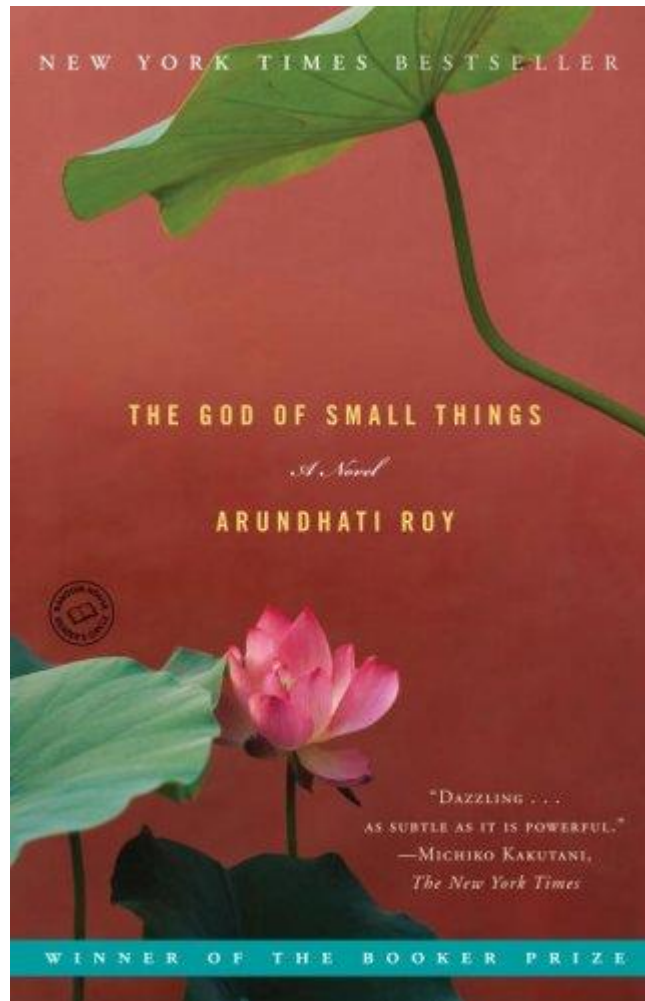


**Tracing the Voices of the Downtrodden:  
A Reading of *The God of Small Things***

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**Abstract**

Now-a-days globalization seems to have taken over every form of literature everywhere in the world, but there's still a form of literature that thrives on being different in every country and every local community which moves away from the mainstream, called subaltern literature. The voice of the marginalized is mostly muted. It is socially, culturally, economically and legally

deprived of one's 'right' to voice their protest as a human being in every society. Voices from the subaltern: in the Indian English Novel it is located and explored in the works of eminent novelists like Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Arundhati Roy, Rohinton Mistry, Vikram Seth and David Davidar. Arundhati Roy as a Booker Prize winning novelist has shown keen awareness of the problems of many of her characters through her debut novel *The God of Small Things*. Therefore, my aim in writing this paper is to show how Roy rightly brings forth the characters who have become victims of violence, exploitation, alienation and exile as they are the ones on the margin of society.

**Key words:** Globalization, Marxist literature, Subaltern literature, Voice of the marginalized, Indian English Novel.

### **Arundhati Roy and Her Writings**

Indian novel after 1980's witnessed a new wave of writers, who potentially handled diversity of issues. Their works are known for keen depiction of contemporary social and political issues. Majority of novelists realistically wrote about problems faced by women in a male dominated society. Arundhati Roy is one of them, who have been acclaimed as a leading interpreter of brutalities in a rapidly changing Indian society. Her writing is exclusively about current controversial issues like caste discrimination, gender discrimination, environmental protection and marginalization. She has used marginalization as a literary device to explore the sufferings of peripheral sections of society, especially women and subalterns. The novel *The God of Small Things* directly deals with the marginalization of three generations of women in an orthodox Syrian Christian family in Kerala and two Paravans both father and son. These three women are: Mammachi, who is representative of old generation of women; Ammu who is representative of the second generation; and Rahel is a daughter of Ammu, representative of the third generation of women in the same family. They are severely marginalized by the male dominated society. Velutha, son of an old Paravan, Vellya Pappen is the victim of caste discrimination.

