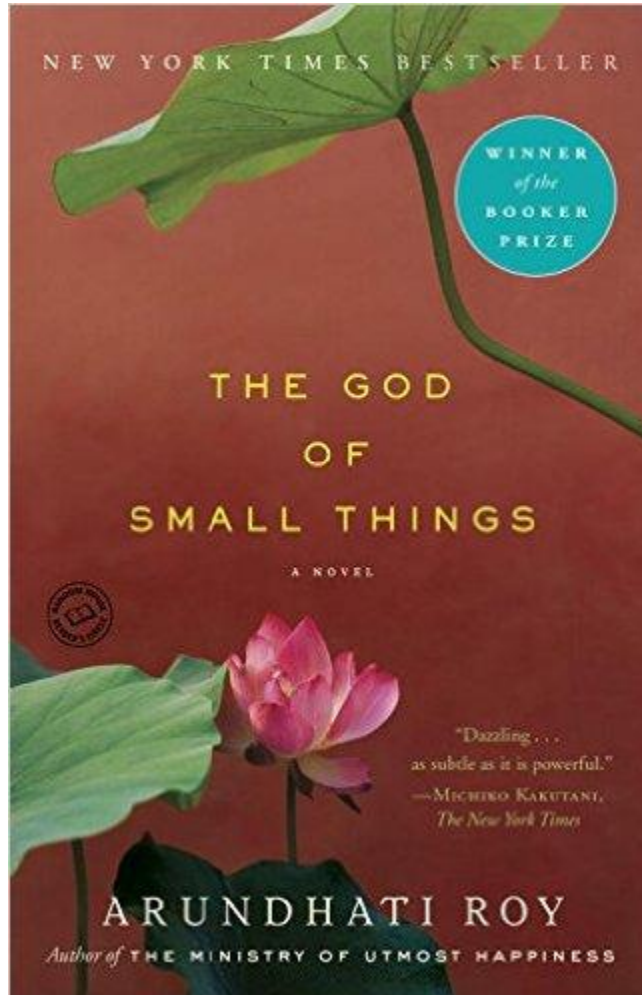


**Social Conflicts as Delineated in Arundhati Roy's
*The God of Small Things***

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Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

Arundhati Roy's **The God of Small Things** received mixed reactions after being published in 1997. Due to the author's Indian nationality, some critics hailed her as a female Rushdie and many critics praised Roy's linguistic originality and inventiveness with the English language. Meanwhile, in some parts of India there were violent public riots due to its caste transgressive

content, and some left-wing critics chastised Roy's (negative) portrayal of the communist party in the novel. Apart from raising controversies as well as acclaim, Roy's novel has also been analyzed by scholars from various theoretical angles: Feminism, Postcolonialism, Post-structuralism, Marxism, New Historicism and so on.

Postcolonial Feminist Perspective

Roy's novel from a postcolonial feminist perspective, with a special focus on how she models different representations of women, taking as a background the discussions about subalternity and the representations of women from the so called Third World in theory and literature, as well as the concept of agency from Cultural Studies. The term subaltern, although somewhat disputed, is commonly used in a general sense to represent "subordinated classes and peoples" in short marginalized groups and the lower classes, especially in formerly colonized, Third World countries. The purpose of exploring how Roy fictionally constructs marginalized female voices will be reached by studying and comparing three main female characters in *The God of Small Things*—Mammachi, Baby Kochamma and Ammu—centering on their different ways of relating to Velutha, the male hero of the novel. These three women related to and respond in different ways to Velutha, who is a Paravan, the lowest caste among the Untouchables. Depending on how they relate to him, different aspects of their characters are revealed.

Several Layers of Oppression

In Roy's description of Kerala in the novel, there are several layers of oppression stemming from colonialism, patriarchy, religion and caste. These structures are often intertwined and serve as a complex oppressive system that is sometimes difficult to dissect. For instance, caste was often adapted within the Christian churches so that there were different churches for Touchables and Untouchables respectively, reproducing the caste system within the religious realm. Roy also allows her narrator to give a quite unflattering version of why Marxism grew particularly strong in Kerala:

“A second theory claimed that it had to do with the comparatively high level of literacy in the state. Perhaps. Except the high literacy level was largely because of the communist movement. The real secret was that communism crept into Kerala insidiously.” (64).

