Arundhati Roy: Reclaiming Voices on the Margin in The God of Small Things

Angelika Olsson
January 2011

Independent thesis Basic level
(degree of Bachelor)
15 HE credits
English Literature

English C
Supervisor: Ph D Alan Shima
Examiner: Ph D Marko Modiano
Abstract
The aim of this essay is to critically consider Arundhati Roy’s novel *The God of Small Things* from a postcolonial feminist perspective, with a special focus on how she models different representations of women, taking as a background the discussions within postcolonial feminism 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. This purpose is reached by studying and comparing three main female characters in the novel: Mammachi, Baby Kochamma and Ammu, centering on their different ways of relating to the male hero of the novel, Velutha, an Untouchable in the lingering caste system of India. The essay argues that Roy has contributed with diverse representations of subaltern women in the ‘Third World’ who—despite their oppressed and marginalized status—display agency and are portrayed as responsible for their own actions.

Keywords: Arundhati Roy, The God of Small Things, Subaltern, Third World women, Spivak, marginalization
# Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................................... 1  
Introduction ............................................................................................................................................. 3  
  About The Novel ................................................................................................................................. 4  
Theory ..................................................................................................................................................... 5  
  Third World Women .......................................................................................................................... 5  
  A Postcolonial Feminist Perspective ................................................................................................. 6  
  Third World Women and Feminism ................................................................................................. 7  
  Subalternity ......................................................................................................................................... 8  
  Strategic Essentialism ....................................................................................................................... 10  
  Voice and Role Models ..................................................................................................................... 11  
  Agency .............................................................................................................................................. 13  
Analysis and Discussion ........................................................................................................................ 14  
  Character Analysis ............................................................................................................................ 14  
  Marginalization .................................................................................................................................. 17  
  Mammachi ......................................................................................................................................... 20  
  Baby Kochamma .................................................................................................................................. 21  
  Ammu ................................................................................................................................................ 23  
  Double Standards ............................................................................................................................... 25  
  Female Agency .................................................................................................................................... 27  
  Responsibility ..................................................................................................................................... 29  
  The Novel’s Theme ............................................................................................................................ 33  
  Subaltern Speech ............................................................................................................................... 34  
  Conclusion .......................................................................................................................................... 35
Introduction

Arundhati Roy’s novel *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, “establishing . . . the cultural striking back of the once-peripheral” (Boehmer 165) 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 (Mullaney 71). 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 (see for example Boehmer 2005; Mullaney 2002; Pathak 2001). The aim of this essay is to critically consider 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 (Young 6). 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 relate 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. The characters are chosen because they are adults when the
main events in the story take place, which makes it easier to discuss their actions in terms of agency and responsibility.

About The Novel

Before proceeding with the theoretic base of this essay, a few words about the plot, style and form of the novel should be mentioned. The main events in *The God of Small Things* take place during some December weeks in 1969 and the setting is Ayemenem, a town in the equatorial south Indian state of Kerala. Seen for the most part through the eyes of Rahel, Ammu’s daughter, the narrative moves between two points in time, 1969 and 1993, and the perspective subsequently switches between Rahel seeing things as a seven year old girl and as an adult woman. 1993 is the year when Rahel returns to Ayemenem to meet her brother Estha after being separated for 31 years. Haunted by memories from the past, the novel is something of an excavation of a trauma; Rahel looks back at her life to examine it. Postmodern in its handling of time, the plot circles between the ‘present’ and the past, digging deeper and deeper into the tragic secrets of Rahel’s life with an effect similar to that of a detective story, keeping the reader anxious and curious about how things really happened to the very end. More and more details are added, more and more perspectives are offered as the narrator flashes restlessly forwards and backwards. Out of the many qualities about her novel one is that the reader has the privilege to see a course of events from several very different vantage points, and this is also reflected in the novel’s epigraph: “Never again will a single story be told as though it’s the only one” (John Berger). Roy weaves her plot, thread by thread, into a colorful, multifaceted story; added to the narrative are different cultural references to Shakespeare, The Sound of Music, Kathakali (traditional drama-dance) and the music of The Rolling Stones which create a patchwork of associations and connotations. But the novel is not just a beautiful and intricate postmodern saga; it is definitely an intervention into (especially Indian) culture with its close, almost overdone description of caste transgressive
intimacy, and its critical account of the local communist leader and Kerala communism in general. And to this we may add that it is a novel written by and seen through the eyes of a Third World woman and almost all of the central characters are Third World women. While bearing this political dimension in mind, we now turn to some relevant theories that inform the analyses in this essay.

