ammu, for instance, is compared to the river that passes by Ayemenem.

[2] The Editors of *Encyclopedia Britannica* in their entry on Satyagraha write that it meant in Sanskrit and Hindi, to hold onto the truth. The concept was introduced in early twentieth century by Mahatma Gandhi to mean a "determined but nonviolent resistance to evil" (Satyagraha Philosophy).

Her romance with Velutha is set by the river. Velutha is subject to the female gaze as Ammu admires his body coming out of the river. The description makes the male body an organic growth of nature that has been crafted by history. Ammu muses,

> As he rose from the dark river and walked up the stone steps, she saw that the world they stood in was his. That he belonged to him. The water. The mud. The trees. The fish. The stars. He moved so easily through it. As she watched him she understood the quality of his beauty. How his labour had shaped him. How the wood he fashioned had fashioned him. Each plank he planned, each nail he drove, each thing he made, had moulded him. Had left its stamp on him. Had given him his strength supple grace. (*TGST* 333-334)

The diction used to describe Velutha as an object of nature has allowed eco-critics to look for gendered nature in Roy's novel. Ammu is compared to the river, and when Estha returns, she finds the river polluted. It carries the memory of a forbidden love that was muted by the patriarchal agency. The oppression and repression meted out to the subaltern women characters in *The God of Small Things* is replicated symbolically in the environmental pollution that the river is subjected to. Nature, which was considered symbolically as part of Mother Nature or Mother Earth in many pre-colonial traditional societies, went through many a cataclysmic holocausts in the modern capitalist period. Like the molestation of Ammu in the police station, nature was continuously maltreated, symbolically molested, and dishonored in the capitalist and late-capitalist periods.

There is something primordial in the way Velutha is described. It is both exotic and erotic, following the Othering tradition that Edward Said has expounded in *Orientalism*. It seems Roy is writing back to the West to suggest that women of the Indian subcontinent are not the docile other. They can return the male gaze too.

In her seminal essay, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," Chandra Mohanty points out the follies of Eurocentric feminism. She finds the West guilty of reproducing the unequal power relations, albeit unconsciously, that they are trying to resist. Mohanty shows how the western eye views Third World women in stereotypical terms to suggest they are all religious, family-oriented, illiterate and domestic. This they do to pit Third World women as "the other" of Europe, where women are supposedly more progressive and modern. Furthermore, Mohanty reacts against how western feminists tend to reduce Third World women to a monolithic entity, where women are nothing more than powerless exploited objects and victims while males are the powerful exploiters. Such views also ignore both the relationships between women and different kinds of relationships between women and men.

Roy's novel offers a different perspective of Third World women. Here women are not without desires. Women are both victims and perpetrators of crime. Women take charge in a relationship. The male-female dichotomy is not standardized, rather there is a plurality of relationships in the novel. The female characters in the novel are deeply divided by boundaries like class, caste, and religion. Instead of allowing the First World to speak for this subordinated group, Roy uses her fictive space to allow the women to speak for themselves with their actions.

Roy's criticism of Western feminism becomes clear in her critique of the French government's recent ban on the head scarf. I quote in full:

> When, as happened recently in France, an attempt is made to coerce women out of the burka rather than creating a situation in which a woman can choose what she wishes to do, it's not about liberating her but about unclothing her. It becomes an act of humiliation and cultural imperialism. Coercing a woman out of her burka is as bad as coercing her into one. It's not about the burka. It's about the coercion. Viewing gender in this way, shorn of

> social, political, and economic context, makes it an issue of identity, a battle of props and costumes. It's what allowed the US government to use Western feminist liberal groups as moral cover when it invaded Afghanistan in 2001. Afghan women were (and are) in terrible trouble under the Taliban. But dropping daisy cutters on them was not going to solve the problem. (*Capitalism: A Ghost Story*)

Roy makes it clear that western feminism often gives lip service to women's conditions by looking at some external factors. Without getting into the "social, political, and economic context," the issue of identity cannot be addressed.

Similarly, in my dissertation, I am arguing that, in the Indian context, the identity of a woman is tinged with various exclusionary grids. For the purpose of categorization, I have identified three: caste, class, and gender in Roy's novel. It is true that Roy is adopting a feminist writing to reverse the male gaze, it is true that Roy is trying to enact a speak-act by giving voice to the subalterns, it is true that Roy is engaging with the Love Laws to break the negative duality that binds women, it is true that Roy has used various western literary allusions in her text, still it is evident that she is trying to carve a style of her own. The issue of gender is as diabolical as the jam-jelly metaphor: it is hard to tell whether it is too thick or too thin.

CHAPTER 4: THE CURIOUS CASE OF CLASS IN *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*

4.1 "Caste is Class, Comrades"

In proving my hypothesis that caste is the most dominant cause of subalternity in *The God of Small Things*, I have to sift class from caste. In most of the readings, including those which focus on the Dalit (untouchable) elements of the text, do not necessarily distinguish the two issues. The dichotomy can best be explained by the "jam-jelly" metaphor that Roy used with reference to Mammachi's product, of which the sanctioning authority is never sure as its thickness defies any form of classification. It is my contention that the uniqueness of caste neither allows Roy to align herself fully with the subaltern group that has its ideological sympathy for the Naxalite Movement nor makes her wholeheartedly subscribe to Eurocentric feminism that does not take contextual history and politics into consideration.

The convoluted nature of the issue is expressed in Comrade Pillai's public and private stance on class. In public he opts for an inclusive policy on caste to tell others, "Caste is Class, Comrades" (*TGST* 281). In private, he confesses to Chacko, "You see, Comrade, from local standpoint, these caste issues are very deep rooted. … It is conditioning they have from birth. This I myself have told them is wrong. But frankly speaking Comrade, Change is one thing. Acceptance is another" (*TGST* 278-9).

The Marxist dream of morphing society into a classless state is defeated by the "deep-rooted" division based on four *varnas* (castes) within the community. While the Marxists expect change through revolutions and class struggles, their attitude towards acceptance of people from low-caste remains conservative. Roy makes no secret of it as she makes her narrator say, "The real secret was that communism crept into Kerala insidiously. A reformist movement that never overtly questioned the traditional values of a caste-ridden, extremely traditional community" (64).

The narrator's use of "crept," "insidiously" suggests the subtle and harmful way Roy thinks left politics has made its entry into South India. The seven-party anti-Congress coalition Marxist government that ran Kerala never attempted any real "reformist movement" that would address the cancerous caste question that disintegrates society from within. The chameleon-like Comrade Pillai can blend into the power structure without revealing his true colors (that is, *varna*); he can put his hand in "History's waiting glove" (*TGST* 281). The novel's 1969 backdrop is telling of the time that divided the communist party from within, and the revolutionary elements in the party felt that they were betrayed by those who compromised their ideology by joining the coalition government.

The radicalization of the communist party was influenced by the rift between the Chinese and the Soviets. In India those communist groups who were with China and the line of Comrade Mao became known as the Maoists. A group among the Maoists adopted the line of violent class struggle in West Bengal in the region called Naxalbari in the Darjeeling district under the state of West Bengal. Although the movement ultimately failed in its effort to overthrow the government, it divided the Communist Party of India in two segments: the mainstream one adopting parliamentary democracy and the other, armed struggles. John Harriss sums it up thus:

> Those Marxist intellectuals who led a peasant uprising against landlords in the area of Naxalbari in northern West Bengal in 1967 argued against participation in parliamentary democracy and against mass organization, in favour of armed struggle. They sought to follow the example of the Chinese communists, led by Mao Zedong, in "liberating" rural areas and then encircling and taking the towns. Their actions sometimes degenerated into indiscriminate violence following from the injunction of Charu Mazumdar, who had emerged as the movement's leader, to undertake "annihilation of class enemies." (312-313)

The stated objective of this peasant uprising includes a horizontal mobilization of territories, caste, class, kinship. The incident saw radicalization of Kolkata based student intelligentsia, and eventually spread along the eastern, central and southern parts of India which came to be known as the "red corridor." The violent consequence of the Naxalbari insurgency led to the killing of thousands of activists and innocent civilians. Charu Mazumdar formed the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) to dissociate their movement from the Communist Party of India. The announcement was made under the banner of "All India Co-ordination Committee of Communist Revolutionaries." Their declaration, read,

> The All India Co-ordination Committee of Communist Revolutionaries, which met in a plenary session from 19th to 22nd April 1969, announces the formation of the revolutionary party, Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) – based on the thought of Mao Tse-tung on 22nd April 1969, the one- hundredth birthday of Great Lenin – a task it set itself eighteen months ago, in November 1967 – and also announces its own dissolution after setting up a Central Organising Committee to hold Congress at an appropriate time. (Mohan 1119)

Kanui Sanyal, the tribal leader who spearheaded the Naxalbari uprising, made the declaration at the May Day rally held in Calcutta. Mohan adds,

> The formation of this party did not, however, lead to the unification of all the Maoist groups in India. Sizeable groups of Communist Revolutionaries, loyal to Peking, remained outside its fold – not only in Andhra and Kerala but also in West Bengal. The CPI (M-L) has attracted the most attention because it has organised more "actions" of a spectacular nature than the others and because it seems to be the group that is most favoured by Peking. (1119)

With several factions of Marxist dissidents in operation, it is difficult to say which group has Roy's sympathy. Suffice it to say, she was not a big supporter of CPI (Marx) that has become part of the state machinery by forming a coalition government. Roy's endorsement of Dalit scholar Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, known for his ideological opposition to mainstream Marxism, may help us understand Roy's political orientation. She wrote "The Doctor and the Saint," a long essay written as an introduction to B.R. Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste* and later published as a book by Navayana Publishers Delhi. She praises Ambedkar for his critical insight into Marxism's inefficacy in the Indian context. B.R. Ambedkar aptly remarked, "Had Karl Marx been born in India and had written his famous treatise *Das Capital* sitting in India, he would have had to write it in an entirely different fashion" ("Marx in Ambedkar's thoughts"). Ambedkar pointed out that Marx's view of the abolishment of private ownership would never appeal to the class-conscious Indians whose social privileges depend on property and ownership and who think that the lower caste has been born to serve the upper castes.

