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The God of Small Things: A Critique of Postcolonial Condition

Abstract: Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things (1997)* is a postcolonial literary text. It presents the Indian scenario in the light of the aftermath of European colonization. Through her presentation of characters, language, dialogues, and other events Roy has brought into focus the postcolonial condition of India in her novel. The novel shows how the Indians have lost their original cultural identity and found themselves in between two cultures---Indian and European. At the same time, it also presents the wretched condition of the 'subaltern classes' of contemporary Indian society. By creating a postcolonial discourse in the novel Mrs. Roy is seen to criticize, question, and subvert the old dominance of the European colonizer.

Key Words: Postcolonial Condition, Marginalisation, Hybridity, Subaltern Classes.

The history of colonialism can be traced back in the fifteenth century when the European voyagers began to discover new lands which had so long been unknown---the explorations of America and other continents. The advent of Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth century brought about a radical change in economy and society. To supply the need of raw materials the European industrialist began their journey to the non-European countries and subsequently made their colonies. The White European tradesmen at a large number began to settle down in the colonized countries. The coming of the White men ushers in a new culture. The culture of the indigenous people was swept away by the European cultures. The native people began to follow the White men's culture and lifestyle and they had to face identity crisis. The European also

brought Christianity with them and they began to convert the colonized people. Thus the indigenous people along with their culture became marginalized 'other'. In the words of Nair:

> [C]olonialism is the process of settlement by Europeans in Non-European (Asian, African, South American, Australian) spaces. While migrations are as old as the presence of human kind on earth, colonization in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries meant a violent appropriation and exploitation of native races and spaces by European powers. Colonization often destroyed native cultures, or altered them significantly, often producing new (hybrid) forms. Thus colonialization cannot, in the twentieth century, be seen as an innocent 'settlement' in a new place. It must, rather, be seen as a powerful mode of exploitation based on the difference in race, culture, forms of knowledge, technological advancements and political systems (3).

Most of the postcolonial literary texts like Roy's *The God of Small Things* are rewriting of colonial and postcolonial images.

Postcolonialism is the critique of the colonial aftermath of an independent state. It deals with the effects of colonization on indigenous cultures and societies. "It invokes the ideas such as social justice, emancipation, and democracy in order to oppose oppressive structures of racism, discrimination and exploitation. It asserts the formerly colonized subject's 'agency'- defined as the ability to affect her/his present conditions in the face of continuing oppression" (Nair, 17). In the words of Leela Gandhi, postcolonialism "can be seen as a theoretical resistance to the mystifying amnesia of the colonial aftermath. It is a disciplinary project devoted to the academic task of revisiting, remembering, and, crucially, interrogating the colonial past" (4).

After the colonization of India by England, the Indian elites began to follow the life style of the colonizers. Even many Indians went to England to study in different universities. This tendency is still dominant in the post-independent India. The Indian elites have always preferred the western culture and life styles with deep admiration and respect to the western values. They are seen to behave like the western people rather than Asian Indian. The European colonizers' cultural legacy is depicted in Pappache, the British entomologist. He is a British gentleman in the whole of Ayemenem. Even after his retirement, he refused to go around in Indian clothes and followed western suiting. He drove a Plymouth and smoked a cigar. Pappache is so British

minded that he even refused to believe that Mr. Hollick would want to fulfill his need with Ammu. "Pappache would not believe her [Ammu's] story…simply because he did not believe that an Englishman, any Englishman, would covet another man's wife (42)". Chako had correctly described Pappache as an 'Anglophile'.

One of the main concerns of the novel is hybridity. Roy presents different aspects of hybridity---religion, language, culture and biology. As a result of the long and deep interaction with the colonizer and the colonized, people began to feel their own culture, language and religion to be inferior when compared to that of the colonizer's. The feeling of inferiority complex created disturbance in the indigenous people. As a result they began to appreciate all aspects of the colonizer and thereby gradually forgot their own culture, language and history. Their identity was in dilemma as they struggled to become the members of the European people. By repeatedly stating that "things can change in a day" (32), Roy makes it clear that everything has been changed in the life of the indigenous people with the arrival of the colonizer. The colonized people recognized that the only way to make their situation better following the colonizer's way of living, and with this realization they grasped and adored the foreign culture to be their own. As Roy states, "Chako told the twins though he hated to admit it, they were all 'Anglophiles'. They were a family of Anglophiles. Pointed in the wrong directions, trapped outside their own history, and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swiped away" (52).