**Theory**

The theoretical framework applied in this essay commences with a discussion about the concept Third World women, accompanied by a brief presentation of the postcolonial feminist approach in the analysis. Thereafter a survey of the discussions within postcolonial feminism about western feminist’s relationship with and representations of Third World women will follow. Proceeding from there the essay further explores the notion of subalternity and strategic essentialism succeeded by a discussion about voice, representations and role models within the specific Indian context. The theory section is finally closed with a paragraph introducing and defining the concept of agency. The chosen theoretical framework has been assessed as productive in the close reading, analysis and discussion of the characters in the novel.

**Third World Women**

The term Third World is somewhat outdated, originally meaning countries that did not belong to the ‘First World’ (the Western, capitalist countries) or the ‘Second World’ (Soviet Union with communist allies). As stressed by Robert Young, the term Third World was intended as a positive, empowering label for a different perspective on “political, economic, and cultural global priorities” than the predominant polarized world order with capitalism on the one side and Soviet communism on the other (Young 17). However, that third way was never properly defined, and over time the term instead became associated with the problems of the Third
World rather than unique solutions, and it gradually became a pejorative. Another weakness with the concept is that it conceals the many social and cultural differences that exist within the Third World; there is simply no such uniform group of countries. An alternative term would perhaps be ‘women in developing countries’ but since that concept is equally vague and since ‘Third World women’ is a concept that has remained widely in use in many disciplines, it will be a conceptual and strategic point of departure in this paper, as we reach for a more nuanced understanding. It is important to remember though that these concepts are, as McLeod puts it: “provisional categories of convenience rather than factual denotations of fixed and stable groups” (174). Regardless of which concept we use, the fact remains that an average Third World woman does not exist, which is why any common label would conceal a number of historical and cultural differences.

A Postcolonial Feminist Perspective

The feminist perspective in this essay is extracted from McLeod, who is informed by ideas expressed by Catherine Belsey’s and Jane Moore’s introduction in The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism (1989). When reading a text from a feminist point of view (regardless of what branch of feminism you belong to) they suggest that we should look at “how [it] represents women, what it says about gender relations, how it defines sexual difference” (Belsey and Moore 1). As already mentioned the focus of this essay is how the women in Roy’s novel are represented but also, as will be demonstrated later on, how the expectations towards women are very much different from those on men. However, a common goal in both postcolonialism and feminism is “challenging forms of oppression” whatever they look like, and each context has its own, unique structures of oppression (McLeod 174). 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: “the real secret was that communism crept into Kerala insidiously. A reformist movement that never overtly questioned the traditional values of a caste-ridden, extremely traditional community” (64). 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 thing that is interesting to bear in mind while reading this novel is the relatively high status of women in Kerala (compared to the rest of India) possibly due to earlier matrilineal kinship systems (Encyclopaedia Britannica). This higher status might perhaps serve as part of an explanation to the strength of agency that some of the female characters display.

**Third World Women and Feminism**

Within the postcolonial literary discipline there has been an ongoing discussion about First World feminism in relation to Third World women (McLeod 174). 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. Chandra Talpade Mohanty criticizes western feminists in her essay ‘Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses’ and accuses many of them for unconsciously reproducing the unequal power relations that already is at work politically and financially, within their analysis (Mohanty 17-42). Mohanty shows how Third World women are often described in sweeping terms as religious, family-oriented, illiterate and domestic, placing them in a position as ‘the other’ in contrast to the allegedly more progressive and modern women in the First World. Furthermore, Mohanty reacts against how western feminists tend to refer to a
monolithic, global patriarchy that “apparently oppresses most if not all the women” (19) in Third World countries and they tend to describe women as powerless exploited objects and victims as opposed to the assumed powerful male exploiters. She concludes: “Sisterhood cannot be assumed on the basis of gender; it must be forged in concrete historical and political practice and analysis” (24). Mohanty also notes that the relationships between women are often ignored, as well as different kinds of relationships between women and men. 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. Hopefully it is by now clear to the reader how far-fetched it is to assume that all women share the same cultural or political interests only because of their similar bodies. Women as a group are more likely to be deeply divided by boundaries like class, ethnicity, and nationality.