The hypocritical communists in Roy's novel subscribes to similar views. Interestingly, the launch of Ambedkar's book forewarded by Roy had to be cancelled because radical Dalits labelled Roy as a Maoist sympathizer and a non-Dalit who had no right to talk on their issue ("Why Dalit radicals don't want Arundhati Roy to write about Ambedkar"). Yet it takes the creative genius and linguistic skills of Roy to shed light on Velutha's cause. Velutha's brutal death in police custody is reminiscent of the way Naxalites were subjected to extra-judicial killings. Velutha is an enemy of the state both because of his radical politics that aims at a classless society and because of his transgression of caste boundary. Velutha, the skilled worker with the potential of social mobility, is trampled down because he imagined the unimaginable; he touched someone who was "untouchable" for him. Velutha is a member of the proletariat by dint of his employment in a

factory. But in India, the subaltern is not a product of industrial revolution; his social position is determined by his birth. Therefore, the victimization of Velutha epitomizes the complicity of Indian politics, particularly the politics of Brahminic structuralization that harbors the four varnas as outlined in *Manu Smriti*. I shall take up this idea in the next chapter with specific focus on Ambedkar.

From a Marxist point-of-view, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat seem to be the most obvious class categories. I shall however argue that Roy does not present these categories in binary terms. The chemistry between these groups change when caste is applied as a catalyst. The novel distinctly promotes another categorization of class: touchable and untouchable. Touch is used not necessarily as a conceptual framework to underline the intangible racial issue, it is also used as tactile sensation and described in tangential and material terms in the novel. I will suggest that the class categories in the novel are fluid and interchangeable in nature. As already mentioned, this is partly because of the local context of the class issue. While Marxism and Christianity promote class and brotherhood as universal categories, in Indian context they assume a very regional approach. Analogous to Marxism, Christianity, a world religion that does not distinguish between the children of God, has adopted a local hue in Kerala. The Church built by the Syrian Christians are divided into Touchable and Untouchable branches; the low caste converted Christians were not allowed to pray with the upper class Christians. The syncretic nuance of Christianity parallels the way Marxism has become diluted in India. For Roy, both organized religion and orthodox Marxism fail to deliver the respective religious and political emancipation that their discourses promise. She uses fiction for an imaginative emancipation.

Arundhati Roy's depiction of communists and critique of communism has been analyzed by Brahma Dutt Sharma in his essay, "Communism in the Eyes of Arundhati Roy." In this

meticulously written and historically substantiated essay, Sharma has supported and substantiated Roy's critiques. Taking up Roy's points one by one, Brahma Dutt Sharma finds fault with communism as a system, as an ideology, as a practical plan for administration. Written from a traditional or conservative point of view, Sharma presents a devastating critique of things like the land-distribution among the landless project. Sharma points out the ethical problem in "confiscating" the lands of the landlord or making the landlords "give up" their land for the poor. He also presents and criticizes the unethical behaviours of the workers and questions the moral foundations of Communism and claims to explain Roy's reservations about communism. The essay is a well-written piece and logically consistent. What it lacks, however, is the answer to the question as to what Roy thinks of class and equality. The essay focuses mainly on *TGST* and does not bring into its purview the political essays and this is a big limitation. Roy's activism is also not discussed by the essayist. As my thesis brings into the discussion the political essays and secondary materials on *TGST*, which are relevant for understanding the text, this thesis provides a more comprehensive view on class and subalternity.

For the purpose of this chapter, I shall begin with the political ideology to understand the social class divisions in the textual world portrayed by Roy as well as to examine the impact of the social class on the characters. Then, I will try to explain Roy's similarities and differences with the local brand of Marxist Subaltern Group.

4.2 The Fluid Class Categories in *TGST*

The political context of the novel *The God of Small Things* involves the Communist Party coming to power in Kerala. Roy's critique of the failings of the political system demands that we explain the class issue in Marxian terms. For Karl Marx class is a phenomenon where the control over the means of production determines the economic basis for stratification. Through his material

dialectics, Marx identifies different stages in history where the dominant group assumes supremacy over others by controlling the means of production of food and goods. The discrepancy based on the recourse to resources makes class struggles inevitable. Marx believed that the ultimate change will come through the end of class struggles through revolutions. Marx's colleague Lenin explains:

> Class is large groups of people differing from each other by the place they occupy in a historically determined system of social production, by their relation (in most cases fixed and formulated by law) to the means of production, by their role in the social organization of labor and consequently, and by the dimensions of the share of social wealth of which they dispose and the mode of acquiring it. (qtd. in Utomo 421)

There are certain loopholes in these arguments that become clear in the context of the novel. From an Orthodox Marxist point of view, Pappachi the Imperial Entomologist, for instance, may not necessarily qualify for the bourgeoisie or upper class as he is a government employee. Yet the power he asserts in society makes him a candidate for the Upper Class. By the same token, Mammachi and Chacko as proprietors of the pickles factory own the means of production, and therefore qualify for the bourgeoisie. Meanwhile, the workers in the factory including the trade union leaders readily fall into the proletariat working class. However, as an owner of a printing press and the power he asserts in society, Comrade Pillai is a middle class man. His proximity to state machinery as well as his control over his fellow workers instill the dream of overthrowing Chacko from the factory.

Let me illustrate the fluidity of class categories in the text with reference to the main characters. Strictly speaking, Pappachi, Mammachi, Chacko, Ammu, Baby Kochamma, Estha, and Rahel all belong to the upper class as they are born into a Syrian Christian household which,

in Kerala, symbolizes prestige, privilege, and wealth. The Syrian Christians in Kerala are proud of their ancient heritage as they believe themselves to be one of the earliest Christians in the world. They were supposedly converted by St. Thomas, one of the Apostles of Jesus Christ who came to the Kerala port city of Malankara in 52 AD. St. Thomas performed a miracle to impress the local Brahmins, resulting in their baptism. The converted upper class Hindus maintained their caste superiority, which has been further bolstered by their Christian ancestry. In her memoir, *From Chattas to Churindas: Syrian Christian Religious Minorities in a Secular Indian State*, Sonja Thomas recalls, "My mother told me that us Christians would have servants to sweep the ground before us as we walked so we would not step on any bugs. We were just like upper-caste Hindus" (36). The prestige factor attached to a supposedly higher religion explains why a secular religion such as Christianity gets trapped in India's class stratification. Roy shares a similar observation on the treatment of the downtrodden Dalit:

> Pappachi would not allow Paravans into the house. Nobody would. They were not allowed to touch anything that Touchables touched. Caste Hindus and Caste Christians. Mammachi told Estha and Rahel that she could remember a time, in her girlhood, when 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. (*TGST* 73-74)

As the novel progresses we see how some of these Syrian Christians are relegated to the rank of lower working class, if not worse. The widow Ammu and the spinster Baby Kochamma lose their positions in the family because of their marital and property status. In case of Baby Kochamma, that changes once she becomes a shadow matriarch in the family.

Pappachi's wealth, education, and employment, on the other hand, make him a true member of the upper social class in Ayemenem, which is a rural part of Kerala. He maintains the aura of his class by donating to an orphanage or leprosy clinic while he is in Europe. After his demise, the English daily *Indian Express* publishes the news of his death and funeral, which shows the perks of an upper class bourgeoisie.

His wife Soshomma is known in the novel as Mammachi, as that is the name used by the children to address their grandmother. Mammachi's marriage to Pappachi makes her a member of the upper class. But before owning the pickles factory, she did not have any means of production. In a marital relationship, she is the weaker sex who receives constant beatings from her husband. The veneer of the upper class evaporates as we realize Mammachi does not have any agency; in Austria she could not pursue her artistic interest in violin lessons. It is only after Chacko's intervention that Mammachi becomes the matriarch in the house. Then again, Chacko twists his father's arm is a form of violent touch that makes Mammachi a symbolic "untouchable" for Pappachi: "He never touched Mammachi again. But he never spoke to her either as long as he lived" (*TGST* 23).

The first born of Pappachi and Mammachi, Chacko, is privileged as a member of the Ipe family. His status as a Rhodes Scholar who went to Oxford hides his status of a failed student and failed husband. He marries a waitress, a member of the working class, while in England. He becomes a college lecturer in India and then leaves his job to help his mother at the pickles factory. The mobility in his class is conflicted by the sexual exploitation of his female workers: "He would call pretty women who worked in the factory to his room, and on the pretext of lecturing them on labor rights and trade union law, flirt with them outrageously" (*TGST* 31). Chacko is very

conscious of his inheritance law as he constantly reminds Ammu of his property rights: "My factory, my pineapples, my pickles" (*TGST* 57).

Chacko, "the self-proclaimed Marxist" (Roy 65), pursues his class interest and promotes his position in the semi-capitalist, semi-feudal society. Instead of becoming a progressive/productive bourgeois, Chacko proves himself to be a kind of lumpen who keeps on mouthing nativist or nationalist ideas like his hatred of Anglophilia referring to the shadowy History House on the other side of the river. Despite his exposure to an advanced capitalist society, state and culture, Chacko remains proud of his superior class in the Indian society. He becomes a "sleeping partner" of his mother's business and eventually takes control to suggest his patriarchal domination bolstered by capitalism. Despite being the sole policy maker for Paradise Pickles, Chacko cannot make it a successful capitalist enterprise and thus remains a semi-feudal or a petty bourgeois. We are told that at last he leaves India and settles in Canada where he runs, ironically, an "unsuccessful antique business" (*TGST* 15). Chacko's migration to the capitalist West reveals his opportunism and lumpen characteristics. Like his father, his last few days end in misery, which he foreshadowed, admitting, "Our dreams [are] never big enough. Our lives [are] never important enough to matter" (*TGST* 53).

Baby Kochamma comes to stay with the Ipe family after being dejected in love and losing her father. She went to the US to study ornamental gardening, and is a member of the upper class. Her treatment at the police station shows the privileges that she enjoys in the community. Whereas Ammu the real daughter of the house is touted as "veshya" for her liaison with an untouchable, Baby Kochamma is treated almost like a queen by the same police officer. As a permanent guest in the Ipe house, as the grand aunt of Ammu, she tried to play that role of a proxy-matriarch. She uses her age and family position to destroy both Ammu and Velutha. In Velutha's radical politics

she noticed the encroaching danger that the bourgeoisie might face. Her paranoia that the Naxalites would take over and cause "ethnic cleansing, famine and genocide as direct threats to her furniture" (28) shows her insecurities. Similarly, the mixed-blood twins threaten her concept of religious purity that she has assumed. Her racial prejudice is revealed in her comments on the Hindus:

> "I tell you, these Hindus,' Baby Kochamma said piously. 'They have no sense of privacy."
>
> "They have horns and scaly skins," Chacko said sarcastically, "and I've heard that their babies hatch from eggs." (*TGST* 86)

This is at odds with her conversion to sisterhood that she did out of love for a priest. There is no spirituality left in her to view humans as humans. She denounced material possessions to become a nun: "As a young woman she had renounced the material world, and now, as an old one, she seemed to embrace it" (*TGST* 22). The abnormal rejection and embrace of the material and materialistic world implies the primacy of class in her mind. She thinks that she has control over material possessions, which makes her the bourgeoisie that she claims to be. Symbolically, she puts on the jewelry of Mammachi after her death to show that she has become the bourgeoisie matriarch of the house.