Thus the colonized were uprooted from their own culture and began to imitate the foreign ones. But at the same time their skin color and natural origin became a barrier to become a White European. In *Black Skin, White Masks (1952),* Fanon suggests that colonialism, with its explicit conceptual under-pinnings of white racial superiority over non-white peoples, has created a sense of division and alienation in the self identity of the non-white colonized people. The history, culture, language, customs and beliefs of the white colonizers imposed on the colonized and they are eventually coaxed to consider them as universal, normative and superior to their own local indigenous culture. This creates a strong sense of inferiority in the colonized subject and leads to an adoption of the language, culture and customs of the colonizers by the colonized as a way of compensating for these feelings of inferiority in their self identity (as cited in G. Rajeev).

The novel shows 'been to' people affected by the western culture manners. Baby Kochamma had been to America for a diploma in Ornamental Gardening. Since then she had began to follow and copy the western culture. After returning from America, she had raised a garden with the flowers most of which are foreign varaieties---'Anthurium', 'Rubrum', 'Honeymoon', and a host of Japanese varaities. Baby Kochamma's garden shows her love for foreign culture. Later on, she abandoned the garden and began to see western programme on TV and tried to copy English words and manners. As Roy tells us:

> [W]hile her ornamental garden wilted and died, Baby Kochamma followed American NBA League games, One-day cricket and all the Gran Slam tennis tournaments. On weekdays she watched The Bold and The Beautiful Santa Barbara, where brittle blondes with lipsticks and hairstyles rigid with spray seduced androids and defended their sexual empires. Baby Kochamma loved their shiny cloths and the smart, bitchy repartee (27).

She had been so much affected by the western lifestyles that even in her old age she used to wear make-up and lipstick and dye her hair. Even the old Kochu Maria, the cook, enjoyed western shows like WWF Wrestling Mania in the company of Baby Kochamma.

Chako is another 'been to' character in the novel. He went to England to study at Oxford. There he found himself lost in the western culture. He fell in love with Margaret and forgot his near and dear ones of India and Ayemenem seemed too far away for him. As Roy states, " He [Chako] had no pressing reason to stay in touch with his parents…(246)". In fact his marriage to Margaret represents hybridity of two cultures. Even when he came back India, he behaved like an Englishman. Roy has finely descried his 'Oxford Moods', "…Chako used his Reading Aloud voice. His room had a church-feeling. He didn't care whether anyone was listening to him or not. And if they were, he didn't care whether or not they had understood what he was saying" (54).

Roy has presented her view on postcolonial condition of India through Chako:

> 'We're Prisoners of War….Our dreams have been doctored. We belong nowhere. We sail unanchored on troubled sea. We may never be allowed ashore. Our sorrows will never be said enough. Our joys never happy enough. Or dreams never big enough. Our lives never important enough. To matter.…We cannot understand the whispering (of our ancestors from the History House), because our

> mind have been invaded by a war. A war that we have won and lost. The very worst sort of war. A war that captures dreams and re-dreams them. A war that has made us adore our conquerors and despise ourselves' (53).

In The *God of Small Things* Indian elites' love for the western culture is more clearly reflected in the way the twins---Estha and Rahel---had been forced them to learn English. Before Sophie Mol's arrival at Ayemenem, Baby Kochamma forbade Estha and Rahel to speak Malayalam and ordered them to always speak in English. "She [even] made them write lines---'impositions' she called them---*I will always speak in English, I will always speak in English*. A hundred times each (36). Baby Kochamma also made the twins to practice an English car song with proper words and proper English pronunciation:

> *Rij-Oice in the Low-Ord Or-Orlways*
>
> *And again I say rij-oice,*
>
> *RijOice*
>
> *RijOice*
>
> *And again I say rij-oice*(36).

When Chako described Pappachi as an '*Anglophile*', " [he] made the twins to look up the meaning in the *Reader's Digest Great Encyclopedia Dictionary*. It said *person well dispose to the English*. Then Estha and Rahel had to look up *disposed*" (52). Throughout the novel the twins are seen as uncomfortable with English and could not speak in English correctly. So Baby Kochamma and Ammu had to correct them. As a resistance Estha and Rahel had developed a habit of reading backwards. When Mrs. Mitten gave them a baby book *The Adventures of Susie Squirrel*as a present, they read the title backwards, " '*ehT serutnevdA fo eisuS lerriuqS. enO gnirps gninrom eisuS lerriuqS ekow pu*' (60)." At the police station Estha read from the board on the wall:

> 'ssenetiloP'…. 'ssenetiloP, ecneidebO,'
>
> ' ytlayoL, ecnegilletnI,' Rahel said.

