

Can the Subaltern Be Heard: Subalternisation in the Context of the God of Small Things

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Abstract

Colonialism and Post-colonialism are theoretically speaking two mutually entangled but conflicting terms. Key aspect of these conflicting terms lies in their mutual hostility and polarization. Colonialism thrived on exploitation, hegemony, control, and deprivation of the colonized; creating an aura of its “otherness”. Spivak’s “Can the subaltern speak” draws attention to the “general attribute of subordination in the south Asian society” and “oppressed subject” position in the context of the oppression exercised by the colonial politics and legacy. The postcolonial theory despite intricacies surrounding its complex interdisciplinary nature and definition (Gandhi, Postcolonial Theory, 1998, Allen&Unwin, p, 1) Gandhi This paper argues that Roy’s *The God of Small Things* highlight the complex nature of colonial and post-colonial interaction. It argues that Roy fluctuates subtly between two opposing modes of colonial and post-colonial modes and draws on both to develop a complex pattern of meanings in her award winning *The God of Small Things*. She reverts to the colonial mode of social reformation in the Indian subcontinent and raises strong voice against societal division along castes and creeds; acknowledging Spivak like enabling part of the colonialism. Written in 1969, the novel repeats history to draw attention to need for substantial social reformation in the independent India.

Keywords: Hegemony, Sub-ordination, Subject, Colonial legacy, Cultural enclosure

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Introduction

The caged bird sings
With a fearful trill
Of things unknown
But longed for still
And his tune is heard
On the distant hill
For the caged bird
Sings of freedom.

MAYA ANGELOU
“And Still I Rise”

The rural- urban interface of the peasant groups or it would be appropriate to call it subaltern-weak communities in the wake of the rise of urban centres that comes at the global forefront and often contested and deliberated upon in the Asian postcolonial discourse. Here the reference to Antonio Gramsci's Prison Notebooks which has formed the foundation for peasant problems in Italy. Very likely, the civil war in the U.S.A in 1775 was strongly grounded in the conflicting concerns of the North and rural South. Ranjit Guha and the subaltern critics reflects to the contestation pertaining to colonialist historiography in India also relate exclusion of the peasant and other subaltern groups in nationalist historiographies, ‘to ignore the subaltern today is, willy-nilly, to continue the imperialist project’ (Spivak, *Marxism and Interpretation of Culture*, p,298).

The village in the nation state has shifted to the periphery therefore it remains at the centre of the periphery, and deconstructing the very idea of a city centre, and displacing the centre-periphery equations (Jain,p 4). Now as far as the polarization of the village in the contemporary social and literary canon the village would remain the epicentre in the metanarrative of the nation state. The historiographic development of subaltern studies begun in India and it was critical form of Marxism influenced by Gramsci and the British essential historians. Classically recognized as ‘history from below’ it primarily engages a paradigm shift from the colonialist, nationalist and Marxist historiographies to the history of the mass movements of lower class and tribals with a view to reclaim *The Small Voice of History* (the title of Ranajit Guha's book).

The subaltern studies ventures into the enquiry for its postmodernist orientations with reference to the delegitimisation of metanarratives and its analysis of rationality. Edward Said's critique of ‘Orient’ and Foucault's notion of history along with power-knowledge patterns have also been instrumental in the relocation of the representation of colonialism from the economic and political sphere to the sphere of culture. The subaltern family objectives are to retrieve the culture of the diverse people in terms of identities, memories and famous voices, on one side of the picture, and sovereignty of subaltern consciousness, on the other, are of concern for the feminists too for the commonality of interests for the subaltern and woman positionality in the literary canon. The implicit and explicate dangers of appropriation of the rural and indigenous subaltern by the market forces as outlined by Spivak, the subaltern studies has been a step ahead towards the procedure of rethinking the position of groups such as lower castes, laborers, lower strata of society and women