Failure of Communists

Thus, according to the narrator in this novel, the communist party in Kerala did very little to challenge the caste system in itself, despite their high-pitched slogans that “Caste is Class, comrades” (266). Another interesting thing to bear in mind while reading this novel is the relatively high status of women in Kerala (compared to the rest of India). This higher status might perhaps serve as a part of an explanation to the strength of agency that some of the female characters display. However well-meant, universal claims of a global womanhood always run the risk of marginalizing someone and of leaving culturally specific patterns of power and oppression unseen. This is why Roy’s novel is particularly interesting because it focuses on how women relate to other women but also to different kinds of men. There is no standard male-female dichotomy in the novel but rather a plurality of relationships. Women as a group are more likely to be deeply divided by boundaries like class, ethnicity, and nationality.

Subalternity and *The God of Small Things*

Subalternity, this line of thought can also be found in the works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who criticizes how western feminists have attempted to apply their theories to a Third World context under the good intention that they work on behalf of their oppressed sisters who cannot speak for themselves. The fact that all women share similar biological features does not mean that they also share the same culture, values, beliefs and experiences. Considering this, it becomes of course very difficult to speak for anyone else with different experiences from them. Spivak addresses these issues in depth and scrutinizes the Subaltern Studies Group’s attempts to revise the history of writing of colonial India by revisiting historical colonial archives, where the reports of subaltern insurgency has been filed, in an attempt to retrieve subaltern perspectives.

If one applies this narrow definition of subalternity, there is in fact no such character in *The God of Small Things*. Not even Velutha, who is “a Paravan with a 10 future”, with skills and brains which should allow him to move upwards in society, had he not fallen in love with a Touchable woman. If there is such a character in the novel (‘pure subaltern’, according to Spivak), perhaps Velutha’s brother, Kuttappen, would be the best example. He lies inside their hut paralyzed “from his chest downwards” after falling off a coconut tree, unable to move, a “good,

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safe Paravan” who could “neither read nor write” (197). He is, so to speak, the ultimate symbol for non-agency; he does not have the possibility to make significant choices of any kind. In a short passage, the narrator reveals some of his thoughts as:

“On bad days the orange walls held hands and bent over him, inspecting him like malevolent doctors, slowly, deliberately, squeezing the breath out of him and making him scream. Sometimes they receded of their own accord, and the room he lay in grew impossibly large, terrorizing him with the specter of his own insignificance. That too made him cry out” (197).

This scream becomes a symbol for his inability to speak; his voice becomes a scream that echoes unheard. Otherwise Kuttappen is almost absent in the novel, he lies silently in his hut and he will most likely not be able to move upwards in society but will remain very dependent on others: a truly and sadly ‘pure subaltern’.

Roy’s novel actually addresses the problems connected with representing subjects/individuals at one point in the story, through the voice of the local communist leader K.N.M. Pillai. When Chacko (a factory owner) reveals his intentions to organize the factory workers into a union to Comrade Pillai, Pillai’s answer is: “comrade, you cannot stage the revolution for them. You can only create awareness. Educate them. They must launch their own struggle. They must overcome their fears” (265). Hence, Roy seems to be aware of the problems connected with representing individuals from diverse socio-economic habitats.

Ammu in *The God of Small Things*

Roy has pinpointed this very issue in *The God of Small Things*. The character Ammu (as well as her daughter Rahel) is not apt to conform to these female role models; in fact they often act contrary to the expectations imposed on them, despite the social cost of transgressing the conventions. These ‘other forces’ (the structure) in this context could be for instance the caste-system, patriarchy, colonialism, religion and politics. The structures of power and oppression are often referred to and discussed by Roy in *The God of Small Things* but the individual perspective is never being neglected. An interpretation of Roy’s novel is that it is an exploration of subaltern agency on the margin because it focuses on men and women and children who struggle for their right to possess a voice of their own.