The central female character in this tragic novel is Ammu, who belongs to the bourgeoisie or petty bourgeoisie class. However, because of her gender and practical socio-economic reality, she becomes the downtrodden or the subaltern, if not the proletariat. Ammu is reduced to lower class even before she came in contact with Velutha as she was involved in an inter-community love marriage. As a divorced woman, her contributions to their family business were never recognized. She had no claim to family property. Ammu's degradation is evident in her attempt to leave the family name, which later implicates the identity of her children. Ammu's deteriorated economic condition after leaving the Ayemenem House is suggested by her illness: "[She] came

back to Ayemenem with asthma and a rattle in her chest that sounded like a faraway man shouting" (*TGST* 76). Her poverty causes her to lose her physical luster, and eventually, her death. After her death, the Church refuses to bury her as a Christian. She was cremated where the common people and beggars were given their last rites. Chacko received the tag number of her cremation slip: Q498673. This is a reminder of the tag attached to the dead body of a Naxalite in Mahasweta Devi's novella *Hajar Churashir Ma* (*The Mother of 1084*). Ammu is thus stripped not only of her class but also of her human identity. She became "untouchable" as is evident at her funeral. Yet in several crucial moments of the novel we have seen her as very physical: she rests "skin to skin" with Velutha or her breasts are touched with a stick by the Inspector. From the touchable class, Ammu ends up being an untouchable.

Ammu's twins are forced to separate after her death: Estha goes to live with his father in Australia, and Rahel stays with Mammachi – which in a way protects their upper class identity. Yet the humiliation of having a scandalous mother reduces their social status. Chacko forgets his Christian piety towards orphans, as he calls them, "millstones around his neck" (*TGST* 85). His petty bourgeois class consciousness gets the better of him.

The middle class is represented by Comrade Pillai, a member of the Communist party. As an educated man who owns a printing press, he represents the middle class, although, as a Communist leader, he is supposed to be declassed. However, in his relations with the subalterns, he acts as a member of the dominant class. He remains true to his opportunistic middle class status, probably petty bourgeois origins, and does not at all behave as declassed. As inherently self-centered and not being declassed, Comrade Pillai behaves inhumanly with the different subaltern characters like Velutha, Ammu, Estha, Rahel, and other members of the subaltern group as a whole.

Comrade Pillai's relationship with Velutha, the untouchable lower class worker of *Paradise Pickles,* is typical in terms of exposing the hypocrisy and the petty bourgeois class loyalty which we have encountered in Chacko. He feels uncomfortable at the fact that Velutha is a card-carrying Communist and skilled worker, and yet, he mouths slogans about the emancipation of the downtrodden characters, marginalized because of exclusionary grids such as caste and class. The duplicity of his nature is evident in the way he separates the public from the private. Publicly, he says caste is class, privately he denounces it. When Velutha's cross-caste and cross-class liaison with Ammu is exposed, Comrade Pillai publicly denounces Velutha's "private" act. "The Party was not constituted to support workers' indiscipline in their private life," he observes (*TGST* 287).

Another example of this public/private issue is seen when Comrade Pillai empowers his wife to devalue Velutha: "'See her, for example. Mistress of this house. Even she will never allow Paravans and all that into her house. Never. Even I cannot persuade her. My own wife. Of course inside the house she is Boss.' He turned to her with an affectionate, naughty smile. 'Alley edi, Kalyani'" (*TGST* 278). By claiming that his wife brings blessings to the house by not bringing the untouchable in is tinged with a naughty joke: she is superior in the house where he is the touchable one. A moment earlier, he was aroused by his wife. His sexual touch was interrupted by the presence of the untouchable. Before arresting Velutha, who is known to be Pillai's comrade, police ask for the party's signal before "touching" the "untouchable," accusing him of kidnapping and rape.

Roy herself provides another set of binaries to denote two metaphorical classes: Laltain and Mombatti. Two light metaphors are used by Roy to distinguish big dreams from small dreams. As her narrator says, "There are big dreams and little ones. Big man and the Laltain shahib, small Man the Mombatti. An old Bihari coolie who met Estha's school excursion party at the railway

station used to say of dreams. Big man the lantern. Small man the Tallow-stick. Hugeman the strobe Lights, he omitted to say. And small Man the subway station" (*TGST* 89). Even in her capitalization, Roy is suggestive of the small/big classes. The coolie is like a candle stick whose light is very vulnerable. Then again it has the potential of lighting up and passing on the light to others. The lantern, pronounced as laltain perhaps, is well protected in its hatch. They are the representatives of the big men (Prasad 177). Velutha is compared to a coolie with his dark body and bad smells by Mammachi. In Malayalam, the name Velutha literally means white. The white coolie Velutha is a flickering "mombatti" who momentarily lights up his surroundings. The steady lantern light of Comrade Pillai, Baby Kochamma, and the police remain to show its prowess.

The other Mombatti in the novel is Sophie Mol. The title of the second chapter of the book in which Sophie Mol appears, however, uses another light imagery: "A Sunbeam Lent … Too Briefly." Her untimely death is another instance of chaos theory, in which a slight deviation from the order of things can set everything else on a different chaotic trajectory with random results. Roy observes, "A few dozen hours can affect the outcome of whole lifetime" (*TGST* 33). Sophie's mother Margaret Kochamma is another small thing as she is a "bushy eye-browed waitress" (Roy 241). She held on to her title even after her divorce, showing her desire to upscale in the Indian society, whereas in England her baker father did not even come to their wedding. Once again, we see how race is responsible for conditioning class differences.

These examples will show how the characters are permeable, and they cannot be clamped in any fixed class categories. What then is the purpose of Roy to divide class in terms of touchable and untouchable, powerful and powerless, moneyed and without money, high and low, and so on? The problems are both systemic and ideational. Roy identifies this class confusion as an inherent problem of the Marxist movement in India. In her book *The Shape of the Beast*, she opined, "If

you look at the communist parties, most of their leaders are from the upper castes" (31). Touchable Comrade Pillai becomes Roy's representative of every communist in Kerala. His duplicities and corruption are the reasons why ideological reformation remains an unfinished project. He represents the failed communist project that lost its way in its adoption of participatory democracy – an idea that caused the Soviet-China fault-lines to explode in the late 1960s. The underlying impulse of a revisionist historiography has been taken up by the "academic" subaltern group. In the next section, I look at Roy's relationship with the group whose peak presence coincided roughly with the publication of Roy's maiden novel in 1997.

There is no escape from this history which simply outlines human problems in algebraic formulas. Facts can be the building blocks of history for superficial consumption. In *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* , Roy writes, "A cursory survey tallies the caste, class and religion of who gets to be in which convoy would make a good Lazy Person's Guide to the History of India." For Roy, only stories can offer imaginative escape.

4.3 Can the Subaltern be Storied?

Is Arundhati Roy primarily a writer or an activist? Is she a Marxist or a feminist? Without getting into the trap of nomenclature, it is safe to say Roy has remained anti-capitalist and against the Big Things or the powerful. This is true of her non-fiction as well as of her fiction. Her views align with the historiographical program of the subaltern group. The group made its appearance through a series of publications that came out through Oxford University Press in India. The first volume, edited by Ranajit Guha, was published in 1982. Guha and his western-trained colleagues responded to the elitist way of documenting history by the Cambridge School that maintained its colonial legacy. They wanted to study the revolts of the subalterns who have been largely ignored by mainstream Indian history.

The exponents of the subaltern group's inspiration comes from the Naxalite Movement. After nearly twenty years of the uprising, a group of Indian historians, whose formative years are linked to the Naxalbari experience, tried to re-write "history from below." Led by Ranajit Guha, they brought out The Subaltern Studies Collective which became an influential postcolonial body of scholarship with an Indian accent. The collective does not give a single definition of the subaltern. Borrowed from Indrajit Roy's essay in Oxford data stream, let me offer three definitions of the term that show the divergence within the group:

> [For] Ranajit Guha (1982), the subaltern refers to the "mass of the laboring population and the intermediate strata in town and country." Subsequently, Spivak (1992) clarified that "everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern." These insights formed the basis for Chakrabarty (2002) outlining the ideal figure of the subaltern as "the person who survives actively, even joyously, on the assumption that the statist instruments of domination will always belong to somebody else and never aspires to them." (Indrajit Roy)

These definitions suggest why I have isolated Ammu, Rahel, and Estha from their upper class background to consider them as subalterns. While the first definition may not make them liable as subalterns, they can be considered so under the next two definitions. The Love Laws are a statist instrument of domination, and these characters have limited access to cultural imperialism. In Chapter 1, I noted how Guha subsequently simplified the definition of the subaltern to label anyone who is subordinated, which allows us to consider the Syrian Christian mother and her twins as subaltern. Velutha's subalternity, however, is validated by all these definitions.

Arundhati Roy in her *Broken Republic: Three Essays* shares her thoughts on the peasants' insurgency and the Maoist movement that are in line with the members of The Subaltern Studies

Collective. She wrote, “People are engaged in a whole spectrum of struggles all over the country – the landless, the homeless, Dalits, workers, peasants, weavers. They’re pitted against a juggernaut of injustices, including policies that allow a wholesale corporate takeover of people’s land and resources. However, it is the Maoists the government has singled out as being the biggest threat” (3). Roy’s praxis, however, stops her from being an academic scholar who simply reflects on the revolutionary with the lens of critical theory.