in generating the discourse of history and the representation of peripheral subjectivities in the literary canon. The venture of retrieving the history of the lower class and weak people in the terms of social, economic and political location have to get rid of the elitism of colonialist, nationalist and Marxist historiographies. For Foucault, the problem is not of the existing tradition, of a tracing line, but one of division, of limits. The problem is not of the old foundations, but one of the transformations that is set as new foundation, that is called the rebuilding of foundation. In particular, the history of thought, of philosophy, of knowledge, of literature, are discovering, more and more discontinuities, whereas history itself seems to be abandoning the events in favor of stable structures. This retrieving of the geographical, social and cultural discourses in Foucauldian terms would be the reconstructing and re-presenting the novel foundations. Referring back to the subaltern studies—significant of the post colonial historiography as a metanarrative of the power-knowledge elite class and it requires the coercive incorporation of the voices of inferior people and should enunciate and generate the discourses of tribal, dalits, peasants, women and people who are powerless in the hierarchical paradigm of society. The polemics of narrative and heterogeneity is certainly implicit in the subaltern discourse in the form of the hierarchies within groups and sub-groups at the micro as well as macro narratives. The structures and its underpinnings of dominance and subservience are central to the subaltern and feminist discussion and is comprehensively analyzed by Spivak in her high-ranking essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”. The inclusion of the construct of the woman in this subaltern studies is, however, forceful and polemic as for the subalterns collectives’ much publicized reclamation of the inferior rank people movements vis-à-vis the essentialist historiography, the ‘lower class’ here belongs to the category of the ‘human,’ the ‘universal.’ The most crucial perspective of Spivak’s theory is a woman’s participation in the peasant, tribal or dalit movements across the country is still an imperceptible and unexplored terrain, and as for feminism—Indian or western, the woman is treated in all discourses as a homogenized, monolithic construct and we have example of such women constructs in Roy’s *The God of Small things*.

Ranjit Guha is among the pioneers of subaltern group. He gives another dimension to the binary of powerful versus subalternisation and he says ‘Taken as a whole and in the abstract this ... category... was heterogeneous in its composition and thanks to the uneven character of regional economic and social developments, differed from area to area ... This could and did create many ambiguities and contradictions in attitudes and alliances, especially among the lowest strata of the rural gentry, impoverished landlords, rich peasants and upper middle class peasants all of whom belonged, ideally speaking to the category of people or subaltern class’ (Guha 8).

The characters in the text of *The God of Small things* represent the class consciousness and caste constructs in terms of their social and economic positions. Some of them are obsessed of their caste and class hierarchy and they have been subalternising ‘Other’ not as ‘Other’ but as ‘inhumane’ creatures. Majority of the characters are subaltern at the levels of caste, gender, class and religion specificities, albeit the caste- constructs characters in the canon of ‘Untouchables’ are considered as subalternised. This paper explores the images and representation of the caste syndrome and tug of war between have or have nots and the nuanced multi-faceted, multi-layered and multidimensional socio-political embedded structures of class and caste relations in India. In *The God of Small of Things*, three generations of women

has been focused and they are caught in post-independence phase between this in-betweenness. Ammu left her natal village Ayemenem in the hope for better future and she returned as a widow. Later, Rahel goes to U.S but returns in distress and dejection from the world out there.

The reclamation of images and their representation as subalternised souls specifically of women in the feminist literary canon manifests the process of cultural decolonization which the postcolonial discourse seeks to attain. Roy's work affirms Gayatri Spivak's theory of subalternisation that subalterns cannot speak and by this perspective Spivak tries to outline the main root cause of 'the void of communication gap'. As stated by Roy in one of her interviews that 'there is no such thing as voiceless, There are only deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard' (p, 9).

Rigid caste system is another ominous factor in the Indian culture, where the untouchables being of the lowest cadre have to bear the brunt of social, economic and political segregation and discrimination (Gould 1987, Milner 1993, Pandian, 1978, and Woodbourne 1922). Deliege comments that the Untouchables in some remote areas of India are still required to drag a bush behind them to erase their foot prints and those few who refuse to follow social custom are routinely beaten or murdered. Roy seems to follow the colonial urge to mitigate horrific cultural practices in India and work for the emancipation of rigid caste system through the text. She brings together Ammu, a woman of the Superior Brahmin caste to love Velutha who belongs to caste of the untouchables. *The God of Small Things* is a story of deprivation; displacement and misplacement, a place where you are made to suffer for what you have not done and will never do- a place where you pay price for your smallness, for your being an outcaste. It is also about a place, a diaspora that you have either created or is created within yourself, who cannot be intruded in at any cost-a place most dear to you, your breathing space, your individuality, your identity. Ammu and Velutha's love story forms the basic structure of the novel and a conservative and fundamental society comes into full light through them who sets the rules that who should be loved and how much.