Representations of People on the Margin

Roy intended to make a difference with her novel, to create representations of people on the margin that are seldom heard in depth. From the analysis and discussion, one shall now examine more closely on the chosen characters in the novel. The first and eldest of these three characters is called Mammachi, meaning simply grandmother (her full name is Soshamma Ipe); she is from a Syrian-Christian family and wife to the late Pappachi (meaning grandfather, his full name is Benaan John Ipe), who hit Mammachi regularly with a brass-vase, leaving 'crescent shaped' scars on her skull. She has one daughter, Ammu (the black sheep of the family), and a son, Chacko (a Rhodes-scholar, educated in Oxford). Mammachi starts a small business in making pickles and Jams in her kitchen, and starts later a business her son Chacko soon takes charge of and develops into a factory when he moves back home after his divorce. Mammachi thinks highly of her family as well as of herself and has an almost obsessive habit of ranking every person she ever meets, which normally ends up with them being situated somewhere down below her in the hierarchy of her mind. Towards her husband, she displays the mentioned idealized 'suffering wife' attitude, submits herself to him, accepts her fate and projects her repressed anger at other people, for example at Ammu, her rebellious daughter.

Baby Kochamma

The second character, Baby Kochamma (Navomi Ipe), is Mammachi's short but voluminous sister-in-law and Ammu's aunt, much feared and loathed by Ammu's children. She embodies a mixture of willfulness and adaption towards her family's customs and traditions, but most of all she is a significantly shrewd lady and a master in the skill of manipulation and conspiracy. Sadly in love for her whole life with an unattainable Irish monk, she ends up an old maid living in her father's house, where she, among other things, is in charge of the formal education of Ammu's twins. Ammu is the unruly daughter of the house, who manages to escape her abusive father and suppressed, wretched mother by hurriedly accepting a marriage proposal from a Bengali Hindu man during a visit to a distant relative in Calcutta. Her future husband works as a Assistant Manager in Tea Estate in Assam and seems like an acceptable match in Ammu's eyes but unfortunately he turns out to have severe alcoholic problems. After a couple of years in an increasingly dreadful marriage she divorces him and moves back to Ayemenem with their two children, Estha and Rahel (two-egg twins),

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“When his bouts of violence began to include the children, and the war with Pakistan began, Ammu left her husband and returned, unwelcomed, to her parents in Ayemenem. To everything that she had fled from a few years ago. Except that now she had two young children. And no more dreams” (42).

Ammu is not welcomed when she gets back to the house in Ayemenem and her father does not even believe her when she tells him about how her former husband wanted to sell her like a prostitute to save his own skin. Mammachi, who has put up with years and years of beating and humiliation, is also quite discontent with her rebellious, and now also divorced daughter, and Baby Kochamma despises her more than anyone else because she feels that Ammu is “quarreling with a fate that she” (44-5).

Ammu Falls in Love with Velutha

During these circumstances Ammu falls in love with Velutha, who works as a carpenter in the pickle factory, and their love story is at the center of this novel. Velutha is a Paravan, the lowest kind of the Untouchable outcasts. He lives with his father and brother in a small late rite hut nearby the Ayemenem house where his father has been working for many years. Velutha is extremely gifted with his hands. As a boy he makes intricate little boxes and other minute toys out of dried palm reeds that he brings to Ammu “on his palm . . . so she wouldn’t have to touch him to take them” (72).

Mammachi persuades Velutha’s father to send Velutha to the Untouchables’ school to learn how to read and write. Velutha also manages to obtain some training in carpentry through a workshop in nearby Kottayam held at the Christian Mission Society by a visiting German carpenter. He finishes school at age sixteen and is by then also a trained carpenter, despite his caste. Velutha works as a carpenter and mechanic in the pickle factory and around the Ayemenem house, maintaining and mending everything from clocks and water pumps to the bottle machines in the factory. Chacko says that Velutha “practically runs the factory” (264). These quotes reveal that Velutha has achieved an extraordinary position after all, despite being a Paravan.