**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 (‘French Feminism in an International Frame’ in *In Other Worlds* 184-211). The fact that all women share similar biological features does not mean that they also share the same culture, values, beliefs and experiences—and therefore the “First World feminist must learn to stop feeling privileged as a woman” (187). Instead, she should ask herself what she can “learn from them” and “speak to them” instead of always trying to speak for them (186). However, Spivak is not ethnocentric in the sense that she would believe that “only Indian women can speak for other Indian women” (McLeod 186). Quite the contrary; McLeod establish that “Spivak has consistently advocated that critics must always look to the specifics of their own positions and recognize the political, cultural and institutional contexts
in which they work” (186). Considering this, it becomes of course very difficult to speak for anyone else with different experiences from yours. In her ground-breaking essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Spivak addresses these issues in depth and scrutinizes the Subaltern Studies Group’s attempts to revise the history writing of colonial India by revisiting historical colonial archives, where reports of subaltern insurgency has been filed, in an attempt to retrieve subaltern perspectives. Spivak warns these scholars from falling into the trap of trying to recreate a kind of ‘subaltern consciousness’, something she dooms as utterly hopeless. Spivak (in a deconstructive manner) perceives human consciousness as something that is being continuously constructed from the discourses surrounding us rather than created by an autonomous agency, as if we were sovereign subjects. The same applies to subaltern women, and “the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” than subaltern men, because of the male dominance in these archives concerning subaltern insurgency (*Can the Subaltern Speak* 41). In an interview from 1993, Spivak clarifies that her use of the term subaltern was and is very specific; the pure subaltern cannot, by definition, move upwards in the social hierarchy or make his or her voice heard. To speak, in Spivak’s sense, is when there has been a “transaction between the speaker and the listener” and to her there is “something of a not-speakingness in the very notion of subalternity” (*The Spivak Reader* 289). However, Spivak adds, this does not mean that she has some kind of dubious interest in preserving subalternity. “There is for us no feeling of romantic attachment to pure subalternity as such” (289). Clearly, Spivak wishes to delimit the term subaltern to hinder it from becoming watered down. She explains that if, for example, a subaltern person is given the right to vote (in a free, democratic election) she has thereby spoken, and by doing so the subaltern has been “inserted into the long road to hegemony” and can therefore no longer be classified as subaltern (*Can the Subaltern Speak?* 65). If we apply 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
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, 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 lets us know some of his thoughts: “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’. The three female characters that will be discussed later in this paper may all experience oppression in various extents, but at the same time they are also able to ‘speak’ on different occasions and they do exercise agency to a quite substantial degree.

**Strategic Essentialism**

What Spivak calls for, however, is far from a retreat into passive acceptance of the way things are. In her essay “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography” she explains how one could apply a kind of “strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest” (*The Spivak Reader* 214). However, one could easily agree with McLeod in that Spivak “open[s] herself to the charge of having things both ways by dismissing on theoretical grounds the subaltern subject while supporting elsewhere those projects which still
subscribe to notions of essential subjectivity” (195). Bart Moore-Gilbert criticizes Spivak for being contradictory and incoherent in her critical writings, especially in her effort to bring Marxism and deconstruction in critical alignment. He also accuses Spivak of committing the same fault that she blames the Subaltern Studies Group for by constructing the subaltern’s identity in essentialist terms in her attempt to define subalternity. To qualify to the dubious title of subalternity, as Moore-Gilbert reads Spivak, the individual has to be virtually outside the global economy, marginalized to the extent just short of a caveman, so to speak. Furthermore, she also errs by claiming that ‘the subaltern cannot speak’ because when stating this she obviously speaks for those she claims that others should not try to speak for. Moore-Gilbert also foresees the effect of Spivak’s writings as “the more the subaltern is seen as a ‘theoretical’ fiction . . . the more the suffering and exploitation of the subaltern becomes a theoretical fiction, too” (102). Thus, Spivak’s work runs the risk of leaving the non-subaltern critic with a hopeless feeling that nothing really can be done on behalf of the subaltern. Due to Spivak’s extremely exclusive use of the term subaltern, the more general definition suggested by Robert Young will be employed in this essay, defining subalternity as including marginalized, subordinated classes and groups of peoples (Young 6).