### **Mammachi, a Significant Character**

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Social institutions like family, marriage, religion, politics and government are responsible factors for their marginalization. Mammachi, is a significant character in the novel, representative of the old generation of women. She is the mother of Ammu and Chacko. She has faced brutal marginalization. The man who is responsible for the marginalization of Mammachi is no other than her own husband Pappachi. She has been the victim of her husband's brutality throughout her life. Mammachi is beaten either with a brass vase or an ivory handled riding crop by her husband. Mammachi had exceptional talent for music, especially the violin; that arouses jealousy in the mind of her husband. The pinnacle of his jealousy is aroused when the violin trainer makes the mistake of telling her husband that his wife is "exceptionally talented" and "potentially concert class". Later he breaks the bow of the violin one night and throws it in the river. The same jealousy is expressed again when she started the pickle making business; Pappachi refuses to help her because pickle-making is not "a suitable job for high-ranking ex-Government official". Thus the marriage of Mammachi with the sadist Pappachi lacks understanding, love and co-operation. This results in her marginalization.

### **Ammu, a Marginalized Character**

Ammu is the second important woman character, who emerges as a much marginalized character in the novel. She faces double marginalization at the hands of men as well as women. She is the female protagonist of the novel, being the daughter of Pappachi an Imperial Entomologist and Mammachi, a talented violinist and the sister of Chacko, a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford. Yet, since her childhood she is subjected to patriarchal blows. We expect her upbringing to have been full of care and love, but in reality it shocks the readers. She grows up under the shadow of a male chauvinist father who shows no mercy in his tyrannical attitude towards her. Even her mother Mammachi denies her the right of love and care as a daughter. Her childhood was full of suffering and hardship; as a child her father mercilessly beat her 'with iron-topped riding crop'. This inhuman action of her father is a clear indication of her marginalization in a family, where the father ruled the roost with the help of violence.

The marginalization of Ammu is made possible by the traditional patriarchal family structure, where the female child is always unwelcome and treated as a burden on the family. However, her brother Chacko is privileged in every strata of family life. After completion of her

schooling, Ammu is not allowed to get further education, while her brother is sent to Oxford University for higher education. This dual nature of her parents is prime factor for her marginalization. “Pappachi insisted that a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl. So Ammu had no choice, but to leave Delhi and move with them”. (38) Her father’s remark on her education clearly shows that she has only a secondary place in family. She is intentionally deprived of higher education, which is the one ray of hope in her future life. Her father remains as a hurdle between her freedom and future progress.

When her family shifts from Delhi to Ayemenem, Ammu’s life is engulfed in boredom, isolation and waiting for marriage proposal. The house at Ayemenem is like a prison for her. “There was little for a young girl to do in Ayemenem other than to wait for marriage Proposals while she helped her mother with the housework... All day she dreamed of escaping from Ayemenem and the clutches of her ill-tempered father and bitter, long-suffering mother.” (38-39)

At Ayemenem, Ammu was desperately in search of opportunity that would end her unbearable relationship with her parents. As she gets an opportunity to meet her distant Aunt in Calcutta, she grabs this golden opportunity without hesitation and marries a young Hindu. Her husband is working as an Assistant Manager at a tea estate in Assam. She marries him in the hope that this marriage will bring her all the love and affection which she was deprived of at her parental house. But her bad luck continues as “her husband turns out to be not just a heavy drinker, but a full-blown alcoholic”. (40) She gives birth to twins - Estha and Rahel. When her husband’s boss casts an evil eye on her and her husband wanted to push her into his bungalow to be “looked after”, she runs away and returns unwelcomed to Ayemenem “to everything she had fled from only a few years ago, except that now she had two young children and no more dreams”. (42) Marriage for Ammu has been a horrible experience; her husband is the reason for her physical and psychological suffering. Thus marriage institution becomes the reason for further marginalization of Ammu.

The divorce from drunkard husband leaves her no option, but to return to her parents with two children. A divorced woman has no place and respect in the traditional family. Thus, the family members are hostile, neglectful and unfriendly to her and her children. She receives

mental torture from the ladies of her family. In spite of all these sufferings, she loves and cares for her innocent children. She plans for their future, their education and perfection of their manners. She becomes mother and father to both of them. At this stage it is observed that the mother in her character is predominant than the woman. The gradual detachment from the Ayemenem House increases the pace of her attachment towards Velutha, the untouchable factory worker. When she meets Valutha, a Paravan after many years, it makes her take a fatal decision to “to love by night the man her children loved by day”. (44) This couple, neglected and discarded by the orthodox society, found solace in union.