‘ysetruoC.’

‘ycneiciffE.’

Rahel read a ‘STOP’ sign as ‘POTS’, and Estha read, “ BE INDIAN, BUY INDIAN” as “ NAIDINI YUB, NAIDINI EB” (58). It shows the twins’ rebellion against the weternisation of their culture.

Roy has composed the novel in a hybrid language. In the novel we frequently come across Malayalam words, phrases and sentences. Sometimes they are translated into English. She has given the English translation of Malayalam boat songs:

Enda da korangacha, chandi ithra thenjadu?

[Hey Mr. Monkey man, why’s your bum so red?]

Pandyill thooran poyappol nekkamuthiri muthiri

(I went for a shit to Madras, and scraped it till it bled) (196).

Pandoru mukkuvan muthinu poyi,

(Once a fisherman went to sea,)

Padinjaran kattathu mungi poyi,

(The West Wind blew and swallowed his boat,)

…

Arayathi pennu pizhchu poyi

(His wife on the shore went astray,)

Avaney kadalamma kondu poyi.

(So Mother Ocean rose and took him away) (219-20).

Similarly Roy has given the English translation of Kuttappen's shouting in Malayalam:

Pa pera-pera-pera-perakka

(Mr. gugga-gug-gug-guwava,)

Ende perambil thooralley.

(Don't shit here in my compound.)

Chetende perambil thoorikko,

(You can shit next door in my brother's compound,)

Pa pera-pera-pera-perakka.

(Mr. gugga-gug-gug-guwava) (206).

Without their translation we could not have understood the meaning of the sentences. But in most cases, the readers are left perplexed with the Malayalam phrases and sentences which are not translated. So it becomes difficult for us to understand the meaning of these hybrid sentences without the knowledge of Malayalam.Not only that, Mrs. Roy has used Malayalam and English words in a single sentence. It shows her view on the postcolonial cultural hybridity.

In *The God of Small Things*, the novelist has shown that the culture in postcolonial India has lost its fixity. It is neither fully Indian nor European. In fact, Indian culture has gained a hybrid identity. It is a mixed production of native and colonial identity. According to bill Ashcroft, hybridity is "the cross-breeding of the two species by grafting or cross-pollination to form a third, 'hybrid' species" (118). This ambivalent cultural identity does not belong definitely to the world of either the colonizer or the once colonized. Thus the postcolonial cultural hybridity is an 'other' from both cultural identities--- native and foreign. Homi K. Bhabha in his *The Location of Culture (1994),* has analyzed the colonizer/colonized interdependence and the mutual construction of their subjectivity. He shows that all cultural statements and systems in postcolonial society are structured in a space which Bhabha names 'the Third space of enunciation' (54). Postcolonial cultural identity is always in this contradictory and ambivalent space which for Bhabha constructs the argument to a hierarchical 'purity' of cultures. As he says:

> It is only when we understand that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation , that we begin to understand why hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or 'purity' of cultures are untenable, even before we resort to empirical historical instances that demonstrate their hybridity…. It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensures that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same science can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricised and read anew (54).

In fact, the characters in the novel suffer because they are the 'other' both of Indian and English cultures. They belong to Bhabha's 'Third Space of enunciation' and cannot adapt themselves in either the Indian or European culture.

The God of Small Things presents the wretched condition of the 'subaltern classes' of contemporary India. In general, subaltern classes may include peasants, workers, women, the lower castes, and even the children. They often fall victims to hegemonic power. But they are always subject to the hegemony of the dominant and the ruling classes of the society in the same way as the colonized were to the colonizer (Ashcroft, 215). In Roy's novel, Ammu, Estha, Rahel, and Velutha are the 'subaltern classes because they are oppressed and marginalized throughout their life. Ammu is seen as the victim of gender discrimination of patriarchal society. Throughout her life she had had to suffer from the male domination and also the dominant women's humiliation. Her brother Chako is allowed to go to Oxford for higher education. But Ammu was given a little opportunity of school education only. As Roy says, "Pappache insisted that a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl…. There was very little for a young girl to do in Ayemenem other than to wait for marriage proposals while she helped her mother with housework" (38).