Dingwaney Needham notices an interesting parallel between Ranajit Guha’s way of telling history and Roy’s practice of storytelling; both “attempt to recover the voice of the silenced space of the popular, the agency repressed by different forms of metanarrative explanation” (qtd. in Menozzi 124). However, there are differences too. While the subaltern group is interested in the history of the marginalized groups (small things), Roy takes additional interest in the emergence and conditioning of these stories. In Needham’s observation, Roy seems to be interested in:

> … how these conditions do not uniformly yield the difference of the subaltern from the dominant. To give flesh, as it were, to her interests, she draws upon resources of storytelling (which entail the use of both imagination and invention), in general, and the techniques of the realist novel, in particular, to bring her readers into a close, even intimate relationship with the world her characters inhabit. (qtd. in Menozzi 124)

Gayatri Spivak is one subaltern theorist whose influence on Roy has been aptly established. Her seminal essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” is echoed in Roy as we have seen in the previous chapter. Roy wants her character to speech-act. Even the silence depicted in her novel speaks, and can speak. I agree with Anita Singh who sees the novel as “a discourse of the marginalized and subordinated” as it “crystallizes the issues of atrocities against … all those dispossessed of an identity or a speaking voice. The writing subject itself [Roy] belongs to the rank of the

hitherto silent. The act of authorship is an act of retrieval as well as an act of liberation" (133).

It is no surprise then that Velutha does not say a single word in the novel, although his action speaks for him. Ammu's attraction to Velutha is physical. But in the course of the story we realize it is also ideological. When Ammu sees him at the Communist Party march, she identifies herself with him because of their shared anti-establishment sentiment: "She hoped it had been him that had raised his flag and knotted arm in anger. She hoped that under his careful cloak of cheerfulness, he housed a living, breathing, anger against the smug, ordered world that she so raged against" (*TGST* 175-6).

We already know, however, that the ideology that Velutha has embraced (and Ammu admires) is not united in its shared anger against the "ordered world" (Roy 167). Within the Party, Velutha is discriminated for his untouchability. Despite his craftsmanship, the other workmen feel that he should not be working alongside them. Mammachi underpays him for his service. The touchable workers at the factory get more than him for the same work and "Mammachi didn't encourage him to enter the house (except when she needed something mended or installed)" (*TGST* 77).

The ideology that binds Ammu and Velutha together is thus poised on thin ice. Yet the couple manages to find common grounds. Ammu becomes the mirror image of Velutha in her anger. She is angry at the system that continues to deprive her of her biological rights, property rights, marital rights, educational rights. At the same time she is concerned about the future of her children. She can even become a terrorist to protect her children. Hence Roy dubs her as "An unmixable mix" with "[t]he infinite tenderness of motherhood and the reckless rage of a suicide bomber" (44). The shared urge to challenge the order of the world brings the couple together who

share some tender moments as children. Ammu likes the fact that the untouchable boy of her childhood days who would make her wooden toys has grown up to be a firebrand activist while keeping his innocent smile intact.

Velutha initially remains suspicious about their class difference. Just like his father, he knows that for a Paravan, Ammu is "untouchable." She belongs to a class that he is supposed to annihilate. He notices the desire for his body in her eyes, and thinks of the dimple when she smiles. Love overpowers hate. Roy gives us access to what Velutha is thinking upon seeing Ammu by the river:

> Velutha shrugged and took the towel away to wash. And rinse. And beat. And wring. As though it was his ridiculous, disobedient brain.
>
> He tried to hate her.
>
> She's one of them, he told himself. Just another one of them.
>
> He couldn't.
>
> She had deep dimples when she smiled. Her eyes were always somewhere else.
>
> Madness slunk in through a chink in History. It took only a moment. (*TGST* 177)

Roy is thus making the individual's story as the building block of history. The same story-telling is involved in the depiction of the twins and their eventual incestuous relationship. Rahel and Estha, being children of a broken family and class-wise challenged, are conscious of the stark reality and the brutish facts of history. They learnt of history as a kind of hard taskmaster who extracts what is due to it and punished those who broke its laws. The narrator tells us, "While other children of their age learned other things, Estha and Rahel learned how history negotiates its terms and collects its dues from those who break its laws" (55). History here implies the oppressive

societal structures and exclusionary grids, like the capitalist class system, caste, and patriarchy, which are united against their prototypically subaltern mother.

In this manner the twins learn very early that they are subalterns or inferior in rank or position. As the feeling of oppression is ingrained in Rahel and Estha, they become "mulish" like their mother and so intransigently read things backwards in revolt against the neo-colonial Miss Mitten, the missionary teacher who represents the authoritarian face of Christian education: "Miss Mitten complained to Baby Kochamma about Estha's rudeness, and about the reading backwards. She told Baby Kochamma that she had seen Satan in their eyes. nataS in their seye" (*TGST* 60). The Satanic defiance against the missionary teacher is an act of subversion. Rahel continues to be involved in such subversive menace even after the twins get separated after the death of their mother.

The linguistic reversal of the children finds their match in the role reversals in their union when "Rahel watched Estha with the curiosity of a mother watching her wet child. A sister a brother. A woman a man. A twin a twin" (*TGST* 93). Through this unlawful union, Rahel and Estha take a symbolic revenge against the class-based oppressive societal actors and the ancient caste based Love Laws.

In another instance, we find the idea of reversal. After finding his son in intimate proximity with Ammu, "Vellya Paapen began to cry. Half of him wept. Tears welled up in his real eye and shone on his black cheek. With his other eye he stared stonily ahead. An old Paravan, who had seen the Walking Backwards days, torn between Loyalty and Love" (*TGST* 255). While the "Walking Backward days" is a reminder of the actual practice of not showing the back to the upper caste while walking, it also shows a sign of retraction. Vellya is imprisoned in the old customary practices. He is like an existential character who sees no way out, and can find meaning only by

reporting facts to the master. The invisible Big Things of loyalty force him to ignore the Small Thing love that his son was experiencing.

Unlike Vellya, both Chacko and Pillai want social mobility to change the old structure. While Chacko wants to be the pickles baron, thinking he can run the factory in a systematic modern way to bring in more profits by transforming it from its traditional cottage industry orientation. He fails to realize the preservation of passion or memory that his mother has put in to make the factory work. His interest in the capitalistic profit is the Big Thing that ignores the Small Things of his mother's passion.

Meanwhile, Comrade Pillai secretly desires to become a landlord by outmaneuvering Chacko. He knows that he does not have the cultural capital of his counterpart; but he knows that he can use his local influences to overthrow Chacko:

> With a street fighter's unerring instincts, Comrade Pillai knew that his straitened circumstances (his small, hot house, his grunting mother, his obvious proximity to the toiling masses) gave him a power over Chacko that in those revolutionary times no amount of Oxford education could match. He held his poverty like a gun to Chacko's head. (*TGST* 14)

The other category of class that we can mention involves agency: those who have power and those who do not. The interaction of the police with the subalterns (Ammu, Velutha, Estha, and Rahel) illustrate that. The novel gives us the "little story," the micro-narrative involving Estha's false testimony. Baby Kochamma becomes the accomplice in the police plot to implicate Velutha in an extra-judicial killing. The police were "history's henchmen" (*TGST* 308) making sure that things happen in a certain way to restore the old order. Here is a long quote that captures the emotions of the muted subalterns vis-à-vis the oppressor:

> The twins were too young to know that these were only history's henchmen. Sent to square the books and collect the dues from those who broke its laws. Impelled by feelings that were primal yet paradoxically wholly impersonal. Feelings of contempt born of inchoate, unacknowledged fear – civilization's fear of nature, men's fear of women, power's fear of powerlessness. (*TGST* 308)

The children became unwilling witnesses to violence, which will traumatize Estha and impact his psychological make-up:

> Inspector Thomas Mathew squatted on his haunches and raked his jeep key across the sole of Velutha's foot. Swollen eyes opened. Wandered. Then focused through a film of blood on a beloved child. Estha imagined that something in him smiled. Not his mouth, but some other unhurt part of him …
>
> The Inspector asked his question. Estha's mouth said Yes.
>
> Childhood tiptoed out.
>
> Silence slid in like a bolt.
>
> Someone switched off the light and Velutha disappeared. (19)

The innocence is trampled as the grownups subject the children to imagine the unimaginable as Velutha disappears. The ellipses, long gaps, short disjointed sentences both suppress and reveal, silence and speak. The use of oxymoron is characteristic of Roy who releases energy through condensing oppositional categories: "silence/bolt" [with obvious pun], tiptoed childhood/raked feet.

4.4 The Curious Case of Class

Finally, it can be said that Roy's *The God of Small Things* critiques the type of Marxism that the incumbent Communist Party practices in Kerala. The party shows no interest in dissolving the

class divide that is based on caste. The social, cultural, racial chasm is widened by the hypocritical leaders who dream of social mobility through personal gains. Individual characters here offer a case study for the sickness that is allowing old practices such as Love Laws to thrive. Chacko and Comrade Pillai are ardent supporters of E.M.S. Namboodiripad who is touted as the "flamboyant Brahmin high priest of Marxism in India" (*TGST* 67).

In her characteristic use of paradoxes, the communist leader is compared to a high priest. This goes on to show how religion, which Marx famously called opium for the masses, and communism go hand in hand in Keralite society. The Syrian Christians and the communist leaders are the Big Things who can subjugate the subalterns. The Syrian Christians have syncretized their religion in espousing the local class consciousness. Like Marxism, the local brand of Christianity too has not tried to eradicate the caste cleavage. Instead, it has bifurcated its institutions into touchable and untouchable entities.

This chapter has shown, how the traditional binary categories of class are ineffective in both Keralite and Royesque textual contexts. Roy herself has invented some new categories and used different terminologies and tropes to expose the inefficacy of the borders separating various groups. Comrade Pillai is right to point out that change is one thing, but to accept that change is another matter.

Roy is interested in telling the stories. She knows that her non-fiction can talk about issues in political terms with a call for change. But in order to accept those changes she must address the consciousness of the masses. Simply subscribing to state sponsored information will not bring change. She needs a figurative campus to pinpoint all the small things bothering her in contemporary society. Then she invites her readers to connect them in their mindscape. She creates an alternative world where "Love Laws" are dead, where love is the law. She prepares us for a

shock where a non-normative incestuous behavior can become the norm. Roy tells us a story which has a class of its own.