**Voice and Role Models**

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. Spivak would perhaps argue that Roy is erring when she, as a middle-class, educated woman and author, seeks to give
voice to the oppressed. However, Spivak might nevertheless approve of Roy’s intervention due to that the author is most likely acting out of a ‘scrupulously visible political interest’ which Spivak feels sympathetic to and welcomes as a kind of strategic essentialism. There are other critics who definitely acknowledge Roy’s potential to represent the ‘hitherto silent’. Anita Singh sees the novel as “a discourse of the marginalized and subordinated” as it “crystallizes the issues of atrocities against . . . all those dispossessed of an identity or a speaking voice. The writing subject itself [Roy] belongs to the rank of the hitherto silent. The act of authorship is an act of retrieval as well as an act of liberation” (133). By this Singh points to the fact that Roy has relevant personal experiences that she uses for her story; she has grown up as a woman in a small Indian village as the daughter of a Syrian Christian mother and a Hindu father, and her parents divorced when Roy was young (Mullaney 7). Singh concludes: “The book becomes the voice of all those who are relegated to the margins of society” (133). It could be worth noting here that women’s voices have indeed been marginalized in postcolonial India. Ketu H. Katrak has pointed out that even though India’s national leader Mahatma Gandhi did much to mobilize women in the nationalist movement through passive resistance, “which feminized the usually masculine struggle against the colonizer”, he never intended to “confuse men’s and women’s roles” and “challenge patriarchal traditions that oppressed women within the home” (Katrak 395-96). Thus after independence, the women who had struggled for freedom alongside with the men, found themselves back in their traditional roles as primarily mothers and wives. Furthermore, Gandhi often used symbols from Hindu mythology, intended to serve as role models for women. Katrak continues:

The notion of female suffering in the Hindu tradition is dangerously glorified through such use of mythological models. The subconscious hold of socialization patterns inculcated in girls through the popular mythological
stories of the ever-suffering Sita as virtuous wife, or the all-sacrificing Savitri who rescues her husband from death are all part of the preparation for suffering in their roles of wives and mothers (398).

By using such myths as representations and role models for girls and women, Katrak argues that Gandhi extended an ideology where “female sexuality was legitimately embodied only in marriage, wifehood, motherhood, domesticity—all forms of controlling women’s bodies” (396). All these feminized role models are alive and well in present day India, and as every other postcolonial female writer, Roy has to address the expectations imposed upon women, as they are part of the overarching structures that influences everyday life. Susheila Nasta describes the mission like this: “the post-colonial woman writer is not only involved in making herself heard, in changing the architecture of male-centered ideologies and languages, or in discovering new forms and language to express her experience, she has also to subvert and demythologize indigenous male writings and traditions which seek to label her” (xv). As will be shown later, 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.

**Agency**

Returning now to the previous discussion of Third World women, Julie Mullaney sees Roy’s novel clearly as a critique, in the spirit of Spivak, against the “production of a homogenous model of ‘third world womanhood’ ” that, however well-intentioned, only serves to hide the substantial differences between women worldwide (11). She further describes how Roy “carefully delineates not their false homogeneity as representations of oppressed ‘third world woman’ but the range of options and choices, whether complicit, resistant—or both—to the dominant order” (11). It is in these characterizations, similar to ‘strategic essentialism’, that
Roy offers us a scope of detailed, varied and subtle representations of what a marginalized Third World woman might be. The ‘options and choices’ that Mullaney speaks of are similar to the idea of ‘agency’ in cultural theory. This concept will be used in the character analysis later and is defined by Chris Barker as “the socially constructed capacity to act”, meaning that all humans are subjects that in some way or other are “determined, caused and produced by social forces that lie outside of themselves as individuals” (236, 235). This will also be the perspective on agency employed in this essay; even if an individual could never be described as wholly undetermined from the outside world, she does have opportunities to choose, or as Barker puts it: “We clearly have the existential experience of facing and making choices” (236). Jonathan Culler adds to this that the question of agency is “the question of how far we can be subjects responsible for our own actions and how far our apparent choices are constrained by forces we do not control” (45). 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. One 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. I believe that Roy intended to make a difference with her novel, to create representations of people on the margin that are seldom heard in depth.³ We shall now examine more closely the chosen characters in the novel.

