

THE PERIPHERAL APPROACH IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

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ABSTRACT

Arundhati Roy is the most significant writer in India. Through her works, she underlines the reality of post-modern and post-colonial society of India, The God of Small Things is also a fine example of genuine Indian scenario, in which she mocks the political, economic and social setting of second half of twentieth century India, where according to Indian constitution, everyone is equal to other though he or she belongs to minority class, subaltern or peripheral class, touchable or untouchable class, proletariat or bourgeois class etc. but in tangible life everything is contrary to the ideal law. No one fears to suppress the freedom, fraternity and equality of other due to having selfishness and power in hand, in post-modern India. The present novel also shows such issues where women and men are treated peripheral by the superiors or hierarchical people.

Key words: *Periphery, The God of Small things, Arundhti Roy, Indian society, etc.*

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Arundhati Roy is among prominent writers in contemporary Indian writing in English. In her works she delineated the reality of contemporary Indian society. Her debut novel *The God of Small Things*, the winner of Booker prize in 1997, also deals with such serious problems of subaltern, peripheral, underclass, politician etc. she also wrote screenplays for television and film before drafting *The God of Small Things*, which took her five years to complete. Brought up in Kerala, Roy has been living under its influence since Kerala is purportedly a more democratic state than most of the other areas in India. It is even asserted that women in Kerala enjoy relative freedom and they are more assertive, energetic and courageous. Known as a Third World woman writer, Roy is also an outspoken political figure, social activist, polemicist, cultural critic and new age feminist. In her political essays, Roy conveys radical viewpoints on issues related to globalization, imperialism, neo-liberal capitalism, transnational politics, environmental movements and the current state of India.

At first glance, the content of Roy's novel may not have too much in common with her political essays. Yet if we are careful enough, we will find that Roy has expressed her anti-war and anti-imperialism thoughts in *The God of Small Things*. In recent years, Roy has published several non-fiction books, such as *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (2001), *Power Politics* (2001), and *The Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire* (2004), just to name a few. Though her critical remarks outside the field of literature draw her acclaims as well as controversies, she has tried hard to give voice to the voiceless and speak for those marginalized and underprivileged, domestically and nationwide.

The present paper deals with the issues of periphery. So it is mandatory to clear the term 'periphery'. The word periphery originates in late 16th century for denoting a line that forms the boundary of something: via late Latin from Greek periphēreia 'circumference', from periphērēs 'revolving around', from peri- 'around' + pherein 'to bear'. It means not to the center or not to superior in rank.

According to Oxford Advance Learner's Dictionary term periphery means the outer edge of a particular area or the less important part of a social or political group. In other words periphery means nothing but marginal or subaltern or inferior in ranks in respect of ethnicity, race, caste, creed, religion and gender. It also means 'underother' {Sub (under) – altern (other)}. The term gained effect in Post-Colonial era. This term covers the subjects, the masses, the deprived and the neglected sections or people of the society. After that, it is Gayatri Spivak, who brought the term subaltern, under special effect as far as literature is concerned. Her controversial and special essay 'Can Subaltern Speak?' affected a specifically associated with female. In the course of time, it is urgently felt that subaltern are not only the women but even those having been

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deprived of liberty, equality, fraternity and social justice. These (Subalterns) are Women, Blacks or slaves, Untouchables (lower caste), workers and poor people. Peripheral is also called as marginal, other and subaltern.

Indian society has the inheritance of Patriarchal and touchable society in which there were no any value for the women and untouchable, where women were consider only as tool or object of sexual desire of men and untouchable, only as slave. As a writer, Roy has shown her awareness of periphery by creating the images of women and untouchables, who always meted out to inhuman treatment by the patriarchal and touchable agents in *The God of Small Things*. The present paper aims to focus on the situations of women and untouchables in the novel. The attempt has been made to discuss the images of female and untouchables.