We see Ammu, a Brahmin loving Velutha, an untouchable. This is the power of her individuality, her freedom that has been half-paralyzed by the laws of the society. She could see nothing in her future; it was a plain straight road only moving towards the dead end. How racial boundaries are demolished through love and sex is made evidently clear in the last chapter of the novel. Throwing away all restraint on creative imagination, Roy describes their utmost love through sheer physical enjoyment. The superior Ammu moves down on his body to press "the heat of his erections against her eyelids" (p, 318), and taste him "salty in her mouth" . The untouchable on the other hand sips deeply her love, "an untouchable tongue touches the innermost part of her" (p,319) . He "drank long and deep from the bowel of her" (p319). All distinction of creed seems to have evaporated into nothingness with each playful act on their part. He held her firmly against the mangos teen tree, "while she cried and laughed". Roy describes their jubilation in very simple words, "then, for what seemed like an eternity". Her choice of Velutha from the start carries an element of deviance from the caste ridden society. Neglecting the cultural restraint, she moves forward to select low caste Velutha as her boyfriend allied to this emancipator role of their love is the concept of sexual freedom. Quite amazingly Roy's description of the sexuality

assumes a westernized look to draw public wrath against her. In fact her description of the above scene seems to leave behind the Western writers like D.H Lawrence. It's so clear and vibrant that the difference between the pure and un-pure (lust) is amalgamated here

“Get out of my house before I break every bone in your body! My house, my pineapples, my pickles.”(Roy 225) Mammachi's reaction after knowing about Ammu's illicit relationship was against the norms of the society. For Chacko everything was permissible, for Ammu it became the question of family's name, honor and worth. What Mammachi considered normal and natural for Chacko, was considered highly immoral and profane for Ammu. Mammachi's locking Ammu in her bedroom as a first reaction after listening about her alleged love affair symbolizes Ammu's entrapment within the inherited caste values and boundaries set by others at a larger level .(Mullaney 55)

Traversing the Post-colonial spaces

Roy does not ignore the repressive, traumatic effect of the process of colonization of the natives. Following the typical post-colonial mode of repulsion to the colonial politics of expansion and social segregation, a paradoxical process of “othering”; Roy develops a narrative of how colonizer traumatically adversely affected the natives. Then her focus on small things in her *God of Small Things* would be argued in terms of her association with the “Others”. This section has been subdivided into two parts:

Ravaging the Body; Ravaging the Mind

It has been explained that how characters, events, issues reveal the body (India) was ravaged by colonial expansion and how this resulted in ravaging of the mind (psychologically traumatized condition; strange behaviors, mental paralysis and sickness. The “silenced, wounded body of the colonized is the pervasive figure in then colonial and the postcolonial discourses”. (Spring, 1993). Postcolonial imperialism produced a new race of subalterns as “Neil Bissoondath in *A Casual Brutality* states unequivocally: 'as they [the colonizers]exploited us, so we[the postcolonial]exploited each other. As they raped our land, so we raped our land. As they took, so we took. We had absorbed the attitudes of the colonizer, and we mimicked the worst in him. We learnt none of his virtues'.”(Nayar 99-100) Further Nayar says “If the native was the subaltern during colonial rule, post colonialism created its own subalterns. Women 'lower' castes, and classes, ethnic minorities rapidly became the 'Others' within the postcolonial nation state. The new elite was as oppressive and exclusive as the colonial master”.(Nayar 100) Roy is purposefully preoccupied with the Indian landscape as body that has undergone ravishment, abuse, torture to produce traumatized existence of the colonized. Estha and Rahel if viewed psychoanalytically reflect a condition of mental impasse; a kind of paralytic existence caused by prolonged and persistent mode of exploitative politics. They are the children of divorced parent and their sickness, and depression is no doubt spring from separation of parent, but the deeper issue of colonization could also be identified in their loss as, “Rahel wasn't sure what she suffered from, but occasionally she practiced sad faces, and sighing in the mirror” (59). Estha's mental impasse, condition of deathly silence and numbness of mind is even more powerfully put in there(p 13). It [quietness] “reached out of his head and enfolded him in his swampy arms . . . It sent its stealthy, suckered tentacles inching along the inside of his skull, hovering the knolls and dells of his memory, dislodging old sentences, whisking them off the trip of his tongue . . .

