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## Confronting the web of power politics: An interpretation of Arundhati Roy's the god of small things

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### Abstract

The Good of Small Things is regarded as a novel of protest against injustice and oppression on women & subaltern. Arundhati Roy deliberately wrote this novel in order to question and liberate the age old Indian society of patriarchal dominance and supremacy. With this objective in view to awakening public awareness in support of oppressed and humiliated women, she focuses particularly and specifically on the predicament of social injustice and torture meted out to women in their marital and familial situations. Roy Skillfully delineates the various scenes and incidents of physical and emotional torture inflicted upon the helpless and powerless women in their state of adversity and suffering. Throughout The God of Small Things, Roy champions the cause of oppressed women and espouses their rebellious sentiments and outrage resulting in reaction against the injustice and oppression suffered by them.

**Keywords:** Oppression, subaltern, patriarchal, injustice

### Introduction

The God of Small Things is a text of subversion. It presents the things which would be impossible to tell to anyone else – the madness of biological urges, the incestuous embrace, and hideous violence of the master discourse from the point of view of the victims, the marginalized, untouchables, women & children. The God of Small Things displays character caught in the web of power-relation which determines their lives. The central theme of *The God of Small Things* is the confrontation between 'The Big Man- the Laltain and Small Man- the Mombatti. in other words, the book shows a maladjustment between the God of Big Things – Pappachi, Baby Kochama, Mammachi, Chacko, Comrade Pillai and Inspector Thomas Mathew, and 'The god of Small Things'- Ammu =, Velutha, Rahel, Estha and Sophic Mol. It is to be noted here that the term 'Laltain' and 'Mombatti' are highly suggestive. Both Laltain and Mombatti give us light and burn another light. The Laltain is well fed and well protected as it can bravely face the blowing wind. But on the other hand, the Mombatti has no glass. No protection and no support. It can easily be blown out by the surge of wind. But the advantage of the Mombatti is that it can very soon light another lamp, but Laltain, in comparison with a Mombatti, is somewhat stubborn to burn other's light. Thus through these beautiful connotations, the author has successfully tried to arouse our sense of pity and catharsis for the Mombattis – the down- trodden and have-notes, the dalits and the deserted, the marginalized and the defenseless.

In Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things, the love laws govern who should be loved, how and how much. The love laws function as surveillance to obtain and maintain power and order. However, sexual desire proves to be the one thing that caste and gender cannot successfully regulate. Ammu and Velutha's sexual desire provide a perfect venue for tracing panoptic operations in Indian society. The clear opposition of Ammu and Velutha have to the love laws exemplifies how "the value scales which serve to classify the world be modified so that the familiar boundaries which organize people into societies, castes and families have to be questioned, moved or even removed" (Cabaret 75). Because the trysts of Velutha and Ammu break two love laws, the situation must not only be prevented but also ended completely. The families of the transgressors come to fill in the roles necessary for panopticism to work.

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Vellya Paapen, realizing the potential effects of the transgressions of his son, sets in motion the punishment to mediate appropriate behavior by telling Mammachi someone who can do something about the situation. Ironically, baby Kochamma who formerly tries to break the love laws with father Mulligan, comes to be “the representative watcher of purity” (Roy) and exacts punishment.

Ammu and Velutha despite extreme caste differences, engage in sexual intercourse due to their passion for each other. “The only way to contain their intimacy is to literally separate Ammu and Velutha by locking Ammu in her room” (Roy 239). Essentially, the two are separated – Velutha physically leaving the town – until proper punishment can be meted out. When Velutha and Ammu die, the ‘scourge’ is gone and ironically will not spread. “The Ammu – Velutha relationship must end in death because while the affair is conducted secretly, it is also done so in full visibility” (Bose 67). While Ammu’s death is the result of her banishment and resulting loneliness, Velutha’s death is a direct result of crossing caste lines. Velutha’s gradual assimilation of limited privileges of the ‘Touchable’ threatens the power system established by the love laws and the caste system. So, Velutha must be eradicated, and is. While the Ammu – Velutha affair exhibits Panoptic surveillance by those wielding power, it also resists the system by undermining it and giving tough resistance.