**Analysis and Discussion**

**Character Analysis**

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, 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.

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 tea
estate assistant manager up 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), “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 most unwelcome when she gets back to the house in Ayemenem and her father dos 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, Baby Kochamma herself, felt she had graciously accepted. The fate of the wretched Man-less woman” (44-5). 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 outcastes. He lives with his father and brother in a small laterite 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. “Mammachi (with impenetrable Touchable logic) often said that if only he hadn’t been a Paravan, he might have become an engineer” (72). 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.
Marginalization

To start with we might ask in what ways these characters are on the margin? 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 us how Velutha appears in Ammu’s dream: “He left no footprints in sand, no ripples in water, no image in mirrors” (206). This is a reflection of the subaltern position of the Untouchables in the old days that Mammachi tells her grandchildren about, the days when “[p]aravans 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 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 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 behind. 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 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 as well. 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 “Half-Hindu Hybrids whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian would even marry” in the eyes of Baby Kochamma (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 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.
Mammachi and Baby Kochamma are both Syrian Christians, a proud minority group in Kerala of around twenty percent (a large number of Christians for an Indian state), who believe themselves to be “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 colonialists 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). In fact, they are so to speak “remnants of the old colonial elite” and descendants of “those Indians who were part of the steel frame of British in India, the Indian Civil Service” (Mullaney 33). Chacko also explains this to the twins, that “though he hated to admit it, they were all 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’, as will be explained later.

The question of identity permeates The God of Small Things since the whole Ipe family has this problem of ‘classification’, symbolized in the novel by Mammachi’s banana jam. The banana jam was banned illegal by the Food Products Organization because it “according to their specifications . . . was neither jam nor jelly. Too thin for jelly and too thick for jam. An ambiguous, unclassifiable consistency . . .” (30-1). 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). Having examined briefly the marginalization of the characters we now turn to a closer look at the three women respectively.

**Mammachi**

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 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 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 her religious beliefs.

**Baby Kochamma**

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 father figure to them and reproaches Rahel for being “over-familiar” with Velutha (175).

Another feature that is particularly marked in Baby Kochamma’s character, as mentioned before, is that she carries this “fear of being dispossessed”, a political fear (shared with the elites and landowners worldwide) that grows stronger every year. This fear, in her relation to Velutha, becomes mixed up with the age-old, more regional contempt towards Untouchables, creating strong feelings of antagonism that make her do almost anything to get
rid of him. On one occasion in the narrative, when the family’s car is stuck in the middle of a Marxist demonstration, Baby Kochamma is humiliated by a mob of men who make a joke out of her by forcing her to wave a red flag while shouting Marxist slogans. After this, she “focused all her fury at her public humiliation on Velutha” (78). “In her mind he grew to represent the march” and all that had been done to her, “all the men who had laughed at her” (78). It should be mentioned that Baby Kochamma’s fear of the communists was not without cause. We are told by the narrator (and these are also historical facts) that a new militant communist movement called the Naxalites spread rapidly across India and “struck terror in every bourgeois heart “ (66) by organizing peasants into fighting cadres, expelling landowners and seizing their land. They even set up “People’s Courts to bring “Class Enemies” to trial (66). In Kerala, a landlord had not long ago been brutally lynched and killed. Even if the Ipe family is on its downfall financially and status-wise, they bear the characteristics that easily would make them ‘class-enemies’ in the eyes of the Naxalites. This political fear grows so strong in Baby Kochamma that she, in her declining years, locks all the doors and windows of the house, and even the fridge so that no one can steal her cream-buns.

