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Narrating Multiple Marginalities in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

Dr. Md. Abullais

Department of English, Deochand College, Hajipur, Bihar, India; B.R.A. Bihar University,
Muzaffarpur, Bihar, India

E-mail: abullais2010@gmail.com

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Abstract

The concept of marginalization has become highly significant in contemporary literary practice. It serves as a critical approach to studying literature by foregrounding the voices of marginalized groups within society. Marginalized communities often experience social, political, economic, and legal deprivation in society, which denies them their fundamental human rights across societies. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is considered one of the most powerful literary explorations of marginality, social exclusion, and resistance in postcolonial India. As a novelist, she explores caste, marginalization, and personal trauma through nuanced storytelling. As an activist, her essays emphasise more directly on subjects like state power, displacement, and inequality. *The God of Small Things* presents the picture of a post-colonial nation with all its wide-ranging varieties while her non-fiction throws light on the global issues with all their repulsion.

Keywords: Marginalization, Caste, Post colonialism, Power, Inequality

Indian English Literature has played a significant role in the development of society. It has influenced civilisations, transformed political systems and brought injustice to light. It offers a profound insight into human experience, enabling us to connect through shared desires and emotions. Indian writers in English were profoundly shaped by the political, social, and ideological upheavals of their time. The emergence of Indian English

fiction reflects the cultural perspectives of the people. Arundhati Roy, a prominent voice in the anti-globalization movement, has been a sharp critic of the many social and political issues that continue to trouble the Indian nation. As a novelist, she addresses social issues in order to create greater social awareness. Arundhati Roy's literary works explore themes of inequality, economic justice, cultural diversity, and participatory democracy. She has also

written a collection of essays in which she addresses various political and social issues and raising her voice against controversial political matters in an effort to inspire social change.

Arundhati Roy, as a writer and activist, focuses on issues related to human rights and environmental causes. She is a committed writer whose concerns consistently center on the oppressed and the marginalized. Through her activism and creative writing, Arundhati Roy explores the interconnections between domination and the oppression of the subaltern and marginalized communities, including women and nature, in contemporary India. Arundhati Roy has written numerous essays on contemporary politics and culture. She is widely recognized for her debut novel, *The God of Small Things*, which is semi-autobiographical and significantly draws upon her childhood experiences in Aymanam. The publication of *The God of Small Things* brought Arundhati Roy international recognition and acclaim. She believes that writers should remain politically conscious and challenge systems of injustice and oppressive power. Arundhati Roy has stated in several interviews that writers should not merely aim to market a product; rather, they should express their convictions openly and defend them, even in the face of strong opposition or unpopularity. India is a diverse nation composed of people from various cultural and religious backgrounds, each practicing distinct traditions, beliefs, and ways of life. Arundhati Roy's works explore how minorities in India become victims of marginalization and exclusion within the broader social and political framework, as contentious politics often intensify the challenges faced by these communities. Arundhati Roy also emphasizes the need to advocate more strongly for women's rights in the developing world. Her writings and public statements reflect her belief that women are often undervalued, exploited, and mistreated, particularly in developing nations such as India.

In 1997, Arundhati Roy published her debut novel, *The God of Small Things*, which received widespread critical acclaim. The semi-autobiographical novel broke away from the conventional plots and simple prose commonly found in popular bestsellers. Written in a lyrical style and centered on South Asian themes and characters, the narrative moved fluidly across time. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* became the highest-selling book by a non-expatriate Indian author and earned the prestigious Booker Prize in 1998. The novel portrays the practice of caste discrimination among South Indian Christians, highlighting how the caste system was used to oppress and marginalize lower-caste communities. This novel exposes the hierarchical structures of power and oppression that exist at different levels of contemporary society. Arundhati Roy explores how distinctions based on caste, class, gender, and race operate through social institutions and influence the lives of marginalized and subaltern communities.

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, Arundhati Roy's latest fiction novel, took nearly two decades to complete and was published in 2017. The novel examines themes such as gender inequality, militarism, and social prejudice in contemporary India. The novel reflects the fractured nature of the contemporary world. Through this narrative, Arundhati Roy highlights the struggles of the subaltern classes, whose voices have long been excluded from political and social discourse. The work portrays how the elite and patriarchal structures continue to marginalize minorities, Dalits, transgender individuals, and others who lack access to power and representation.