Untouchables completely undermine the power structure, so carefully set by the caste system. Ammu and Chacko are equally guilty of breaking the love laws, yet Chacko does not face any punishment. The clear double standard emphasized by Friedman to show how Chacko receives no punishment for his transgression, whereas Ammu and Velutha do, proves why panoptic operations are resisted” (Friedman 255). A sexual and hierarchical double standard make the effectiveness of the Panopticon questionable: “They all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory” (Roy 31)

In this novel, women form a subservient class in the patriarchal discourse because they are at the mercy of a powerful ideology. Pappachi often beats Mammachi with a brass vase. He sends his son Chacko to England for higher studies but thinks that it a waste of money send Ammu to a college even in a nearby town. Baby Kochamma believes that “a married daughter had no position in her parents’ home. As for a divorced daughter ...she had no position anywhere at all. As for divorced daughter from a love marriage, well words could not describe Baby Kochamma’s outrage” (Roy 45). The woman as a daughter has no claims to her father’s property. Chacko tells Ammu, “what’s yours is mine and what’s mine is also mine” (Roy 57).

The novel shows two transgressions. The first one is by Ammu and Velutha who flout the law about sexual union of a low caste, untouchable man with an upper caste woman. There desires are aptly described as a form of ‘madness’ in more senses than one. They are mad in their libidinous desire of each other but they are ‘mad’ also because they do not realize the consequences of their actions in terms of retribution from the patriarchy, casteism, political party and the police – the so called guardians of public morality. There smothered by social injustice, Ammu rebels against the established social norms of the society by establishing illicit relations with Velutha and even goes to the police station and argues against the detention of this lower cast

and lower class person. In this way Ammu resists and challenges oppressive and repressive social and political structures. She does not succeed in bringing a tangible change but puts a brave fight for realizing her dreams.

The second transgression is the incestuous relationship of Rahel and Estha which may be treated as consequence of the first one. The seven year old twins, Rahel and Estha were subjected to such emotional stress that their personalities were distorted forever. As a result both were emptied of all emotions and none could develop a meaningful relationship later on, and they just drifted through life. Rahel went to study in a school of architecture in Delhi, even got married to an American girl, went to Boston, but failed to lead a normal life. Estha was divorced and came back to Ayemenem to lead a sad and lonely life.

The God of Small Things shows how power/knowledge discourse seeks to turn Rahel and Eshta into ‘docile bodies’ and how the two twins were given drills in spelling-corrections and compositions to make them learn English. Similarly, Baby Kochamma asserts her power and forces them to speak in English at home so that they will not cut a sorry figure in front of Margaret and Sophie Mol. In this novel it is not that just Ammu and Velutha who undergo power repression and offer resistance, the other characters are also caught in the relational network of the power-structures. Rahel and Estha, the seven years kids defy the power of Ammu and Baby Kochamma and refuse to behave in the manner they were ordered to. Baby Kochamma offers resistance to the religious discourse and family power to turn a Roman Christian in the hope that she would be able to be near Father Mulligan in the Convent in Madras. In short, Foucault’s observation that all relations are power relations in which resistance is inbuilt proved valid if we look at the interpersonal relations of the characters in *The God of Small Things*.

### Conclusion

The novel provides us an absorbing account of ruthless and repressive power of discourses and ideological practices. The novel shows how individual resistance is brutally crushed by the master discourses of caste, class and gender in the age old Indian social and patriarchal systems. In recent interviews, Roy has herself drawn attention to the connection between power and knowledge, and has criticized in her characteristic way the role of education, especially higher education to preserve and justify the actions of governments and institutions. For Roy, any specialist knowledge must be treated with suspicion for protecting its own logic and approach. She holds them (the specialists) responsible for “politically trying to prevent people from understanding what is really being done to them” (Roy 2004). To sum up, it may be stated that Roy’s idea of oppression in the broad sense is subsumed in the issues of female marginalization and entrenched social inequalities. The God of Small Things opens up in the thematic and ideological sense, to a number of positions in Foucauldian Discourse of power, as attempted between power and powerlessness and the endless circular conflicts they are engaged in.

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