In the case of Velutha it is obvious to see that he is marginalized and subordinated; being a Paravan and an Untouchable the society he lives in still regards his kind as inferior and unclean. Roy gives us a somewhat euphemistic picture of his status when the narrator shows the readers

how Velutha appears in Ammu's dream, this is a reflection of the subaltern position of the Untouchables in the old days that,

“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” (71).

Velutha is encouraged to go to the school though not together with Touchables but to a special school for Untouchables only. But as time goes by, Velutha crosses several lines; apart from learning how to read and write, he becomes a trained carpenter, when traditionally a Paravan should stick to the simpler activities like toddy tapping, picking coconuts and so on. He secretly becomes a member of the communist party and participates in a political March (organized by the Marxist labor Union). Eventually he crosses the most forbidden line of all, that of having a relationship with a Touchable, upper-caste woman. So being born a Paravan, Velutha transgresses many of the lines that society expects him to stay at the back. All the same, in many ways Velutha is the most oppressed and downtrodden of the main characters in the novel—despite being a man.

Ammu's Marginalization

Ammu's marginalization is also quite obvious; she is a divorced woman with two children to take care of. They live on 'sufferance' in her parent's house where she is disregarded by her relatives, especially Baby Kochamma who is eager to make Ammu and her twins understand that they “really have no right to be [there]” (44). As a teenager, Ammu does not conform to the expectations on her that she should wait obediently in her parent's house for a suitable husband. Instead she more or less escapes her parents and marries the first man who proposes to her, outside her parent's religion and without their consent, and after a couple of years she decides to divorce him. Ammu's brother, Chacko, reminds her children that their mother has no 'locus standi', no legal rights to inherit the factory or the house for instance (56). Intentionally or not, he pronounces the word 'Locust Stand I', making it sound like Locust, a grasshopper, perhaps implying that their mother is more or less a kind of parasite in the Ayemenem household. In the end, she is in fact literally kicked out of her parent's house by this very same brother. If Ammu is on the margin, her children are even more so. They are portrayed as:

“Baby Kochamma disliked the twins, for she considered them doomed fatherless waifs.

Worse still, Half-Hindu Hybrids whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian would even

marry. She was keen for them to realize that they (like herself) lived on sufferance in the Ayenmenem House, their maternal grandmother's house where they really had no right to be"(44).

Their vulnerable position makes Ammu very protective towards them and even if she is "quick to reprimand" them she is "even quicker to take offense on their behalf" (42). Even though Ammu is disregarded and perhaps even despised by her family, she is also sometimes feared by them because they can sense an 'unsafe edge' in her, being "a woman that they had already damned, [who] now had little left to lose, and could therefore be dangerous" (44). This fear makes them to show her the respect of keeping a distance to her, especially on the days that the "radio played Ammu's songs" (44). Rahel ponders over this 'unsafe edge' and this 'air of unpredictability' that surrounds Ammu: "It was what she had battling inside her. An unmixable mix. The infinite tenderness of motherhood and the reckless rage of a suicide bomber" (44). This quote illustrates the opposing forces that Ammu carries inside her; as a mother she strives to love and protect her children at all cost but as an individual she is desperate to break free from and rebel against the 'smug, ordered world' that surrounds her. Ammu is, like Velutha, a transgressor of boundaries, a person unwilling to submit to the role models presented to her.

Syrian Christian Family

Mammachi and Baby Kochamma are both Syrian Christians, a proud minority group in Kerala of around twenty percent (largest number of Christians of all the Indian states), who believe themselves to be

"...with the large population of Christian in the state. Twenty percentage of Kerala's population were Syrian Christians, who believed that they were descendants of the one hundred Brahmins whom St. Thomas the Apostle converted to Christianity when he traveled east after the Resurrection" (64).

In the social hierarchy of Kerala, they are 'upper-caste Syrian Christians', separating them from the lowlier 'Rice-Christians' who (like Velutha's grandfather) joined the British Colonialist's Anglican Church encouraged by a little food and money. However, the minority position of the Syrian Christians does not mean that they are degraded or downtrodden by the Hindu majority; far from it. They are "by and large, the wealthy, estate-owning (pickle-factory running), feudal lords" (64). Chacko also explains this to the twins, that "though he hated to admit it, they were all

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Anglophiles. They were a family of Anglophiles” (51). And as such, the Ipe family is somewhat on the edge in postcolonial, communist Kerala. This position becomes particularly clear in the case of Baby Kochamma, who develops a strong fear of the communists and a fear of ‘being dispossessed’.