Even after decades of Independence, Dalits continue to endure severe suffering, discrimination, and exploitation at the hands of the upper castes. Instead of making sincere efforts to eradicate this social evil, politicians often appear to exploit it for their own political interests. *The God of Small Things* serve as

powerful portrayals of the injustice and suffering endured by Dalits and untouchables since the emergence of a stratified social order. The novel portrays the exploitation, oppression, and suffering inflicted upon Dalits by the dominant upper-caste sections of society. The latter portrays the persecution of Dalits and their silent resistance through the relationship between Velutha and the upper-caste characters such as Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, Comrade Pillai, and Inspector Thomas Mathew in *The God of Small Things*.

The God of Small Things also captures the notions of purity and pollution through one of its significant passages. The omniscient narrator, Arundhati Roy herself, poignantly addresses the issue of untouchability in the following passage:

As a young boy, Velutha would come with Vellya Paapen to the back entrance of the Ayemenem House to deliver the coconuts they had plucked from the trees in the compound. Pappachi would not allow Paravans into the house. Nobody would. They were not allowed touch anything that Touchables touched. 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 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 polluted breath away from those whom they addressed (Roy 73-74).

Thus, Dalits are communities that remain socially marginalized, politically exploited, economically disadvantaged, and culturally suppressed. They are marginalized people who are often engaged in low-paid and menial occupations. The term "Dalit" refers to a community of people who were traditionally considered Untouchables in Indian society. It is a modern term used for the untouchables in India, literally denoting the oppressed and downtrodden people who endure exploitation. In Ambedkar's words, "The dalit factor is a form of conditions of life that reflect exploitation, oppression and marginalization of the dalits on account of social, economic, cultural and political dominance of the upper castes influenced by Brahmin ideology".

Caste and religion have had a subterranean presence in Indian politics since the time of the nationalist movement. Since then, the situation has changed dramatically. Political parties based on caste and religion have emerged prominently and now occupy a significant space in Indian politics. Their influence has become so significant that caste-based parties have come to power in several states. More importantly, caste and religious consciousness have become so dominant that almost every political party shapes its political strategies with an eye toward potential caste and religious support. As a result, caste antagonism and religious conflict have become increasingly prevalent, while the tradition of accommodation and cultural interaction has gradually eroded, creating a widening gulf among religions and castes.

Arundhati Roy critiques the patriarchal structure of male-dominated society and advocates women's emancipation through bold protest and open defiance of patriarchal norms. Roy's fulmination against such male dominated society is evident in *The God of Small Things*. The novel provides a powerful critique of patriarchal culture and male dominated society. The novel presents a strong critique of

patriarchal culture and the dominance of male-centered society. The novel narrates the tragic story of Ammu, a lonely and helpless woman who, abandoned by her husband and neglected by her family, ultimately meets a sorrowful fate. The novel portrays her relentless struggle for survival and dignity. Although she resists and fights against the injustices inflicted upon her, she ultimately succumbs to the countless sufferings she endures. Ammu emerges as the central character of the novel.

The novel presents three generations of women: Baby Kochamma, Mammachi, Ammu and Rahel, and all are unhappy in their own way, but the story mainly concerns Ammu who became a victim of male-dominated society when she was not allowed to pursue her studies. She finished her school education the year her father had retired from his job at Delhi and settled at Ayemenem. Ammu's father, Pappachi in the novel, considered the college education of women an 'unnecessary expense' and so Ammu's education had suddenly come to stop and she had no other alternative than to come with her father to Ayemenem and wait for marriage and meanwhile help her mother with housework. When no suitable marriage proposal arrived within a reasonable period, Ammu gradually became desperate. Life in Ayemenem made her feel like a captive, confined to household duties and trapped in a monotonous and mechanical routine. The abrupt end of her education, the uncongenial atmosphere at home, and the absence of a promising marital future deepened her sense of frustration and desperation. Society often regards the sexual experiences of men as a natural aspect of their personal growth, whereas similar experiences in a woman's life are viewed as a disgrace and a loss of honour and virtue. Ammu represents the struggles and dilemmas faced by the average woman in the contemporary social structure.