The novel shows a harsh reality of two extremes i.e. the haves and have not of the society, the high and the mighty, the low and the weak, big man as Iyannan and small man as Mambatti, the God of Big things and the god of small things. The Iyannan means 'Big Things', who always exploits to the Mambatti small things which represents periphery. In the novel, Ammu, Rahel, Mammachi, Velutha and Vellya Pappan are peripheral. These characters are always treated as lower, marginal and other. The novel sets in Ayemenem, the small town, near Kerala. It offers the story of three generation of women and untouchable who are outer to the patriarchal and touchable society. These women are Ammu, Rahel, Mammachi, and Baby Kochamma and Untouchables are Velutha and Vellya Pappan. Mammachi is one of the peripheral women in the novel, she represents typical Indian wife who always beaten and looked down by her husband, Pappan. She is the symbolic representation of harsh reality regarding to the place of woman in Patriarchal society like India. Through, Mammachi, Roy shows how married woman have to spend all her life with her husband without getting freedom.

Mammachi's attempt to begin a pickle factory is always criticized by her husband, who thinks of his own reputation more than her. When she becomes the center of attention, it hurts his male ego, which makes him take pleasure in beating her frequently, as the novelist writes "Every night he beats her with a brass flower vase. The beating weren't new, what was new was only the frequency with which they took place." (Roy: 47) Whenever, he gets the chance to humiliate her in public, he does it. She never complains against all oppression and humiliation. She accepts the male chauvinism; of which she is a victim.

Ammu, is the heroine of the novel, is treated as peripheral. She is compelled to accept the easy taste of chauvinistic brutality, tyranny and hypocrisy. Her parents do not love her as they love Chacko, only because she is a female. While she was child, she was inculcated that father bear is greater than mother bear, because "Mother Bear suffered those beating with mute resignation." (Roy:180) Her father, is charming and urbane with visitors, donates money to orphan, leprosy clinic to show he is a moral man. But in loneliness he used to beat her and her mother, once with her mother she was thrown

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out of the house. They "endured cold winter nights in Delhi hiding in the mehndi hedge around their house because Pappachi had come back from work out of sorts, and beaten her and Mammachi and driven them out of their home." (Roy: 180-181)

As a girl, Ammu was deprived from higher education. Her father thought that "a college education is unnecessary expense for girl." (Roy: 38) On the other hand, her elder brother has been sent to Oxford for higher education. No one is serious about her life and future. Therefore, she takes a decision without thinking properly to get marry anybody during her short visit to Calcutta. She thinks "anything, anyone at all, would be better than returning to Ayemenem." But her tragedy never ends here a person, whom she married is a drunkard, who asks her to satisfy his boss' lust for the sake of his job. Then, she leaves her husband, returns to Ayemenem where she is unwelcome.

After coming back, Ammu is treated as inferior or peripheral by her relatives and in society, because married and divorced daughter has no position in her parents' house. On the other hand, her brother becomes the owner of the parental property, though he gives divorce for his wife. He not only denies her share of property but humiliates her. He always says, "my pickles, my factory, everything is mine" and refers "What is your is mine and what's mine is mine." (Roy: 57) It shows self-centered nature of male in patriarchal society. No family members understand Ammu's problem but treats her as per the ancient rules of patriarchal society. Baby Kochamma, Ammu's aunt never accepts her presence in the house. She also neglects the twins of Ammu.

Baby Kochamma easily accepts Chako's illegal relationship with labour women. Society and Family accepts his flirting behaviour with labour women who works in the factory, because he is a man and says "he can't help having a Man's Needs." (Roy: 168) Baby Kochamma makes the separate entrance for Chako's room to let the women with whom he flirts. She also secretly pays money to those working women who make him happy. But, Baby Kochamma turns her nose on Ammu's relationship with Velutha and comments, "how could she stand the smell? Haven't you noticed; they have a particular smell, these Paravans?" (Roy: 78) She thinks that Ammu has defiled the ancient prestige of their family.

According to Baby Kochamma, a divorce woman, Ammu has no right to love any man though it is a Parvan, an untouchable. When, she goes to the police station to save Velutha, her statement is also not taken by police inspector. He only looks her breasts and presses them by baton which is in his hand and called her Veshya (Prostitute). This incident highlights reality of Indian police system. Where, Police treat peripheral people purely contrary to their motto of Politeness, Obedience, Loyalty, Intelligence, Courtesy, Efficiency and always exploits inferior people for having money or because they do not have any power.