Why does Velutha represent this fear within Baby Kochamma? Evidently he is an ‘unsafe’ Paravan, very much unlike his father, Vellya Paapen, who is an “Old-World Paravan” who has “seen the Crawling Backwards Days” (73). Vellya Paapen is content with his present situation and humbly accepts all the benevolence showed in many ways towards him and his family by the Ipe family. But Vellya Paapen feared for his son. “He couldn’t say what it was that frightened him. It was nothing that he had said. Or done. It was not what he said, but the way he said it. Not what he did, but the way he did it” (73). Through this we learn that Velutha carries a sense of self-respect that makes him appear a little dangerous, since as a Paravan he should be lowly, humble and grateful in his attitude. “Perhaps it was just a lack of hesitation. An unwarranted assurance. In the way he walked. The way he held his head. The
quiet way he offered suggestions without being asked. Or the quiet way in which he disregarded suggestions without appearing to rebel” (73) Velutha’s self-assurance is strange and unfamiliar to his father, who’s gratitude towards the Ipe family’s charitable deeds has “widened his smile and bent his back” (73). Baby Kochamma also notices these traits and tries to explain this to the others in the family by vague insinuations that she has “noticed some signs, some rudeness, some ingratitude” (78). 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.

Ammu

If Velutha has an enemy in Baby Kochamma, he definitely has an ally in 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 “wrong-footed, caught off guard” with its “marks, its scars, its wounds from old wars and the walking-backwards days all fell away” (167). (Before that moment, Ammu regarded Velutha only as a sweet, three years younger cheerful boy who had the funny habit of calling her Ammukutty—little Ammu—even though she was older than he was). Furthermore, she discovers a potential companion in him who ought to be as angry as she is, and she wishes 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 we 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 lets us know about 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 the ladies money secretly, 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 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 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 us two very potent ladies full of (socially constructed) agency, not at all willing to await the will of the ‘master of the house’ (Chacko). Clearly, Roy wishes to exhibit to us 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 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 of 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 continually brokenhearted. 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 mores and values of her community. She exercises agency again and again to influence her surrounding in accordance to her own beliefs. Saving the honor of the family becomes a number one priority to Baby Kochamma and she never once 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 above in the story. Another great talent of hers 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 pugnacious; 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). In this quote, Roy seems to imply that Ammu acts according to her ‘essence’, undetermined by society. However, we are also told about how Ammu’s experiences during her adolescence influence and shape her, for instance about the “mulish, reckless streak that develops in Someone Small who has been bullied all their lives by Someone Big” (173). 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.

Responsibility
As quoted from Mullaney earlier, Roy displays in her novel women with a ‘range of options and choices, whether complicit, resistant—or both—to 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. 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. One example of this is when she quarrels with her husband during their divorce about who should take responsibility for their children. Ammu wants her husband to take care of Estha, the boy, but he refuses. When Estha reminds Ammu about this later, how she and his father had pushed him and his sister between
them like billiard balls, Ammu denies it, hugs him and says that “he mustn’t imagine things” (81). This memory is painful to her—that she actually had tried to leave her son alone with an alcoholic, abusive father—and she does not wish to confront it, even if it means that she has to lie to her son. Another painful memory for Ammu, something she regrets for the rest of her life, is connected to when Mammachi and Baby Kochamma lock her into her room “incoherent with rage and disbelief at what was happening to her—at being locked away like the family lunatic in a medieval household” (239). In this situation she screams the most terrible things to her children as they come to her door to ask why she has been locked in: “Because of you! . . . ‘If it wasn’t for you I wouldn’t be here! . . . I would have been free! I should have dumped you in an orphanage the day you were born! You’re the millstones round my neck! . . . Why can’t you just go away and leave me alone?!’” (239-40). After hearing this, the twins decide to run away from home, a decision that later tragically leads to the death of their visiting cousin and eventually to Ammu being banned from her parent’s house and separated from her children. Surely, those words echo in Ammu’s mind for the rest of her life, even if they were uttered in a state of utmost desperation and despair.

