

# GENDER AND SUBALTERNITY IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*

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**“Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.” — Arundhati Roy**

## 1.1 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 dangers of the rise of Communism and the residual effects of the caste system 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

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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 a 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 article. Given her environmental concerns, recent scholarship 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 article, 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, VellyaPaapen, 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, arguably 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.

### **1.2 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<sup>1</sup>. 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. Ammu 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

“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 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, mothersmothers, cousins cousins, jam

jam, and 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 divorcees. 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 lovemarrriage 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 repeating her words 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, "Forherself 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 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 as 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 phallogocentric 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 article..

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 express 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. The other touchable workers were however, 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, the first one to be, 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,

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 thus 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 patriarchal structure of 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).

### 1.3 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 OrangedrinkLemondrink 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 OrangedrinkLemondrink 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.

#### **1.4 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 OrangedrinkLemondrink 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. For this perhaps. We need to look at a type of female space in the Indian context which takes both the local culture and nature into consideration.

### 1.5 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*\*\*. 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

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\*\* 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).



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.

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.

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 also true that Roy is engaging with the Love Laws to break the negative duality that binds women. 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 prominent but not paramount in the novel.

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