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Mammachi also takes less care of daughter to son. When Sophie Mol died Ammu is prohibited to attend the funeral, later she is asked to leave the house. Ammu is the most conspicuous representative of the modern generation of women who dare to rebel. She challenges the old age norms of the society and becomes the symbol of all the men folk want to be. Society rejects to her lover, family, protection, recognition, everything. She faces partial situations before and after her marriage. She is the victim of male dominated society. She voices of peripheral situations of women in and around the society. When, Ammu died Church refuses to do the final rites on her body, so the body has been taken to the electric crematorium by wrapping in a dirty bed sheet. Finally she becomes mere a number receipt No. Q.498673, it shows what is the value of women in patriarchal, whether she is alive or dead.

Rahel, Ammu's daughter also suffers life like Ammu. She was born of parents who are divorced, was a big stigma and it was believed to be even worse disease than inbreeding. Being a girl child, humiliation starts early in Rahel's life. She also does love marriage with Larry Mc Caslin, an American, she could not live happily. Very soon the marriage turn to great failure, so she has to divorce. After divorce with Larry, she returns to Ayemenem. As there was no one to share their grief and love them, Estha and Rahel stand for each other. It has been indicated at the end of the novel that she shares her body with Estha, her own brother and dares to break the laws of society.

Roy also focuses on untouchable's subaltern situations in Indian society through the medium of Velutha and Vellya Paapen in post-independence, post-colonial and post-modern era. In post-independence period India created its own constitution of people, for people, by people and it suggests every one ought to be treated equally in society. But, novel shows how power centered people misuses it to the peripheral though they are female or untouchable. Pappachi, a Christian, does not allow Parvans into the house. They do not allow touch anything that Touchables touched in the house. Novelist presents the situations of untouchable in Mammachi's time as, "In Mammachi's time, Parvans, like other untouchable, were not allowed to walk on public roads, not allowed to carry umbrellas. They had put their hands over their mouths when they spoke." (Roy: 74) here, Roy focuses on terrible situations of the Untouchables like Parvans, Pelayas and Pulayas of that period, who changed their caste to live happy life, when British came to Malabar. They converted to Christianity and joined Anglican Church to escape from the scourge of Untouchability. But situations became worse than the past. They were made to have separate churches, with separate services and separate priests. This incident did not take long to realize that "they had jumped from the frying pan into the fire." (Roy: 74). Hybridity occurs in postcolonial societies both as a result of conscious efforts of colonial subjugation like when the colonial hegemonic power invades, encroaches and controls the colonized or when they compel the indigenous people to absorb and accept the new paradigms devised for their suppression. After independence they found that they were not entitled to any

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government benefits like job reservations or bank loans at low interest rates, because officially, on paper, they were Christians, and therefore casteless

Velutha, a Parvan or a untouchable, is the hero of the novel treated as peripheral, works in the pickle factory of Mammachi. Apart from carpentry skill he had the knowledge of the Machine. He can mend radios, clocks, water-pumps, so Mammachi says about Velutha as, "If only (Velutha) hadn't been a Parvan, he might have become an engineer." (Roy: 75) It shows though Untouchables have great skill, he can't get good education for their survival. He has good knowledge of machinery than other touchable worker of factory. But, Mammachi gives him less payment than touchable workers and more than other untouchable workers. It shows, though, Velutha has great skill, but due to his low caste, he is treated as inferior to other workers in society.

Roy gives us a somewhat euphemistic picture of Velutha's status when the narrator shows us how he appears in Ammu's dream: "He left no footprints in sand, no ripples in water, no image in mirrors" (Roy: 206). This is a reflection of the peripheral position of the Untouchables in the old days that Mammachi tells her grandchildren about, the days 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" (Roy: 71). Velutha is encouraged to go to school though not together with Touchables but to a special school for Untouchables only.

In Police station Baby Kochamma tells lies about Velutha to the inspector. She said that he threatened them while no male member of family present at home. Even police inspector, Thomas Mathew, did not listen his opinion as he did with Ammu. He beats him so badly to kill. Here novelist tries to focus on the naked reality of the police officer who works only under the pressure of the politician and for Touchables even today also.

In her novel Arundhati Roy tries to rise the voice for peripheral people through the medium of Ammu, a divorced lady; Mammachi, a suppressed wife; Velutha and Velly Pappen the Parvan or untouchables. She also deals with current issues of Indian society. She is a serious and sensitive writer, who presented reality of women and untouchables in the post-colonial India. She has pointed out difference like female and untouchable condition in the early part of the independence and later. She is fully alive with the social evils around her. She reacts sharply against social justice, social inequalities and the evils of religious fanaticism.

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