Banana Jam

The God of Small Things reveals that the whole Ipe family has this problem of ‘classification’, symbolized in the novel by Mammachi’s Banana Jam. The Banana Jam was banned illegally by the Food Products Organization. Perhaps this anxious feeling of not belonging anywhere, of having a vulnerable social and financial standing (the factory was not profitable) contributes to Mammachi’s and Baby Kochamma’s extreme reactions to Ammu’s and Velutha’s social transgressions. The Syrian brand of Christianity was in fact like the Banana Jam, an ambiguous mix of Christianity and Casteism (stemming from Hinduism) and perhaps this explains why Mammachi initially pretends to be liberal and modern by encouraging Velutha to go to school, whilst in the end of the story she overtly acts in accordance to the caste system and calls him a ‘pariah dog’ (269).

A Closer Look at the Three Women

Having examined briefly the marginalization of the characters one now turn to a closer look at the three women respectively. Mammachi is submissive towards people whom she considers to be superior to her, like her husband, and oppressive to people she regards as inferiors, like Ammu and her children. Being children to a divorced mother is, according to Mammachi, a fate “far worse than Inbreeding” (59). She tries to cover her oppressive tendencies and be liberal and a good Christian towards Untouchables for instance, but this is merely on the surface. In fact, she regards Untouchables as being deeply inferior and she is firmly rooted in the hierarchical caste system of her culture. This becomes very clear in her treatment of Velutha when he crosses the forbidden line in having a relationship with her own Touchable daughter.

When Velutha’s father comes to the kitchen door, drunk and wretched, to inform her about the love affair, Mammachi starts to scream hysterically, pushes him off the steps into the mud and spits at him, yelling “[d]runken Paravan liar” (243). When Velutha finally comes home in the same evening, Mammachi loses her senses completely. She “spewed her blind venom, her crass,

insufferable insults“(268) at him and used such an incredibly foul language that no one had ever heard her use before. Mammachi seems to be perfectly fine with Untouchables educating themselves and working together with other Touchables of lower status than herself.

A stricter limit however surrounds her own house and especially her family; Velutha is not welcome into the house, “except when she needed something mended or installed” (74), and definitely was not allowed (unthinkable) to have a relationship with her daughter. When Mammachi is confronted with the facts about his relationship with Ammu, the image of coupling dogs comes to her mind: “Like animals, [she] thought and nearly vomited. Like a dog with a bitch on heat” (244). The last thing Mammachi says to Velutha before he leaves is: “If I find you on my property tomorrow I’ll have you castrated like the pariah dog that you are! I’ll have you killed!” (269).

These utterances show how strong the ideology of caste and difference is to Mammachi, overriding by far to her religious beliefs. Baby Kochamma is in her youth quite rebellious in the sense that she both opposes the tradition of arranged marriages by independently choosing a man, and then even converting to Catholicism against her father’s will. Later in life she apparently becomes more conservative, and accepts her bad fate as a ‘Man-less woman’ while condemning others who break the rules like she once did. Obviously she pities herself and is Jealous of other people, for instance Ammu, who as a “divorced daughter from a intercommunity love marriage” in Baby’s opinion did not have the right to live in her parent’s house. Baby Kochamma does not spare any chances to make Ammu and her twins understand this, but in her own, insinuating manner. She begrudges the twins every small moment of happiness and especially the “comfort they drew from each other” when they really ought to be generally unhappy and sad (45). This Jealousy is probably a major motive behind Baby Kochamma’s idea to return one of them (Estha) to their father after Ammu is kicked out of the house by Chacko. She is perhaps also Jealous of their relationship with Velutha, who has become something of a fatherly figure to them and reproaches Rahel for being “over-familiar” with Velutha (175).