Apart from the outburst towards her children, Ammu also feels guilty about Velutha’s death. “He’s dead . . . I’ve killed him” she whispers to the unknowing conductor on the bus back to Ayemenem, after having tried to settle things at the police office but having failed immensely. Why is Ammu feeling guilty about this? In what way did she ‘kill’ Velutha? Perhaps she regrets her affair with him all along. There is, after all, a social distance between them, a difference in class and position in society that proves to be fatal to Velutha. Even though Ammu also has to pay for their relationship in the end, Velutha is far more vulnerable and exposed. During their first night together, Velutha suddenly hesitates and becomes scared: “He tried to be rational. What’s the worst thing that can happen? I could lose everything. My job. My family. My livelihood. Everything” (316). The stakes in entering a
relationship with an upper-caste woman are huge for him. Ammu does not seem aware of
these risks with their relationship, only that it has to be kept secret and that they cannot expect
anything else from each other than spending a few hours together under the cover of night. In
Ammu’s dream the “cheerful man with one arm” sees long shadows flicker around them, but
he has no other arm to fight those shadows. “Shadows that only he could see” (205). The risks
that Ammu cannot see at that point seem to become clear to her later, when she has all the
cards and facts in hand. If she had never ventured to enter into the relationship he would still
be alive and now she perceives herself as the cause of his death. To the reader, Ammu’s
words ’I’ve killed him’ seem to contain an insight of responsibility that dawns upon Ammu
when it is too late.

Mammachi’s responsibility is quite clear in the story; she acts openly according to her
beliefs when she is told about the affair. Even if she is described as submissive in relation to
her husband and suffers a great deal from being so, she is all the same not portrayed as a
victim who is unaware of her values and beliefs. She is able to run a small business and
towards the end of her marriage she is freed from Pappachi’s violent company and may relax
more. Mammachi’s agency is of course heavily socially constructed and her identity is a
unique mix of casteism, religion and culture, but she is nevertheless depicted as fully
responsible for her actions. Baby Kochamma is probably the character depicted as most
energetic, cunning and vicious—not in the least similar to that of a martyr or victim, even
though she likes to think of herself as an innocent sufferer. “In her mind she kept an
organized, careful account of Things She’d Done For People, and Things People Hadn’t Done
For Her” (93). This quote illustrates her self-righteous and self-pitying mindset, which serves
as a protection from admitting her own partaking and responsibility in different situations. For
example, she is the one who persuades Estha to betray Velutha (in order to save his mother
Ammu from jail) at the police station. Inspector Thomas Mathew makes Baby Kochamma
understand that a testimony from the twins against Velutha is the only thing that can save her from being charged with giving a false first information report (where she implied that Velutha had abducted the children). The case of Velutha’s death closes with the false charge of kidnapping hanging over him. Baby Kochamma fears that her conspiracy with Inspector Thomas Mathew could be revealed by Ammu if an investigation is opened later about the case, and this fear makes her conspire once again to make Ammu leave Ayemenem since she knows the whole truth. This time Baby Kochamma uses Chacko’s grief over his dead daughter, who drowned accidentally during the nighttime expedition with the twins, and she succeeds in portraying Ammu as responsible for this. This insinuation gives Chacko an “accessible target for his insane anger” and he breaks down Ammu’s door and tells her to “pack her bags and leave” (305). Baby Kochamma never reveals any feelings of regret about her role in to what has happened but she definitely feels uncomfortable with having both of the twins in the house again as grown-ups. “They had begun to make her uneasy, both of them” (283) the now eighty three year old Baby Kochamma ponders. “What and how much did they remember? When would they leave?” (283). The twins are the last persons alive whom were present at the police station in 1969, and their presence in the Ayemenem household awakens Baby Kochamma’s feelings of guilt or at least uneasiness about the family tragedy.

Now, even if Roy also describes the structures of oppression in the context vividly, she nevertheless allows her characters to remain subjects as far as is possible, and responsible towards their deeds and actions. She does not deny her characters their agency and their choice to comply or to resist. They may not always admit their responsibility, like Comrade Pillai, who denied Velutha protection when he tried to find refuge in Comrade Pillai’s house the night he was sent away by Mammachi. The narrator tells us that “[t]hough his part in the whole thing had by no means been a small one, Comrade Pillai didn’t hold himself in any way
personally responsible for what had happened” (15). But the narrator lets the reader understand that the responsibility is shared by many hands, each of them stained with a fleck of blood, more or less complying with the system.