### **Velutha, a Representative of the Downtrodden**

Velutha is the representative of the untouchable in the novel. He is black in complexion and there is an irony with the name Velutha as it suggests ‘something white’. In the novel, “He was called Velutha - which means White in Malayalam - because he was so black”. (73) His father Vellya Paapen, was a toddy tapper. They were allowed to deliver the coconuts which had been plucked from the trees in the back entrance of the Ayemenem House. Velutha accomplished himself as a carpenter. Mammachi was very fond of him, but with a certain amount of distance as he was an untouchable. Though Velutha was an untouchable, Mammachi utilized his ability in producing various things, paying him less than the other touchable carpenter. Caste issues paved the way for his downfall despite his skill in craftsmanship.

The secret love between Ammu and Velutha goes on for thirteen days, until it is reported by Valutha’s father Vellya Paapen to Mammachi. When this disastrous affair is revealed, Valutha is grabbed by police and killed brutally on a false case of rape without getting an opportunity to open his mouth and speak out what had actually happened. He is forced to admit the crime and dies with a sad heart.

Even Comrade K.N.M. Pillai played a double standard on the basis of caste issues. Though Velutha was a card-holder of the Communist Party, Comrade Pillai does not like Velutha because he is more concerned about his votes and any kind of punishment to Velutha in the name of discipline will be a welcome reward to both Pillai and the factory workers. So Velutha lost his political support which was the last hope to survive. When Ammu went to police

station to set the record straight against Valutha, at that time the police officer insulted her with remark that the “Kottayam police does not take statement from *Veshyas* (prostitutes) and their illegitimate children”. (58)

This brutal behavior of the police shows that he has used his power to marginalize Ammu. At the end of the novel, Ammu is exiled from home by her family members. She is separated from her children and not allowed to visit Ayemenem. She desperately tries to seek a good job in anonymous places. Tired, exhausted, sick and finally defeated, she is found dead in a grimy room in Bharat Lodge in Aleppy.

After death her humiliation does not end, the church refuses to bury Ammu. Finally cremated in the electric crematorium where only beggars, derelicts and police custody dead are cremated. Throughout the course of Ammu’s life, we observe that she was severely marginalized by social institutions like family, marriage, religion and police. We also observe that for her marginalization not only the men are responsible, but women like Mammachi and Baby Kochamma have equal share. Both Ammu and Velutha are victimized as scapegoats in Roy’s novel.

### **Rahel, Yet Another Marginalized Character**

The third marginal woman character in the novel is Rahel. She is a less marginal character in comparison with her mother and grandmother. She never faces domestic violence as Ammu and Mammachi had faced. Still she remains a marginalized character, because of being a daughter of neglected Ammu. She grows up without proper health guidance. Like Ammu, she also faces marginalization and its tormenting effects throughout her life. She too experiences insult and humiliation in her childhood just as her mother had experienced. Her life totally is disturbed and deserted because of the tormenting memories of past. She becomes independent and loses her qualities as a girl. She is humiliated in front of an assembly of stern-mouthed nuns and sniggering school girls in Nazareth Convent at the age of eleven for decorating a knob of fresh cow dung with small flowers, outside her Housemistress’s garden gate. She is forced to read the meaning of depravity from the Oxford Dictionary. For her marginalization past memories associated with her mother play a key role.

## Marginalization as a Medium

In a nutshell, we may find that Arundhati Roy has used marginalization as a medium to show the miserable lives of women in orthodox Indian society. Through the marginalized characters like Ammu, Mammachi and Rahel, Roy has presented sufferings, pain, physical and sexual violence against women in a male dominated society. Even Roy bitterly criticized the social institutions like Family, Marriage, Religion and Police authority which are responsible factors for the marginalization in the novel. Through the portrayal of these characters in *The God of Small Things*, Roy has very successfully presented before the world the deplorable condition of the women and the downtrodden low castes of the Indian society.

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