CHAPTER 5: WALKING BACK THE CASTE ROAD IN *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*

Mammachi is the moral police

5.1 Like Tea from a Teabag

> Long before the Marxists came. Before the British took Malabar, before the Dutch Ascendency, before Vasco da Gama arrived, before the Zamorin's conquest of Calicut. Before three purple-robed Syrian Bishops murdered by the Portuguese were found floating in the sea, with coiled sea serpents riding on their chests and oysters knotted in their tangled beards. It could be argued that it began long before Christianity arrived in a boat and seeped into Kerala like tea from a teabag. That it really began in the days when the Love Laws were made. The laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much (*TGST* 33).

This excerpt touches on the advent of a series of ideologues and pirates that colonized Kerala without attempting to change the plights of the low-caste. The murder of the Syrian Bishops alludes to the tension between the Syrian Christians who settled in South India and the Roman Catholic Church represented by the Portuguese. When the Syrian Christians tried to free itself from Rome, the Portuguese attacked them and killed their Bishops in 1653. The Syrian Christians offered its allegiance to the Eastern Church and maintained its sovereignty. In 1889 under the leadership of Rev. Mar Thoma, the Syrian Church got its recognition. We are told that Rahel and Estha's great grandfather was a member of the Mar Thoma Church. Under the British Rule, this protestant Church received support from England, and continued to convert low-caste Hindus. However, the converted low-caste Hindus were never given the same status as their Christian brothers as they were called "Rice Christians" (*TGST* 74). Surprisingly, the Syrian Christians appropriated local

customs to avoid conflicts with the upper-caste Hindus. They remained "Christians of Mesopotamia in faith and worship and ethic, [and] Indians in all else" (Tickell, *Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things* 22). No wonder, talking to David Barsamian , Roy points out, "Even among the Syrian Christians – who are the oldest, most orthodox Christians in India – you have caste issues" ("The Checkbook and the Cruise Missile")

The three untouchables who are converted Christians in Roy's novel are Vellya and his two sons: Kuttapen and Velutha. Central to the novel is Velutha's action in which he dares to touch someone above his caste. Although it was a mutually consensual "touch," rather love, the laws of the society do not sanction such a union. The old custodians of love cite scriptures to decide and measure who should be loved, and what amount.

The idea of laws on love, or the Love Laws, that colonizes the mind, according to Roy, is much older than the European and Christian invasion. It can be traced back to the inter-caste marriage outlined in the law code of Manu or *Manu Smriti.* It is part of the *dharma* (socio-cosmic) order that is as old as creation itself. Alex Tickell offers a comprehensive context of the formation of the Love Laws in Hindu cosmology. He quotes the Vedic scriptures, the primeval cosmic being *Purusa,* dismembered into four parts, resulting in the *chaturbarna* (four castes):

> When [the gods] divided the Man, into how many parts did they disperse him? What became of his mouth, what of his arms, what were his two thighs and two feet called? His mouth was the *Brahmin* [the priest class], his arms were made into the nobles [ksatriyas], his two thighs were the populace [vaisyas], and from his feet the servants [sudras] were born. The moon was born from his mind; the sun was born from his eye. (Tickell, *Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things* 22).

The “untouchables” are the lowest of the low. They are the outcastes or marginalized class among the *sudras* who are responsible for undertaking dirty jobs such as dealing with the garbage and filth, sweeping the streets, and disposing dead bodies. Ironically, they are the unclean ones who keep society clean, as Mulk Raj Anand has so convincingly portrayed in his novel *Untouchable*. The fate of the untouchables is tied to their birth as they are bound to remain socially and economically dependent on others. However, scholars are divided in their opinion about the timing as well as validity of such ostracizing. While some believe that the original Hindu scriptures *Veda* and *Rigveda* proclaim the untouchability of the low caste, others think that this idea was slowly developed in society probably during the first millennium and peaked in the 13th century. The observance of the caste-system within Hinduism varies from region to region. In South India it seems to be quite strong even after its constitutional abolishment in 1950.

The situation is further complicated by the fact that the British consulted *Manu Smriti* in coding Hindu Laws. Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, in his *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Sharia*, maintains:

> The selectivity of the process, whereby colonial authorities sought the assistance of Hindu and Muslim religious elites in understanding the law, resulted in the Brahminization and Islamization of customary laws [in British India]. For example, the British orientalist scholar William Jones translated the key texts Al Sirjjiyah in 1792 as the Mohammedan Law of Inheritance, and *Manu Smriti* in 1794 as the Institutes of Hindu Law or the Ordinances of Manu. In short, British colonial administrators reduced centuries of vigorous development of total ethical, religious and social systems to fit their own preconceived European notions of what Muslim and Hindu “law” should be. (149-150)

In what follows, I shall discuss the subordination of the lower caste by both religious and political entities. Roy uses Vellya, Kuttapen, and Velutha as case studies of the double consciousness that persists among the lower caste. Vellya Paapen is indebted to the Ipe family because it was Rev. E. John Ipe who gave his family the title to the land on which they live. Mammachi also provided Vellya with a loan to get a glass eye replacement after an accident. The older son Kuttapen fell from a coconut tree and is paralyzed. He spends his days like a fish caught in a net, never having attended school. His physical and intellectual immobility symbolize the general condition of the paravan, or low-caste Dalit in society. Velutha, the younger son, is different. He went to school, learnt woodwork from a German carpenter named Johann Klein, and got involved in radical left politics with hopes of changing his social position. His transgression leads to his death in which his own father is complicit as he was the one to report his tryst with Ammu to Mammachi. He thus becomes the optical agency of Mammachi symbolically represented by his glass eye.]

Instead of showing filial love, "the docile conformist" Vellya prefers to uphold laws as he goes to Mammachi to reveal what he has seen by the river on the very day the boat capsizes and drowns Sophie Mol. Vellya walks back to the old ways, not showing any courage to break the shackles of the caste system. The tree-climber Kuttapen's prospects of climbing up the social ladder is signified by his paralytic state. The rebel is brutally annihilated by the system as he posed a threat to its seeming order. Now the question remains, how ingrained is the caste system that it makes a father go against his son? The interpellation of such a racial construct demands a revisit to the history of the caste system. Roy does not want to write history from an academic stance; her interest is in the missing glue that prevents communities from coming together. She is interested in the human bonds without which humanity cannot exist.

Roy's aesthetic project has been met with severe criticism. Aijaz Ahmed admits that Roy has written about the caste issue "with devastating precision," but she seems least "concerned about those aspects which are not tied to caste" ("Reading Arundhati Roy *Politically*" 43). Ahmed further thinks that "The intermeshing of caste and sexuality is indeed the ideological centre of the book, and is precisely the transgressive claim in this domain that will account for much of the popularity of the book" (35). Ahmed is hinting at Roy's apolitical stance, which I find a bit disingenuous given her track-record as a social activist who has never shied away from voicing out against injustice.

Roy's own admission is relevant here. In *The Algebra of Infinite Justice,* she posits, "True, *The God of Small Things* is a work of fiction, but it's no less political than any of my essays. True, the essays are works of non-fiction, but since when did writers forgo the right to write non-fiction?" (Roy 196). Elsewhere, she claims, "Though it might appear otherwise, my writing is not really about nations and histories, it's about power" (*An ordinary person's guide to Empire* 14). As argued in Chapter 4, Roy has avoided the strict binaries of classes to keep her distance from Orthodox Marxism. She is more interested in writing stories, the micro-narratives, rather than the building blocks of history that are against the grain of a grand narrative. These stories are ultimately presented as a domino effect where the minor characters can touch and influence the major ones. The butterfly effect is the way she connects the small things with big things. The textual discourse is an enactment of two groups: the powerful and the powerless. She castigates caste for dividing people between the touchable and the untouchables. By categorizing three of the subalterns as members of the upper caste Syrian Christians, made powerless because of their gender, age and property status Roy accommodates different kinds of domination in her understanding of coercion or hegemony. The narrative line and the plot structure of the novel are

both alive to and aware of the Orthodox positions of Christianity and Hinduism as well as Marxism which was used to gain political power in South India. In this chapter I shall refer to the arguments of both the subaltern discourse and the philosophical ideas of Ambedkar available in *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) to prove my hypothesis that caste is the most important exclusionary grid in Roy's novel.

5.2 "Caste" in the "Subaltern" Cast

In Chapter 4, I have shown how Roy's praxis can correspond to Gayatri Spivak's idea of "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Having established who the subalterns are in the novel, let me show how Roy attributes the four subaltern characters under study here with political agency. In Chapter 1 and Chapter 4, I have used Ranajit Guha's The Subaltern Studies Collective to formulate the parameters of the subalterns in the text. For this chapter, I shall use Partha Chatterjee's essay "Caste and Subaltern Consciousness" anthologized in *Subaltern Studies VI Writings on South Asian History and Society*. This is an invaluable essay to understand the caste issue from a Marxist point of view. Chatterjee writes,

> Marxists have chosen either of two approaches. Most have argued that caste is a feature of the superstructure of Indian society and ought to be understood in terms of its efficacy as an ideological system that reflects the basic structure of the material (i.e. productive) relations. Others have suggested that caste is the specifically Indian form of material relations at the base with its historic dynamics; caste, in other words, is the form in which classes appear in Indian society. (175)

It is clear from this observation that the Marxists are divided in their opinion on locating caste either at the base or in the superstructure. I think that caste is both ideational and material as it is connected with property relations, inheritance, and marriage. In the case of *The God of Small*

Things we find that as an upper caste Syrian Christian daughter, Ammu is disadvantaged in the schema for distribution of paternal property. At the same time the idea of purity and pollution is relevant for her. Simultaneously with these two aspects, her marriage and the future of her lineage are determined by the ancient Love Laws. Now, the pertinent question is: if we consider subaltern as primarily the name of a class or class fragment, then where do we locate caste in that context? My answer is that with the word "subaltern" I mean the individual lower caste/outcaste or untouchable and not any group or group-fragment. Being of pre-colonial origin, I think that the caste system is one where certain classes of people maintain their material or economic dominance by bringing in religious and legal sanctions. They also perpetuate it among their offspring through the idea of purity and pollution. If I look at gender, class, and caste from the perspective of the concept of the subaltern as based on the ideas of Ranajit Guha, it will tie up the previous attempts at revisiting the downtrodden in the chapters on gender, class, and caste. My view is that the subaltern as a category fits in as a synonym for the downtrodden and there are enough points of contact or similarity between the three concepts of caste, class, and gender to be covered by this word.