Arundhati Roy, in *The God of Small Things*, poignantly portrays the grave dangers of

social stratification and its political dimensions. The novel depicts how an untouchable is denied even the final chance to save his life by the union leader of the very political organization to which he had remained a committed, loyal, and genuine member. The novelist powerfully challenges the supporters of the caste system through the heart-rending depiction of Velutha's custodial murder. The man chiefly responsible for Velutha's tragic end is K.N.M. Pillai, whom Arundhati Roy describes as "was essentially a political man. A professional omeletteer, who walked through the world like a chameleon (Roy 14)". It was Pillai who could have saved Velutha's life by extending political support to him, as the Kottayam police were reluctant and apprehensive about subjecting a politically affiliated person to third-degree torture. Arundhati Roy highlights the nexus between politicians and the police when she writes:

Inspector Thomas Mathew was a prudent man. He took one precaution. He sent a Jeep to fetch comrade K.N.M. Pillai to the police station. It was crucial for him to know whether the Paravan had any political support or whether he was operating alone. Though he himself was a Congress man, he did not intend to risk run-ins with the merriest Government (Roy 262).

Another political dimension of social stratification is reflected in the effort to expand the Christian demographic through the conversion of untouchables, luring them with the promise of a respectable life free from discrimination. The conversion of untouchables to Christianity reflects the political aspect of social stratification. The Syrian Christians convert the untouchables to Christianity not out of sympathy or genuine concern for their suffering. Instead, they do so merely to increase their demographic strength. They remain indifferent to the wretched condition and miserable existence of the Paravans portrayed in

the novel. Their real concern lies in demographic consolidation. They seek to increase the numerical strength of their community, since in politics, numbers hold the greatest significance. It is a well-established and widely practised reality that demographic strength enhances political influence. In other words, the political power of a particular community or caste largely depends on its numerical strength and demographic position. In the politics of social division, numerical strength plays a decisive role. It is numbers that create the distinction between majority and minority, and these categories ultimately shape political decisions and actions. Roy discusses the issue of conversion arising from untouchability in considerable detail:

When the British came to Malabar, a number of Paravans, Pelayas and Pulayas (among them Velutha's grandfather, Kelan) converted to Christianity and joined the Anglican church to escape the scourge of Untouchability. As added incentive they were given a little food and money. They were known as the Rice- Christians. It didn't take them long to realize that they had jumped from the frying pan into the fire. They were made to have separate churches, with separate services, and separate priests. As a special favour they were even given their own separate Pariah Bishop. After Independence they found they were not entitled to any Government benefits like job reservations or bank loans at low interest rates, because officially, on paper, they were Christians, and therefore casteless (Roy 74).

Thus, Roy here shows a kind of interplay between religion, politics, caste and economics. The Syrian Christians persuaded the so-called untouchable Paravans to embrace apostasy by promising them improved living conditions, though their actions were driven neither by altruism nor by any philanthropic motive. Moderately, they do so in order to reinforce their demographic base and thereby become politically significant. The outcastes,

namely the Paravans, accepted this unsolicited favour in order to escape the oppression and mistreatment inflicted upon them by the upper-caste communities. The Paravans were persuaded to undergo proselytisation in the hope of achieving economic upliftment, but their aspiration for a dignified life soon turned into disillusionment when they came to perceive themselves as outsiders within the Christian community. They became Christians with the hope of living life like Christians, where there is no question of touchable and untouchable. But unfortunately becoming Christians cost them particularly. Firstly, their ambition of leading a reputable life remains unsatisfied because they are treated as substandard people even by Syrian Christians. Secondly, they got disadvantaged of public welfare schemes launched by the government like reservation in jobs, bank loans at low interest rates because they lost their tag of socially backward caste by becoming Christians. Here, the concept of social stratification is adversely influenced by the politics of religion and economic interests.

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