Unspeakable, numb” (p.13). Roy takes them as the history house in the fiction, “looming in the heart of darkness” p 53. The particular mental condition is reflected in the following description: ‘While other children of their age learned other things, Estha and Rahel learned how history negotiates its terms and collect its due from those who break its laws. They heard its sickening thud. They smelled its smell and never forgot it. . . . They would grow up grappling with what happened. They would try to tell themselves that in terms of geological time, it was an insignificant event, just a blinking of the earth’s woman’s eye. Those worse Things had happened. The worse things kept happening. But they would find no comfort in the thoughts’ (p,54).

Big Man the Laltain, Small Man the Mombatti , Love of the “Small”

Othering constitute another potent and significant part of colonial-postcolonial discourse, strongly reflecting the difference between the colonizer and the colonized. The natives are made explicit in several theoretical modes of the colonialism constitute inferior other to the superior colonizer. Roy however explicitly and implicitly affiliates her with the “other”. *The God of Small Things* is the story of a mother and her twins, who liked a Paraven. All four of them, were made to suffer because of their smallness. The God of small things could not help them because he was not powerful enough in front of The God of Big Things (the imperialistic powers). They had to pay a big price for all the small things they did – because they were outcastes in their own places, all four of them. Ammu suffered because she was a female and she tried to cross the limitations set by the society, the twins suffered because they were hybrids – somebody without identity, and Velutha suffered because he was untouchable. According to Nayar, “There is a constant elision in diasporic narratives between the individual and the communal, the personal and the collective, even when we are being told the story of one individual or family.” (Nayar 188). “Much of diasporic writing explores the theme of an original home. This original home is now lost-due to their exile-is constantly worked into the imagination and myth of the displaced individual/community. Nostalgia is therefore a key theme in diasporic writing.” (Nayar 191) In *The God of Small Things*, this diaspora becomes personal diaspora where the individuals are separated from themselves and their loved ones forcefully and they want to reunite with themselves and their beloveds. All the time they are thinking about the past and reliving through it. Personal Diaspora becomes particularly alive through the characters of Ammu, Rahel and Estha. Imperialism can basically be divided into male imperialism, societal imperialism and female imperialism. As regards societal imperialism, it is the outcome of male imperialism as male is occupying the prime position in the societies of this particular geographical area. Everything is regulated and initiated for them and on their behalf. *The God of Small Things* provides the best example of this societal and male imperialism. It throws a light on the general behaviors of a society that how it struggles to keep its imperial rule intact over the weak ones. Hindu culture is defined depending on social hierarchy it also becomes a type of imperialism and because a woman is weaker than man so her social standing is no way equal to that of man and the sole purpose of her life is to please man in particular and society at large. Because of their close proximity with the Hindu society these Syrian Christians adopted many of their norms and traditions. Baby Kochama steadfastly stuck to the general views about widowed or divorced women which she manifested now and then in the novel through her behavior with Ammu. This hatred was also regulated towards Rahel and Estha because they were her children- a divorced woman’s children. “...they were

Half-Hindu Hybrids whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian would ever marry. She was keen for them to realize that they (like herself) lived on sufferance in the Ayemenem House, their maternal grandmother's house, where they really had no right to be." (Roy 83) And also when Estha would play at night and fall on bed pretending to be Caesar, Kochu Maria would say, "Tell your mother to take you to your father's house... There you can break as many beds as you like. These aren't your beds. This isn't your house." (Roy 83) When Margarat Kochama and Sophie Mol came, they were admired for whatever they did and everybody especially Baby Kochama tried her level best to exclude Ammu and her twins out of conversation and made them feel out of place. At that time Ammu again remembered the one-armed dream man. He seemed to be a refuge for herself and her children where they were not outcasts. That one-armed man seemed to be that refuge, that homely thing that she always wanted for herself and her children. He was her God of Small Things, because she and her children were small things, they weren't big couldn't be because they were outcasts in that imperialistic society. No matter how hard they tried but the society wouldn't let them be big. Ammu and the twins clung to small things-small happiness even that was denied to them, small presents, small dreams, small future plans small hopes and at the end everything small was smashed down because in an imperial society like theirs only big are allowed to live, to own, to love, flourish and thrive. Roy's association, preoccupation, and concern with small things could be taken as developing association with small things as "others". God of small things provide avenues to the small in human life to assume substantial importance of our routine existence.

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