The first point of similarity or point(s) of contact between gender, class, and caste is the fact that in all three concepts there is the idea of superior and inferior. Second, all three concepts deal with power and powerlessness. Third, all three concepts imply a binary division, though with caste and class there is also the concept of hierarchy, in one case fixed and in the other case, dynamic. Caste, generally, cannot be changed but class can be. Fourth, caste and gender are birth-ascribed identities, while class, though inherited in a sense, in its operational history, is changeable. Fifth, class and gender are a universal phenomenon, but caste is primarily India-centric. Sixth, with caste, the idea of untouchability is connected but there is no such connection with class or

gender. The term "subaltern" can thus be used as an umbrella term for those who are downtrodden or powerless because of caste, class, or gender.

5.3 Roy, Ambedkar, and Gandhi

The God of Small Things deals with India's "heart of darkness" where caste is a curse (alluding to Conrad's Kurtz). This is evident in a quote I mentioned earlier, "Deep at the heart of the horror of what's going on lies the caste system" (Roy, *The Shape of the Beast* 6). The horror is it is a system that isolates man from man. Two exponents who tried to address this social curse are Mahatama Gandhi (1869-1948) and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956).

Roy compared their approaches towards abolition of caste system in her "Introduction" to the 2014 edition of Dr. Ambedkar's famous book *Annihilation of Caste*. She admires the Dalit physician who not only wanted to cure the physical illness of society but also the spiritual and social illness of India. In an aptly titled essay, "The Doctor and the Saint," she compares Dr. Ambedkar with the leader of the Indian National Congress, the Founding Father of the Indian nation, Mahatama Gandhi. Roy presents Abmedkar as an "abolitionist" who wanted to end both the caste system and the custom of untouchability. On the other hand, Gandhi is shown as being a believer in the caste system, but against untouchability. Roy sides with the arguments of Dr. Ambedkar by pointing out the subtle racism that she had noticed in Gandhi for his dislike of the Africans. In my opinion, Roy adopts a theoretical position that aligns with the Black Panther movement of the USA[3] where caste and race issues are lumped together with a revolutionary edge. Because of this, I am emboldened to claim that Roy privileges caste over the other two exclusionary grids.

[3] The Black Panther Party was a black revolutionary movement which believed in the use of violence to achieve political gains. For a detailed account of its ideology, politics, etc. please consult https://www.britannica.com/topic/Black-Panther-Party retrieved on 5.7.19.

Roy analyzes Gandhi's role and opinion regarding western capitalism, the class system, and heavy industries, to label him as a romantic conservative. Gandhi termed the untouchables as *harijans* (children of God) and encouraged befriending and eating with them, but did not do enough to change the mindset that upholds such an essentialist category that dehumanizes certain groups. A quote from one of Gandhi's works about the schooling of untouchable children is indicative of the confusion in Gandhi's mind about caste. As expressed in his chapter on "Untouchability" published in a collection of his writings in the book, *Hindu Dharma*, Gandhi writes, "Admission to general schools, therefore, should be open to such of them as observe the rule of cleanliness, but there should also be separate primary schools for them for their special encouragement" (78).

This is in tandem with the novel's two separate schools for the touchables and the untouchables established by Ammu's great grandfather. Ambedkar, on the other hand, has no inhibition is labelling caste as the most important cause for inequality in India. Roy's focus on caste in "The Doctor and the Saint" and her desire for its annihilation have significant influence on her first novel, *The God of Small Things* and many other non-fictional essays.

Roy is very clever in not making caste a Hindu issue in her novel. The Syrian Christians are the proxy Hindus who both uphold and practice caste-based hierarchy and social stratifications. From this point of view, Roy's caste issue is slightly different from Ambedkar's. But in her foreword, she unabashedly praises Ambedkar and castigates Gandhi for not doing enough to address the caste issue. For her, Gandhi's rejection of untouchability and hierarchy as being not revolutionary enough suggests a lack of conviction. Just like the Marxists in the novel who maintain a public and a private view on caste, Gandhi too is guilty of a double standard.

5.4 Power Relationships in *TGST*

One atrophy of class stratification is dehumanization. Humans are treated as sub-human categories. Velutha's humiliation and torture at the police station are suggestive of the asymmetrical power arrangement where the untouchable has no recourse to legal rights. Velutha is a disenfranchised "non-citizen" (Prasad 24). For his party, as Comrade Pillai suggests, he is an egg that needs to be broken to make an omelet. Pillai, as mentioned earlier, termed his relationship with Ammu as a personal affair in which the party has nothing to do. Yet after his death, the party expresses solidarity with their dead comrade. For Baby Kochamma, Velutha is a Naxalite who threatens the stability of her inner world. Mammachi was the one to lodge a complaint against her former employee, accusing him of kidnapping and raping her daughter. The first time she hears of the affair from Vellya, she cringes in her thoughts thinking of his Coolie-like smell.

Roy gives gory details of Velutha's torture in police custody. She writes,

> His skull was fractured in three places. His nose and both his cheekbones were smashed, leaving his face pulpy, undefined. … His spine was damaged in two places, the concussion had paralysed his right arm and resulted in a loss of control over his bladder and rectum. Both his knees were shattered. (*TGST* 310)

This is the same body that was admired for its strength and determination. Now the body is broken by the state apparatus which finds Velutha a biological threat as he has invaded the body of an upper caste woman. One police officer flicks his genital with his stick just like Ammu's breast was tapped earlier. The stick is the Lacanian phallus, the name of the father, with which authority is established.

Roy goes on to explain why the police took this inter-community sexual union so seriously based on the case filed by Mammachi. Ironically, Mammachi would not mind paying the working class women in secret after her son was done with them in pursuit of his "Men's Needs"

(*TGST* 238). Chacko receives preferential treatment in society because of the rights and privileges that he enjoys in society. Velutha is the non-citizen, non-human who is deprived of all human rights. Roy explains,

> Unlike the custom of rampaging religious mobs or conquering armies running riot, that morning in the Heart of Darkness the posse of Touchable Policemen acted with economy, not frenzy. Efficiency, not anarchy. Responsibility, not hysteria … After all they were not battling an epidemic. They were merely inoculating a community against an outbreak. (*TGST* 309)

The idea of inoculation further suggests that Velutha is being seen as a micro-organism that can soon become contagious. Both Ammu and Velutha have imagined the unimaginable. They have created a precedence that needs to be diffused by the moral police. Roy even explains why the policemen unleashed their brutal selves to annihilate this untouchable. Roy writes, "if they hurt Velutha more than they intended to, it was only because any kinship, any connection between themselves and him, any implication that if nothing else, at least biologically he was a fellow creature – had been severed long ago. They were not arresting a man, they were exorcising fear" (*TGST* 309).

Again, in the Hindu cycle of reincarnation, the three upper castes (the priest Brahmin, the warrior Kshatriya, and the merchant Vaisya) can purify themselves through rituals. But an untouchable servant class (Sudra) can only find redemption in death and rebirth. Velutha is a pollutant, who has been punished to inculcate a sense of fear in the outcastes to warn against any recurrence of caste transgression.

Velutha's worthlessness can also be associated with his property. His family lives in a hut titled to them by the Ipe patriarch. Velutha finished high school, moved away from his hometown

for four years to learn carpentry, and joined left politics hoping to leave the stigma of his birth behind. He was happy with lesser payment despite his skill sets that even Mammachi thinks as potential engineer caliber. The narrator tells us, "Apart from his carpenter skills, Velutha had a way with machines. Mammachi (with impenetrable Touchable logic) often said that if only he hadn't been a Paravan, he might have become an engineer" (Roy, *TGST* 75). The link between tangible material ownership and intangible humanity is found in other subaltern characters too.

The Ammu-Velutha relationship is a case in point. Unlike other marital or non-marital relationships in the novel, this relationship is egalitarian, despite the inequality in caste background between Ammu and Velutha. The relationship is also unequal in terms of age, as Velutha was three years younger than Ammu. In terms of education, there was an apparent closeness as Velutha had finished high school established for the "untouchables" by Ammu's ancestor and was an accomplished carpenter. Ammu had to drop out as her parents moved from Delhi after her father's retirement. After her divorce, Ammu turned out be a burden for her family as she did not own any property. Velutha is also without property. While Velutha did not have any "land, capital or money," even *de jure* or in name, Ammu was supposed to be part of a rich family. Yet they are compatible in love. Ammu falls for Velutha because she notices a "Naxalite" anger in him, a man who stood up to power. Ammu, on the other hand, has the "reckless rage of a suicide bomber" (*TGST* 44). Both Velutha and Ammu have a soft sensitive side as is evident in their handling of the children. These are the small things that can be used as a formula to end caste as an issue in a human relationship.

Dipankar Gupta, in his *Interrogating Caste Understanding Hierarchy and Difference in Indian Society*, observes, "In the caste system if one were to marry against the rules then a person is outcasted. It is not as if they are merely brought down a notch or two in the caste hierarchy; they

are actually thrown out" (89). The marriage proves fatal for the couple as we find Ammu being locked up like a mad woman and then driven out of the house to die on her own and Velutha being killed by the police. Their treatment as pollutants is reflected when Estha returns and looks at the river filled with floating garbage. This is the same river with which Ammu was compared and the relationship was formed. The stigma of their death flows along the river just like caste flows in society.

On the other side of the spectrum, we come across Comrade Pillai who stands in the way of this relationship and contradicts his ideological belief in promoting casteism. Comrade Pillai considers Velutha a threat because of his Marxist idealism, and being a crass materialist, sees in Velutha's trouble an opportunity to benefit his interests. Instead of acting according to the demands of communist solidarity, he acts as a Machiavellian casteist politician and does not intervene with anybody, including the police. He is calculative and brutal. In all this he is driven by his incisive understanding and hidden prejudice regarding caste. Despite the slogans to the effect that caste is class, his behavior is driven by the implicit idea that caste is an aspect of class in India, though he believes implicitly in the opposite, that caste comes historically before class.

The other character who is responsible for the tragic end of Velutha is Baby Kochamma. Her disgust for Velutha is evident in her racist comment: "Then she shuddered her schoolgirl shudder. That was when she said: 'How could she stand the smell? Haven't you noticed? They have a particular smell, these Paravans'" (*TGST* 257). She was the one to point out to Mammachi and Chacko that Ammu was becoming over-familiar with Velutha. She went to the police station to tell the officer, "A Paravan. A few days ago he had tried to, to ... to force himself on her niece, she said. A divorcee with two children" (*TGST* 259). To implicate Velutha further, Baby Kochamma "mentioned seeing him in the march on the way to Cochin and the rumours that he

was or had been a Naxalite" (261). She thus makes sure that Velutha is held guilty on several grounds: moral, criminal, and political. And using her upper-caste position, she can make her lies believable. In contrast, both Ammu and Velutha are silenced by the police. Ammu became a polluted woman, a veshya, whose statement was no longer required or deemed credible by the police.