In short, Baby Kochamma embodies the Syrian Christians incorporation of the caste system within their religious practices, with all its prejudices and double standards. To her, Velutha represents a person with the potential to transgress the boundaries of class and caste; an Untouchable with the looks and talents and brains to have ‘a future’ and without the common fears that regularly keep people in place in the hierarchy of society. She also regards Velutha as a

personal threat to her and to the whole family. If Velutha has an enemy in Baby Kochamma, he definitely has an ally with her niece, Ammu.

Ammu carries the feeling that her life has been lived and that she really has not much to lose. She has developed a “lofty sense of injustice” and straightforwardness (Chacko calls it cynicism) that makes her see things a bit differently than her mother and aunt do. For instance, suddenly Ammu sees Velutha as a man, in a moment when history was “wrongfooted, caught off guard” with its “marks, its scars, its wounds from old wars and the walkingbackwards days all fell away” (167). Furthermore, she discovers a potential companion in him who ought to be as angry as she is, and she wishes that,

“Suddenly Ammu hoped that it had been him that Rahel saw in the march. She hoped it had 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 “(167).

But she does not generally pity people at the bottom of society which is revealed in the passage when the family is stuck in the Plymouth at a level crossing and a “leper with soiled bandages” comes to beg at their window. Ammu’s reflection on his inordinately bright blood is: ““That looks like Mercurochrome to me” (59). Her comment pleases Chacko to the degree that he shakes hands with his sister, whom he normally mostly wrangles with. Ammu also shows some signs of snobbery when she reproaches the twins for blowing spit bubbles and shivering with their legs, claiming that “only clerks behaved like that, not aristocrats” (80). But these are rather weak traits in her character. What is much stronger is her dislike of lies and insincerity, and she never misses an opportunity to sarcastically scorn other people when guilty of those charges. One example of this is during the Marxist march, when Chacko gratefully rolls down his car window to say thanks to a man who with his balled fist slammed down the bonnet of the Plymouth (someone else had banged it open), Ammu says with irony in her voice: “Don’t be so ingratiating, Comrade . . . It was an accident. He didn’t really mean to help. How could he possibly know that in this old car there beats a truly Marxist heart?” (68). Ammu enjoys mocking her brother for his quasi-Marxist tendencies. She calls him an “Oxford avatar of the old zamindar [landlord] mentality”, that is to say, “a landlord forcing his attentions on women who depended on him for their livelihood” (63). Ammu is in fact the only person in the family who reacts openly to Chacko’s flirtatious ways and illicit relationships with the female factory workers, a lifestyle that is accepted

by for instance Mammachi as one shall see later. Ammu's attitude towards the late Pappachi during the same scene is definitely one of disregard; she refers to her deceased father (in front of Chacko, Baby Kochamma and her children) as an "incurable British CCP", the acronym spelled out is a Hindu expression meaning shit-wiper. By this title Ammu intends to show her condemnation of Pappachi's exaggerated admiration towards everyone and everything from England. Apart from her bluntness there is also another important streak in Ammu's character that has to be mentioned: her sense of not-belonging anywhere. Her unwelcomed presence in the house together with her different mindset from the rest of the family leaves her with a feeling of distance and detachment from the place where she lives. Perhaps this is why she is attracted to Velutha's affinity with the material world around him.

Right before their first night-time meeting he comes up from a swim in the river and the narrator reveals her impression of him:

"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 it. That it belonged to him. The water. The mud. The trees. The fish. The stars. He moved so easily through it" (316).

There is a kind of admiration, perhaps even Jealousy, within Ammu about Velutha's easiness with the world around him. She is longing to belong somewhere and feels safe with Velutha. The narrator ponders: "Ammu smiled to herself in the dark, thinking how much she loved his arms—the shape and strength of them, how safe she felt resting in them when actually it was the most dangerous place she could be" (319).