Ammu married Baba, a Hindu, against her parents' consent. But after several years of marriage, her alcoholic husband began to torture her severely. So she with her children left her husband and returned to her father's home in Ayemenem. She had no space in the family. Even he did not have a share in her paternal property. That is why she had had to work hard in the pickle factory. On the other hand, Chako always referred to the pickle factory as " my factory, my pineapples, my pickle". Roy states that Ammu as a daughter had no legal claim to the

paternal property in the contemporary society and had no " Locusts Stand I". According to Baby Kochamma, "…a married daughter had no position in her parents' home. As for a divorced daughter …she had no position anywhere at all" (45).When Baby Kochamma came to know of Ammu's relation to Velutha, she locked Ammu into her bedroom. Four days after Sophie Mol's funeral, Chako ordered Ammu to leave the Ayemenem house:" get out of my house before I break every bone in your body". In her essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', Spivak has rightly commented that "the subaltern has no history and can not speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (283). Being a woman Amuu is doubly marginalized because she had had to suffer both male and powerful women's domination. In the words of Spivak, "clearly, if you are poor, black and female you get it[torture] in three ways" (293).

If Ammu is marginalized, so are the children. They became the subject of torture to the elders. They had to suffer because they were Half-Hindu hybrids. Baby Kochamma hated them for she considered them doomed and fatherless waifs. "Worse still, they were Half-Hindu Hybrids whom no Syrian Christan would ever marry" (45). When she registered a false case against Velutha, she used the twins as witness against their will. She threatened them to send to jail along with their mother if they did not obey her. So having no option, Estha went to police station as Baby Kochamma's witness. Again at Spohie Mol's funeral the twins and their mother were not allowed to stand with the Ayemenem family. As Roy tells us, " Though Ammmu, Estha and Rahel were allowed to attend the funeral, they were made to stand separately, not with the rest of the family. Nobody would talk to them " (5).

Roy has also presentred the wretched condition of the lower castes of India through Velutha, the Paravan. From Mammachi's account we come to know that the untouchables were not allowed to enter the house of the elites. They were even not allowed to touch anything that the touchables touched:

> Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with broom, sweeping away their footprint so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan's footprint…. Untouchables were not allowed to walk on public roads, not allowed to cover their upper bodies, not allowed to carry umbrellas. They had to put their hand over their mouths when they spoke, to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed (74).

The Untouchables had separate churches, schools and teachers from that of the touchable. So many Untouchables converted themselves to Christianity and joined the Anglican Church to escape their untouchability. Velutha in the novel was sent to the untouchables' school set up by Mammachi'sfather-in-law. He joined the Paradise Pickle factory as a labourer and was made the leader of the labour union. Ammu developed a love affair with him. When Mammachi and Baby Kochamma came to know about their relation, the lovers were punished severely. Mammachi's jealousy and hatred towards Velutha burst out. As she said, "How she could stand the smell? Haven't you noticed, they have a particular smell, these Paravans?" When Velutha went to Ayemenem house, Mammachi scolded him away in foul language. " 'Out!'…. If I found you on my property tomorrow, I will have you castrated like a Pariah dog that you are! I will have you killed!" (284). Even she did not hesitate to spit into Velutha's face.

Ammu and Velutha had been tormented by hegemonic power simply because they are powerless. They had always been victims of the hegemony of the powerful and the ruling classes of the society. When Velutha complained to Comrade K.N.M. Pillai against Mammachi's maltreatment of him, Mr Pillai refused to help him though Velutha was also a member of the Communist Party. It was simply because Velutha was a Paravan. Instead he advised Chako to send off Velutha. As he says, "…whatever job he [Velutha] does, carpenter or electrician or whatever it is, for he is just a Paravan" (297). Even when Inspector Thomas Matthew asked Comrade Pillai about Velutha's connection with the Communist Party, Mr Pillai told that "Velutha did not have the patronage or protecion of the Party" (262). Ultimately, Velutha was beaten to death by the Kottayam 'Touchable Police'. Ammu too had been the victim of hegemony of the police. When Ammu went to the Kottayam Police Station to make a statement on behalf of Velutha, Inspector Thomas Mathew stared at her breasts as he spoke. "He said the police knew all they needed to know and that the Kottayam Police didn't take statements from veshyas or their illegitimate children…. he tapped her [Ammu's] breasts with his baton. Gently. Tap, tap. As though he was choosing mangoes from a basket. Pointing out the ones that he wanted packed and delivered"(8). Spivak has rightly commented, "The subaltern as female can not be heard or read" (293).

In *The God of Small Things*, Roy has masterly brought into focus the postcolonial condition of Indian culture. She has criticized the colonial cultural legacy in the postcolonial

countries like India. As a result of colonization, native people have lost their cultural identity. Their admiration for native values is gradually decreasing. At the same time, Roy also exhibits the wretched condition of the subaltern classes who refuse to follow the colonial cultural legacy.

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