**The Novel’s Theme**

The symbiosis of structure versus agency is reflected in one of the main themes of this novel that a bit reductively can be described as the tension between ‘big things’ and ‘small things’. The conceptual structures of religion, caste, nation and colonialism are big things, difficult to attack and slow to change, whereas peoples, insects and flowers are small things that may be enjoyed today even if they are gone tomorrow. Big things, for instance a possible, joint future for Ammu and Velutha, remain unspoken of, and during their nights together they “[s]tick to Smallness” (321). They enjoy themselves by studying a tiny spider that lives on the verandah of the deserted house where they meet and night by night they nervously check on him to see if he has “survived the day” (321). The spider also becomes a symbol for their own fragile relationship and how “things can change in a day”, another recurrent theme in the novel. Tiny and frail as a spider may seem, it all the same lived a long and happy spider life, and became father to “future generations” of spiders (321), unlike Velutha who was killed a couple of days after. Similarly, big things, like nations or casteism, may be overthrown one day, whilst spiders, dogs and “the whisper and scurry of small lives” (4) go on living as they always have. One interpretation of the novel’s meaning is that one should not be too sure about anything, or too secure about one’s position, no matter how highly we might think of ourselves. We should not think of present conditions as something stable and impervious to change. Seeing the novel from this perspective, there is a ray of light in it which offers a counterweight to the fatal outcome of Ammu’s and Velutha’s love affair.
Subaltern Speech

Is Ammu and Velutha’s sad love story a representation of subaltern speech or subaltern muteness? According to the newspapers, Velutha dies in custody, charged with kidnapping and murder. Comrade K.N.M. Pillai is interviewed in the same newspaper, claiming that the “[m]anagement had implicated the Paravan in a false police case because he [Velutha] was an active member of the Communist party” and therefore they wished to eliminate him (286). Neither of these two explanations of what had taken place were true. Thus in a way Velutha’s speech act—that is his attempt to have a relationship with an upper-caste woman—failed and was never officially recognized. Spivak gives a similar example in Can The Subaltern Speak? of a young woman, Bhubaneswari Bhaduri, who committed suicide in 1926. She was secretly part of a militant liberation group and had been charged with the task of a political assassination, which she felt unable to perform. She decided to commit suicide but it bothered her to know that her family would interpret her action as the result of an illegitimate pregnancy. To prevent this dishonorable reputation Bhubaneswari waited until she had her menstruation before she hung herself and she also wrote a letter to an elder sister about her reasons. However, during Spivak’s research about the story, it became clear to her that not even Bhubaneswari’s nieces had understood the real reasons for her suicide. They only thought it was “case of illicit love” (63), an assumption that made Spivak write in despair that ‘the subaltern cannot speak’, since Bhubaneswari did not get her message through, however hard she tried. The similarity with the death of Velutha in Roy’s novel is of course that the speech act failed in the sense that the official version is totally different from what really happened, which in itself is sad. The good news, however, is that the truth behind Velutha’s (as a representative for thousands of victims of violence against Untouchables who dare to transgress the ‘love laws’) death is made known by Roy’s novel in the same manner that Bhubanesweri’s story is made known through Spivak’s work. Spivak and Roy speak for them,
and their story is being told, the truth about their actions is made known and recognized and in that respect their speech act succeeded after all. And in the case of Ammu and Velutha, there is a strange beauty in the fact that they actually dared to admit their love to each other in Roy’s own version of Romeo and Juliet.

**Conclusion**

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 us 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.⁴
Notes

1Spivak has revised her essay from 1988 excessively several times. To use the latest version of the essay, as in this paper, seemed most fair to the author.

2Spivak’s definition is however, to my mind, even narrower than the one applied by The Subaltern Studies Group. According to Ranajit Guha, Subalternity is the “demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the ‘elite’ “which leaves more room for different kinds of social categories like “rural gentry, impoverished landlords, rich peasants and upper-middle peasants” to be included, if only they act in the interest of the ‘people’ i.e. the ‘subalterns’, not the ‘elite’ (Guha 44).

3An argument for this belief is of course that Roy has involved deeply in political issues over the years, as an essayist and activist. She has criticized India’s nuclear weapons program and big dam projects, but also written about environmental issues, the Israel-Palestine conflict and the war in Afghanistan for example.

4The novel has been sold in over six million copies in forty different languages (Mullaney 77).
Works Cited