Ammu's yearning for love and intimate kinship with another adult human being is thus much stronger than possible fears about what might happen if her relationship with an Untouchable should be revealed. Double Standards When Ammu's and Velutha's relationship is finally exposed, the different expectations upon men and women become as clear as day and this is perhaps best displayed in Mammachi. Without any sense of shame she openly demonstrates her double standards in condemning her daughter harshly for her affair while at the same time vindicating her son for his illicit relationships. Mammachi never even confronts Chacko about his female visitors, she simply adjusts to it. She sees to it that a separate entrance to Chacko's room is built so that his female visitors will not have to pass through the house. She even gives money secretly to the ladies, an act that allows her to think of them as whores instead of as lovers. When

Baby Kochamma complains to Mammachi about the female visitors, Mammachi defends Chacko by saying that he cannot help having a “Mans Needs” (160).

Mammachi’s liberal, forgiving attitude towards her son does not apply to her daughter and her extramarital relationship. The knowledge that Ammu has “defiled generations of breeding” (244) by having a relationship with a Paravan is unbearable to Mammachi. Ammu has denigrated the family name forever, while Chacko couldn’t help having a ‘Mans Needs’ which goes to show that they are definitely not measured by the same standards due to their gender.

After learning about the affair from Vellya Paapen, Mammachi and Baby Kochamma Jointly decide to make Velutha leave Ayemenem before Chacko returns as they “could neither trust nor predict what Chacko’s attitude would be” (244). What the old ladies fear is perhaps Chacko’s sense of Justice; that since he himself has affairs with ladies from the factory, he might feel that he has no right to be angry with Ammu for having an affair with the factory carpenter. They may also fear that Chacko values Velutha’s services too much to make him go, since he in fact “practically runs the factory” (264).

If that should be the case, it would probably be very difficult for them to argue in favor of sending Velutha away. Particularly striking in this passage is also the force by which Mammachi condemns Ammu’s deed. It seems as if all the years of beatings from her husband has shaped in her a dark, hidden, monstrous feeling of self-loathe which she now allows to erupt with all its might over her misbehaving daughter. “Her tolerance of ‘Men’s Needs,’ as far as her son was concerned, became the fuel for her unmanageable fury at her daughter” (244). To Mammachi, this is perfectly acceptable because she subscribes to her culture’s different expectations of men and women respectively.

As a man, Chacko has considerably more freedom than Ammu. That he is a divorcée who does not bother Mammachi much because she ranks his former wife far below herself, as a “shopkeeper’s daughter” (160). Mammachi often says that Chacko is “easily one of the cleverest men in India”, a claim that Ammu dismisses by saying that “all Indian mothers are obsessed with their sons and are therefore poor judges of their abilities” (54).

Mammachi’s love for her son may also of course be due to the fact that Chacko actually one day told Pappachi to never beat his mother again. And “[f]rom then onwards he became the repository of all her womanly feelings. Her Man. Her only Love” (160). Her traditional, conservative worldview fits perfectly well together with these more personal feelings towards

Chacko. All in all these factors together make the relationship between Mammachi and Chacko quite harmonious: a mother and a divorced son living together and this son being ‘the master of the house’ (especially after the death of Pappachi). All the same, in the situation mentioned above when Velutha’s and Ammu’s love has been exposed, Mammachi acts independently from Chacko to prevent Ammu’s and Velutha’s relationship from developing any further. The narrator in the novel presents to the readers about the two very potent ladies full of (socially constructed) agency, not at all willing to await the will of the ‘master of the house’ (Chacko).

Female Agency

Clearly, Roy wishes to exhibit to the readers an example of female agency, and in this way propose that the caste system is upheld not only by men but by women as well. In her novel, women may be the victims to a patriarchal, conservative society with rigid norms and conventions but if they do not oppose it they are complicit upholders of the system and thereby become perpetrators too. The following section more closely examines the agency these female characters exercise. Female Agency Mammachi may at first seem like a very traditional and submissive woman, but in fact she, in her own way, emancipates herself from her husband in some areas although she never overtly opposes him. First and foremost, she starts her pickle business in the kitchen, despite her husband Pappachi’s disapproval. She is quite successful in the business which can only be regarded as a form of agency—that she carries out her idea despite her husband’s and the local society’s opinions.