Baby Kochamma goes against her caste to make sure that her nemesis, whom she fears as a harbinger of radical communism, is finished. Yet Baby Kochamma and Ammu are quite similar in their positions in the household. Baby Kochamma is a spinster, while Ammu is a divorcee. The main difference between them is in their attitude to life. While Ammu has a healthy outlook on sex and marriage or the relationship between males and females, Baby Kochamma takes the abnormal path of spinsterhood. The narrator tells us, "Baby Kochamma resented Ammu because she saw her quarreling with a fate that she, Baby Kochamma herself, felt she had graciously accepted. The fate of the wretched man-less woman. The sad, Father Mulligan-less Baby Kochamma" (*TGST* 45).

Baby Kochamma takes an ultra-conservative and reactionary line regarding Ammu. She supports the patriarchal and unjust caste-based Love Laws and norms regarding daughters, especially divorcees from an inter-community love marriage.

While Baby Kochamma accepts this patriarchal arrangement, it is resented by Ammu. I can say that perhaps personal dislike and casteist values make Baby Kochamma hate Ammu so much at the end.

Analogous to the Baby Kochamma/Ammu relationship which has different power arrangements within the upper caste, we come across another pair from the lower caste: Velutha and Vellya Paapen. Vellya is a conformist who has no intention of changing the structure. His

adherence to the subaltern "inferior in rank" can further be explained by Fanon's idea forwarded in his seminal work *Black Skin, White Masks*:

> The effective disalienation of the black man entails an immediate recognition of social and economic realities. If there is an inferiority complex, it is the outcome of a double process: primarily, economic; subsequently, the internalization – or better, the epidermalization – of this inferiority. (10-11)

As mentioned in Chapter 4, one wonders why a father would walk backwards in the dark alley of the caste lane to expose the illicit affair of his own son to Mammachi. Vellya acts like an existential hero with no choice left. Such helplessness is inculcated in him by a society which constantly reminds him of his inferiority. The title of the hut in which he lives is given to him by the Ipe family, which makes the untouchable Paravan family psychologically dependent on the family.

The "epidermalization" of the complex is evident in the novel's repeated use of the word skin. Velutha's dark body contrasts with the literal meaning of his name which means white. Velutha wears his name like a white mask. He is the only one, the rebel, in the novel who wants to break the shackles of caste. The other characters in the novel who want to change their social positions include Comrade Pillai who wants to take over the pickles factory from Chacko, and Chacko who wants to become a pickles baron. For Velutha, the change is much more essential.

One interesting feature about skin color involves Roy's portrayal of Velutha as a dark-complexioned man. He is almost like Oroonoko, the prince from West Africa who was sold as a slave to work in the Caribbean sugar plantation, in Aphra Behn's novel of the same name. The typical skin color of South Indians is dark brown. Roy, in lines quoted earlier, takes special care to present him almost as a Black Man. Whether the choice is deliberate, we do not know. However, as W.E.B Dubois has said about the double conscious in the Negro can also be applicable to the

low-castes in Kerala. In an asymmetrical power arrangement, the inferior class fails to rise above their caste as they keep on looking at themselves through the eyes of others. Dubois writes,

> After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (9)

Velutha first thinks of Ammu as one of them – the upper caste enemy. But then he thinks of the dimple of her smile, which made him think that he can be on the same horizontal plane with Ammu. But in case of Vellya, he walks backward to think of the days when they could not show their back to the masters, sweep the ways with brooms to remove their traces, and were not allowed to enter the household of the masters. Just like gender, caste is a construct. Vellya is constructed by the optical lens of the society in which he lives.

Velutha's disappearance from the town for four years gives him the necessary incubation period to come back to town with renewed self-assuredness. His belief in radical politics gave him hope that he waved in the form of red flags. Little did he realize that the overwhelming caste system would consider him a disease. His spectacular death is nothing but a warning that the caste system is there to stay.

Vellya-Velutha's mirror image is the mother-daughter duo: Mammachi and Ammu. While Mammachi upholds the caste system, Ammu does not approve of it. One upholds the domination of the upper castes and the other falls in love with a Paravan laborer, an untouchable carpenter. For his skills, Mammachi pays Velutha more than the average Paravan worker, but less than a touchable. For his affection towards children, Ammu starts favoring Velutha more than she should. All these shows that Roy was trying to reflect the reality in Kerala through these characters to go deep into the problem but her choice of fiction and her activism makes it quite clear that she was not indulging herself in a kind of academic pursuit. It can, thus, be said that Roy is not interested in the concepts of caste, class, and gender or the concept of the subaltern from any academic point of view. She is interested in telling micronarratives that will eventually fracture the grand narrative. The stories of Vellya and Velutha, Velutha and Ammu, Baby Kochamma and Ammu, Mammachi and Ammu are the small stories that form the basis of Roy's historiography. She knows for a complex issue such as caste, factual and realistic representation of everyday events or history is not adequate. For any social change, it is important that the masses are engaged so that they can imaginatively recreate their own stories to take position vis-à-vis the characters in the novel. Roy writes,

> People are engaged in a whole spectrum of struggles all over the country – the landless, the homeless, Dalits, workers, peasants, weavers. They're pitted against a juggernaut of injustices, including policies that allow a wholesale takeover of people's land and resources. (Roy,*BROKEN REPUBLIC THREE ESSAYS* 3)

Roy's elaboration of the caste issue in *TGST* is a survey of various ideological and political debates. She exposes the double standards of orthodox Christianity and orthodox Marxism to show how both these ideologies preserve the caste issue in India. Her criticism of Gandhi regarding the

Harijan issue is equally valid. She sides with Ambedkar who had the intellectual acumen to understand the pitfalls of Marxism and its inadequacy in the Indian context as well the Brahministic politics that subsumes Hindu laws. Roy takes a very small thing from the corpus of Hinduism, the Love Laws, and connects it with other small things to make it look big. She applies the crisis in an individual context to show how it can affect the whole society. The death of Velutha is not the death of one individual. It is symptomatic of a sickness that pervades Indian society. If the small story of Velutha is not heard, then we will be missing the dirge of many other stories. In making Velutha and Ammu's silence speak, Roy is making the subaltern speak. She is not necessarily speaking for them, she is rather speaking with them.

CHAPTER 6: REVISITING THE SUBALTERNS IN *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*

6.1 Wrinkled Youth and Pickled Future

In this thesis I have tried to establish the primacy of caste as a cause of subalternity. I have surveyed the other exclusionary grids, that is, class and gender, which feature prominently in Roy's *The God of Small Things.* It has been my hypothesis that in Keralite society in particular, and India in general, it is impossible to ignore the caste issue even seventy years after its constitutional abolishment. In this chapter I shall try to revisit some of the arguments with reference to my initial research questions in Chapter 1.

I have tried to prove that Roy cannot be reduced to any value laden isms. She is not a feminist or a Marxist as many would like us to believe. In her own words, her aim has been, as both author and political activist, "to never complicate what is simple, to never simplify what is complicated [and] … to be able to communicate to ordinary people what is happening in the world" (xiv)

There have been some articles suggesting the autobiographical features in *TGST*; Ammu has been compared to Roy's mother, while Roy herself to Rahel. Roy recalls how her mother came to Kerala as a divorcee. With no family title or standing, she "didn't have a caste, and [she] didn't have a class, and [she] had no religion, no traditional blinkers on [her] spectacles, which are very hard to shrug off" (Barsamian 71). Pappachi in the novel suffers from a similar identity crisis. The moth that he discovered was not given any name. He felt deprived of the recognition that he deserved. As a result, the moth came to represent the negative thoughts which pass on to the next generations. Rahel, for one, always carry that moth inside of her: the fear of having no title, no class, no religion.

Roy's power lies in making the individual story applicable to the social body. In her novel she brings forward issues that concern female rights, religious injustice and class struggles. For her, inequality of power and injustice in all forms matter the most. She is not at all apolitical. Instead, she considers it her *writerly* duty to make political issues relatable through fiction. In an interview, she explains her stories as a narrative, "The writer is the midwife of understanding. It's very important for me to tell politics like a story, to make it real, to draw a link between a man with his child and what fruit he had in the village he lived in before he was kicked out, and how that relates to Mr. Wolfensohn at the World Bank" (Barsamian 72).

In *The God of Small Things,* Roy takes issue with an ancient Hindu law based on the Dharma Shastra found in *Manu Smriti*. The actual text of Manu both assigns and deprives rights to women, and it has been used by the priests to customize their opinions depending on the context in which the laws were implemented. Roy takes one such law, which she calls, Love Laws, and explains it in very simplistic terms: Who should be loved? How much?

As a free thinker, Roy does not like laws to be the guiding force in matters of love. Love can make its own laws. She gives two shocking examples of violation of the Love Laws to reflect on the issues: a physical affair between an upper-caste Syrian Christian woman and a low-caste Paravan, and an incestuous relationship between twins. While the first is a social taboo, the second one is a moral taboo. Roy tells their stories in such a way that the readers understand how these two couples could consummate their love in the manner they did. Roy has not tried to explain why, but she offers a *diegesis* to explain how. This is the technique we have seen in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* in which the narrator says that she will not mention why Pecola, the eleven year old girl, was raped by her father, but show how it happened. I believe Roy has taken a similar artistic position.