Furthermore, after Chacko’s intervention against Pappachi’s beatings, she is never hit again and never again bothered by her husband. In a way, Pappachi and Mammachi live like divorcées after that incident, only in the same house, but this kind of relationship seems to suit Mammachi perfectly. Mammachi’s emancipation is of course another kind than that of her daughter, more subtle and more indirect but all the same very significant. Baby Kochamma has also more indirect modes of operating. She has the dubious advantage of not having a man to submit to; her only love, the absent father Mullaney, does not put her under any marital pressure other than the mental strain of being continuously broken hearted.

Therefore, Baby Kochamma is quite free to act according to her own mind, no matter how socially constructed this mind may be due to the morals and values of her community. She exercises agency again and again to influence her surrounding in accordance to her own beliefs.

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Social Conflicts as Delineated in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*

Saving the honor of the family becomes a number one position to Baby Kochamma and she never hesitates to lie or manipulate others to reach her goals. In fact, she has an incredible capacity to justify her actions by some higher aim, like when she consciously “misrepresented the relationship between Ammu and Velutha [by assuming rape], not for Ammu’s sake, but to contain the scandal and salvage the family reputation in Inspector Thomas Mathew’s eyes” (245). Lying seems to be a special talent for Baby Kochamma so there are many examples like the one listed above in the story.

Another great talent of Baby Kochamma is that of manipulation and one example of this is when Mammachi pours her fury over Velutha. Baby Kochamma stands by her sister-in-law and says nothing but “..used her hands to modulate Mammachi’s fury, to stoke it anew. An encouraging pat on her back. A reassuring arm around the shoulders. Mammachi was completely unaware of the manipulation” (268). By using other people’s passions and feelings, she manages to realize her dubious wishes without taking the blame for it.

Ammu is the most frankly rebellious character of the three; her experience from growing up with Pappachi’s abusive and false ways (striving to be regarded by society as a good and generous man while terrorizing his family at home) made her develop a watchful attitude that made her question people’s motives and actions. It also made her argumentative; the narrator lets us know that she did “exactly nothing to avoid quarrels and confrontations. . . . perhaps even enjoyed them” (173). These experiences motivate her to move against the tide and make choices over and over again that transgress all possible norms and mores imposed on her.

It is quite interesting that Roy depicts Ammu as being essentially ‘herself’ when she bursts out at someone whom she believes to act for example haughty or false. She “had not had the kind of education, nor read the sorts of books, nor met the sorts of people, that might have influenced her to think the way she did. She was just that sort of animal” (171). Roy seems to imply that Ammu acts according to her ‘essence’, undetermined by society. However, one can see that how Ammu’s parents show her the ugly face of patriarchy and the outcome of unconditional female submission at its worst, making her intuitively choose to reject and resist it.

Roy displays the women with a range of options and choices, whether complicit, resistant or both the dominant order and she does not idealize the women but rather exposes them as human beings with complex characters with the possibility of agency and responsibility towards their own actions in her novel. Ammu, for instance, could easily have been depicted as the genuinely good, suffering

heroine having a cruel father and later a drunken husband, a lover who gets killed and so on. Luckily, Roy does not offer stereotypes and Ammu is not always brave and honest.

Several Female Characters

Roy presents several different female characters in her novel *The God of Small Things*, all in different ways trapped in a system of oppression but also with a substantial degree of agency. In the spirit of ‘strategic essentialism’ she has ventured to give voice to some of those who are seldom referred to in the official history writing of India. From a postcolonial feminist perspective Roy has contributed to make the representation of the Third World subaltern woman more diverse, through giving the readers about the various portraits of women that, despite their oppressed and marginalized status, are not depicted without agency or responsibility. The woman who most clearly rejects the intricate system of oppression in the story, Ammu, is punished severely by her mother and aunt. But as one of the main characters in Roy’s novel, Ammu represents people who actually dare to do ‘the unthinkable’, to transgress the very line that upholds the system of difference that casteism inherently maintains. She represents all those who have suffered due to transgressions against the ‘Love Laws’ and gender-specific expectations imposed upon them, sometimes even by paying with their own lives. The novel itself has given the fictional Ammu and Velutha, as representations of thousands of cross caste relationships in the real India, a voice that resonates all over the world.

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