6.2 Fiction-Non-Fiction-Frictions

This brings me to Roy's use of fiction as an artistic weapon. Ever since Roy found fame through the publication of her award-winning novel, she realized that she could use that attention to forward her humanistic causes. Her non-fiction supplements most of the themes found in *TGST*. However, she is very careful about the thin lines that separate fact from fiction. Here is Roy explaining how she sees the difference between nonfiction and fiction:

> Writers imagine that they cull stories from the world. I'm beginning to believe that vanity makes them think so. That it's actually the other way around. Stories cull writers from the world. Stories reveal themselves to us. The public narrative, the private narrative – they colonize us. They commission us. They insist on being told. Fiction and non-fiction are only different techniques of storytelling. For reasons I do not fully understand, fiction dances out of me. Non-fiction is wrenched out by the aching, broken world I wake up to every morning. The theme of much of what I write, fiction as well as non-fiction, is the relationship between power and powerlessness and the endless, circular conflict they're engaged in." (Roy, An ordinary person's guide to empire 14)

Roy has been repeatedly told that her non-fiction is much more controversial than her fiction. Often the same politicians who laud her fiction will dismiss her non-fiction pieces. T.S. Eliot is right in saying, "Human kind cannot bear very much reality" ("Burnt Norton"). Roy's treatment of issues such as Narmada Bachao Andolon (NBA) or nuclear testing is outside the development trajectory of the incumbent government. In fact, Roy seems to use the third person narrator to create an objective distance in her fiction. But in her essays, as the quoted excerpts show, she applies a very aggressive first person point of view.

Anna Clarke in her essay "Language Hybridity and Dialogism in *The God of Small Things*" observes that Roy employs a child narrator for most of the novel in order to violate the rules of language. The short sentences, ellipses, writing backwards are instances of stylistic violation that is symptomatic of the moral, political violation in the text (133).

6.3 Once Again on Gender, Class, and Caste

Roy's style, I have argued, is a type of *ecriture feminine*, which allows Roy to proffer a feminist perspective. For instance, Ammu returns the male gaze by viewing Velutha's body lustfully. She is not ashamed to express female libido or to flay Chacko for his hypocritical feudal libido. In Chapter 3, I have dealt with the gender issues to show how women themselves are subjected to double consciousness. They fail to rise above the patriarchal trap.

I have shown in Chapter 4 that Roy's characters defy class categorization. There are certain dynamic features in her characters which make them fluid in terms of class. The four subaltern characters form a virtual family bonded by love and mutual admiration. We have seen how there is a sensitive side to Velutha which makes him feminine, whereas Ammu takes control of the relationship which is normally expected from a man in a courtship. Rahel too makes the advancement to violate the Love Laws to consummate her union with Estha. The childhood trauma of Estha makes him weak, and in his father's house in Australia, he tries to impress his host that he can cook and do domestic chores. Rahel, on the other hand, is characterized by her tomboyish adventures such as decorating dung with flowers, chest bumping with girls to see if it hurts, or burning the wig of a teacher. Ammu teaches the children to trust no one with reference to Julius Caesar implying the ubiquitous nature of human

Rahel turns out to be a mirror image of her mother. She returns to Ayemenem as a divorced woman after a brief inter-community love marriage. She gets involved in a forbidden relationship

"at a die-able age" (*TGST* 161) Ammu dies at the age of 31, which the narrator calls a "die-able" age; the twins start living, despite their sorrow, at a "die-able" age. The fact that they could avoid the moral and institutional police is a sign of progress as epitomized in the word "Naaley" (*TGST* 340).

Roy creates her own categories, going beyond the usual religious or political stratifications. Her use of Laltain and Mombatti shows how she values the inner light in an individual. The other category that she uses involves touch, which is both physical and metaphysical. For the stigmatized untouchable Velutha, Ammu is untouchable. For Rahel, Estha is untouchable. But these two couples have touched each other with the warmth of their hearts. They violate the ancient laws that are frozen in time like Rahel's watch which always shows ten to two, and move beyond that by using a futuristic temporal reference, "Naaley" (tomorrow).

The progressive change comes through an individual story, not through any historical dialectics. Arundhati Roy's problematic relationship with orthodox Marxism is another area that I discussed in my dissertation. Reflecting on Roy's criticism of the left parties in Kerala, Dasan observes, "the Marxist theory of class struggle which forms the focus of Communist experiment in Kerala has not done much to fight against the social hierarchy based on caste prevailing in Kerala (30). EMS, who was chief among the early theoreticians behind applying communism in in Kerala, somehow "overlooked the institution of caste, deep rooted in the society and equated lower caste with lower class, the proletarians"(30). Dasan quotes EMS's party position to show how the Communists themselves were aware of their failings: "Our party and myself as of its activists have thus been basing ourselves on the Marxist theory of class struggle and subordinating the problem of caste oppression to the needs of uniting the exploited against the exploitation of classes irrespective of the caste to which he belongs" (30). The class-caste complicity was never

sincerely addressed by the Marxists whose universal model of class concerns failed to take the local realities into consideration.

Hence, the card-carrying Marxist Velutha does not receive any sympathy from his working class comrades. K.V. Surendran succinctly puts the primacy of class over caste for Velutha, the Marxist, thus: "He [Velutha] never had the feeling that he was an untouchable especially when it came to his profession … Though Velutha was an untouchable in the eyes of his fellow workers, he was more conscious about his duties to the working class" (*TGST* 146-147).

Velutha is the cause of insecurity for Baby Kochamma. She is threatened by the possibility of his upward mobility. She acts as a moral police in the novel. She is meticulous in her record keeping of "Things she'd done for people, and Things People had done for her (Roy, *TGST* 98). She views herself as flawless and maintains her failed nunnery experience to think that she has made many sacrifices for people. She is untainted and free from sin, and is very quick to judge others and find faults in them. She is the one who goes to the police to inform about the Velutha-Ammu affair. While Baby Kochamma is the moral police, a type of ISA, or Ideological State Apparatus or the corrupt police of Kerala who toe the party line to annihilate a Naxalite, represent the RSA or Repressive State Apparatuses of Louis Althusser's coinage, which respectively represents the hegemonic and coercive wings of the government.

Baby Kochamma's hatred for the twins emanate from another insecurity. When Rahel returns to her family to take care of Estha, she finds the family being run by Baby Kochamma who had even inherited all the family ornaments. Baby Kochamma, who had disliked the twins from the very beginning, thought that "They might even steal their present back, … and realized with a pang how quickly she had reverted to thinking of them as though they were a single unit once again" (Roy *TGST* 29). Baby Kochamma hated the twins also because they were half Hindus.

Interestingly, her own infatuation over a Catholic priest made her convert to Catholicism. But the man she was infatuated with, Father Mulligan, converted to Hinduism himself. Despite all these, Baby Kochamma keeps Father Mulligan in an iconic place in her heart. This ends the first part of Baby Kochamma's life. In the second part, she returns to India and becomes close to Ammu's family, to the extent of finally becoming the most powerful member of the family. But her love and hate for half-Christian half-Hindu entities create an interesting dynamics that is telling of the Syrian Christian appropriation of the caste system.

6.4 Subaltern Matters

I have taken the examples of four characters who have been subordinated in the novel: Velutha, Ammu, Estha, and Rahel.

Velutha is an ideologically committed individual who becomes an active and sincere communist. However, the other characters look at him both as a caste-subaltern and a class-subaltern. The double standard of the Keralite communists are exposed once Comrade Pillai shows his true colors after Velutha's affair with Ammu is discovered.

Velutha's subalternity is primarily because of his caste status. Almost all the characters, including his own father, disapprove of Velutha's social mobility symbolized by his union with an upper caste woman. He has been betrayed by Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, Chacko, and Comrade Pillai. The eventual torture and killing by the police of Velutha is an act of silencing. The extra-judicial killing is a reminder of how the Naxalite activists were unlawfully executed. And Roy tells us that the killing was a warning for any future transgressors.

Ammu and Velutha were childhood friends. The narrator tells us, "Though he was younger than she was, he called her Ammukutty – Little Ammu. Mammachi persuades Vellya Paaapen to send him to the Untouchables' School that her father-in-law, Punnyan Kunju, had founded (Roy,

TGST 74-75). The novel is replete with small incidents that change the course of the story. Here Mammachi encourages Velutha's father to educate his son. She did not know at that time that this education would one day make Velutha a threat to her own kind. On the other hand, Ammu would carry childhood memories of this boy who would turn out to be her future lover. It is not only Velutha's physique but also his simultaneous anger towards the establishment and sensitivity towards her children that would make Ammu fall for a man who is a social pariah.

Velutha attended a school for the untouchables established by Ammu's great grandfather. The charitable establishment of this school testifies Christian mercy and belies its endorsement of the Indian caste system. It can be said that the upper caste Christian Punnyan Kunju founded the school for the untouchables not to emancipate them but to contain the possibility of any rebellion by the poor untouchables. This is a similar position taken by Gandhi with respect to the Harijan issue, which has been critiqued by Roy while rendering her support for Ambedkar.

The novel recalls how the Paravans were not allowed to carry umbrellas, speak without covering their mouth, or enter the household of the upper caste unless for some maintenance work. Roy writes,

> Pappachi would not allow Paravans into the house. Nobody would. They were not allowed to touch anything that Touchables touched. Caste Hindu and Caste Christians. Mammachi told Estha and Rahel that she could remember a time, in her girlhood, when 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. In Mammachi's time, Paravans, like other Untouchables, were not allowed to walk on public roads, 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. (Roy, *TGST* 73-74)

Born in such a patriarchal family one would not expect Ammu to be a subaltern. Ammu gets involved first in a cross-community love marriage with a Hindu Bengali, and then in an illicit affair with an untouchable worker. As a divorced woman with no property rights, Ammu had no standing in the family and was at the mercy of her mother and brother. Out of frustration, she even screams at her children, "'Because of you!' … 'If it wasn't for you I wouldn't be here! None of this would have happened! I wouldn't be here! I would have been free! I should have dumped you in an orphanage the day you were born! *You're* the millstones round my neck!'"(Roy, *TGST* 253). Earlier, her brother Chacko had called the twins "Millstones round his neck" (Roy, *TGST* 85). In fact, the mother and her twins are the millstones for the Ipe family because they have become outcastes and declassed. Patriarchy uses the convenient Love Laws to exclude them from the property equation and family rights.

Finally, it can be said that Arundhati Roy has used her fictional space to expose the hypocrisy of Keralite society in which the big things such as gender, class, and caste are used to subordinate the small things that want to light up like "mombattis" in their own light and pass on such light to others. Roy's affiliation with the subaltern group is evident in her ability to make the silent characters speak. The four subaltern characters speak through their actions. They are not mere victims. They are also transgressors. Their stories are the stories from below, and the basis of an alternative historiography. Roy chooses to avoid universal Marxist, Gender or Race related terms because Roy is alive to the uniqueness of the caste system. In my opinion, of the three exclusionary grids, caste is the main reason for subalternity in *The God of Small Things*.

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