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Confronting the Web of Power Politics: An Interpretation of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract

The God of Small Things is regarded as a novel of protest and Arundhati Roy has deliberately written this novel in order to revolutionize the age old Indian society of patriarchal dominance and supremacy. Her main intention seems to dismantle the old fabric of the tradition bound society and to rebuild it in the favour of the oppressed and exploited female section of society. Roy's idea of oppression in the broad sense is subsumed in the issues of female marginalization and entrenched social inequalities. *The God of Small Things* opens up in the thematic and ideological sense, to a number of positions in Foucauldian discourse of power, as attempted between power and powerlessness and the endless conflicts they are engulfed in.

Keywords

Power; Knowledge; Discourse; Oppression; Panopticon.



Arundhati Roy is indisputably acclaimed and acknowledged as a revolutionary and an iconoclast in her approach in the novel *The God of Small Things*. Her revolutionary spirit and iconoclastic objectives are surfaced in this novel because of her exploitation of the issue of social injustice and oppression on women. *The God of Small Things* is reckoned as a novel of protest against these forms of oppression as pointed out above. Arundhati Roy has deliberately written this novel in order to revolutionize the age old Indian society of patriarchal dominance and supremacy. Her underlying intention seems to dismantle the old fabric of the tradition bound society and to rebuild it in the favour of the oppressed and exploited female section of society. With this objective in view to awakening public awareness in support of these oppressed and humiliated women, she focuses particularly and specifically on the predicament of social injustice and torture meted out to women in their marital and familial situations. Roy skillfully delineates the various scenes and incidents of physical and emotional torture inflicted upon the helpless and powerless women in their state of adversity and suffering. Throughout *The God of Small Things*, Roy champions the oppressed women and espouses their rebellious sentiments and outrage resulting in reaction against the social injustice and oppression on them by the powerful members of society.

The God of Small Things is indeed a fictional work about human beings who are subjected to the discourses of the truth, power and ethics. It is a story of characters who refuse to remain tied to their identities and exhibit the strength to transgress the limits set up by society. It is a novel about the repressive and ideological manifestations of the disciplinary power and the resistance to it at the micro individual level. In short, *The God of Small Things* is a text which displays the characters caught in the web of power-relations which determine their lives. The central theme of *The God of Small Things* is the confrontation between 'The Big Man the Laltain and Small Man the Mombatti. In other words the book shows a maladjustment between The Gods of Big

Things – Pappachi, Baby Kochamma, Mammachi, Chacko, Comrade Pillai and Inspector Thomas Mathew, and The Gods of Small Things – Ammu, Velutha, Rahel, Estha and Sophie Mol. It is to be noted here that the term ‘Laltain’ and ‘Mombatti’ are highly suggestive. Both Laltain and Mombatti give us light and burn another light. The Laltain is well fed and well protected as it can bravely face the blowing wind. But on the other hand, the Mombatti has no glass, no protection and no support. It can easily be blown out by the surge of wind. But the advantage of the Mombatti is that it can very soon light another lamp, but Laltain, in comparison with a Mombatti, is somewhat stubborn to burn other’s light. Thus, through these beautiful connotations, the author has successfully tried to arouse our sense of pity and catharsis for the Mombatties – the down-trodden and have-nots, the dalits and the deserted, the marginalized and the defenseless.

Michel Foucault, the philosopher continues to be one of the significant and remarkable figures in critical theory. His theories have been concerned largely with the concepts of power, knowledge and discourse. With the publication of *Discipline and Punish*, the theme of power became an established component in Foucault’s work as did the question of relations of power and knowledge. His work ranges over an extremely wide variety of subjects and it is very difficult to pin him down as a historian, a philosopher and a critical theorist. The term ‘Discourse’ is one of the most important elements in Foucault’s work. Discourses are the ways of talking, thinking or representing a particular subject or topic and it produces meaningful knowledge about a subject. This knowledge influences social practices, and so have real consequences and effects. Discourses are not reducible to class interest, but always operate in relation to power. They are part of the way through which power circulates and is contested. Discourse does not exist in a vacuum but is in a constant conflict with other discourses and other social practices which inform the other questions of truth and authority. Thus the question of

whether a discourse is true or false is less important than whether it is effective or powerful in practice.

Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, discourse can be both instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a standing point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power, reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it. (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol. I* 101).

Power is a key element in discussion of discourse. Foucault contended that power is “always already there, that one is never outside it” (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 140). He further opined that “A society without power relations can only be an abstraction”(Dreyfus and Rabinow 222). Foucault has been instrumental in the rethinking of models of power. Rather than simply assuming that power is a possession or that power is a violation of someone’s rights or as Marxist theorists have assumed that power relations are determined by social relations, he is very critical of what he terms the ‘repressive hypothesis’, that power is simply about preventing someone from carrying out one’s wishes and limiting one’s freedom. Foucault argues strongly against the notion of the repressive hypothesis that power circulates through a society rather than being owned by one group. Power is not so easily contained and is never fixed and stable. It is always in a state of flux or evolution and goes on changing hands. Power can also be said to create knowledge in the sense that “institutions of power determine the conditions under which statements are to be counted as true or false” (Hacking 42). Foucault maintains that power is not a commodity or a possession of an individual, a group or a class, rather it circulates through the social body, functions in the form of a chain, and is exercised through a net-like organization in which all are caught” (Smart 79). Foucault further opines “where there is power, there is resistance”

(Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol.I* 95). Resistance implies resistance of something and “the notion of resistance remains in an analytic framework of power as the latter is a necessary precondition to the former” (Brown and Stenner 83). It is the goal of power to control the threatening powers and dangers of discourse, to tame and exorcise its unpredictable sensational side and to circumvent its materiality. Out of fear power wants to tame, diminish, control and organize discourse. Foucault lists a number of practices to control discourse: exclusion, prohibition, banning of themes, ritualization of speeches, legal incapacitation of the insane, establishing boundaries between what is true and false etc.

Subsequently, Foucault defines the sovereign power and disciplinary power. In the past, the people were subjected to sovereign power of monarch but in modern society disciplinary power has spread its roots everywhere. This disciplinary power uses various social institutions to act as tool to reach an end of surveillance. There are certain individuals who do not want to toe the line of authority and want to shape their own future according to their own light but such individuals are not appreciated and are considered to have a deviant behaviour; they are termed as rebels. Some strong individuals come out to be successful whereas others are smothered by the social pressures and forces. The conflict between the forces of the society and the true self splits as under the genuine self. The modern social life with unrelenting tensions and conflicting demands causes division or fragmentation of conscience in which the true, original self gets lost. The individual gets baffled and is unable to understand what he should do. If he follows the norms set up by the society and its institutions, he loses his entity and becomes a cog in a machine, and if he asserts himself, he is considered to be an outlaw. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault also examines the way discipline as a form of self-regulation encouraged by institutions permeates modern societies. His work on disciplinary regimes is of great interest, since rather than simply seeing

regimes as being oppressive, he analyses the way regimes exercise power within a society through the use of a range of different techniques. He analyses a range of different institutions such as hospitals, the clinic, the prison and the university and sees a number of disciplinary practices which they seem to have in common. Discipline consists of a concern with control which is internalized by each individual. It consists of a concern with time-keeping, self-control over one's posture and bodily functions, concentration, sublimation of immediate desires and emotions – all these elements are the effects of disciplinary pressure, and at the same time, they are all actions which produce the individual as subjected to a set of procedures whose aim is the disciplining of the self. For Foucault, discipline is “a set of strategies, procedures and ways of behaving which are associated with certain institutional contexts and which permeates ways of thinking and behaving in general” (Mills 44).

Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* explains how the Panopticon is applied to mediate society to achieve the best behaviour. But can panoptical operations work in a society that mediates behaviour according to caste and gender, especially when there are double standards? In the Indian context, caste and class have been perennially been parameters of exclusion and repression, though it is also true that one can locate numerous forms of resistance to these in literature both vernacular and Indian English. In Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, the love laws govern who should be loved, how and how much. The love laws function as surveillance to obtain and maintain power and order. However, sexual desire proves to be the one thing that caste and gender cannot successfully regulate. Sexual desire best illustrates and resists the use of panoptic operations in *The God of Small Things*. Ammu and Velutha's sexual desire provide a perfect venue for tracing panoptic operations in Indian society. The clear opposition of Ammu and Velutha have to the love laws exemplifies how “the value scales which serve to classify the world be modified so that the

familiar boundaries which organize people into societies, castes and families have to be questioned, moved or even removed” (Cabaret 75).

Because the trysts of Velutha and Ammu break two Love Laws, the situation must not only be prevented but also ended completely. The families of the transgressors come to fill in the roles necessary for panopticism to work. Vellya Paapen, realizing the potential effects of the transgressions of his son, sets in motion the punishment to mediate appropriate behaviour by telling Mammachi someone who can do something, about the situation. Ironically, Baby Kochamma, who formerly tries to break the love laws with Father Mulligan, comes to be “the representative watcher of purity” (Roy 77) and exacts punishment.

Ammu and Velutha, despite extreme caste differences, engage in sexual intercourse due to their passion for each other. “The only way to contain their intimacy is to literally separate Ammu and Velutha by locking Ammu in her room” (239). Essentially, the two are separated – Velutha physically leaving the town – until proper punishment can be meted out. When Velutha and Ammu die, the ‘scourge’ is gone ironically and will not spread. “The Ammu-Velutha relationship must end in death because while the affair is conducted secretly, it is also done so in full visibility” (Bose 67). While Ammu’s death is the result of her banishment and resulting loneliness, Velutha’s death is a direct result of crossing caste lines. Panopticism works because power, as well as powerlessness, is always visible. The caste system makes the identifying sources of power effortless because untouchables “were not allowed to walk on public roads, not allowed to cover their upper bodies, not allowed to carry umbrellas and they had to put their hands over their mouths when they spoke”(71). Velutha’s gradual assimilation of limited privileges of the ‘Touchables’ threatens the power system established by the love laws and the caste system. So, Velutha must be eradicated and is. While the Ammu and

Velutha affair exhibits panoptic surveillance by those wielding power, it also resists the system.

Chacko's arrogance and lack of attention to power structures lead to him losing everything he actually loves; Margaret Kochamma, Sophie Mol and dignity. The only recourse for Chacko is to immigrate to Canada. His self-removal from Kerala society can be read as a submission to panoptic operations. The constant grief resulting his daughter's death, his sister's actions, and his mother prove too fine a microscope to be under. Although panoptic operations are illustrated with Chacko and Mammachi, the situation also works against the system. Untouchables, completely undermine the power structure so carefully set by the caste system. Ammu and Chacko are equally guilty of breaking the love laws, yet Chacko does not face any punishment. The clear double standard emphasized by Friedman to show how Chacko receives no punishment for his transgressions, whereas Ammu and Velutha do, proves why panoptic operations are resisted" (Friedman 255). A sexual and hierarchical double standard makes the effectiveness of the panopticon questionable: "They all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory" (31).

In this novel, the women form a subservient class in the patriarchal discourse because they are at the mercy of a powerful ideology. Pappachi often beats Mammachi with a brass vase. He sends his son Chacko to England for higher studies but thinks that it a waste of money to send Ammu to a college even in a nearby town. Baby Kochamma believes that "a married daughter had no position in her parents' home. As for a divorced daughter...she had no position anywhere at all. As for a divorced daughter from a love marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochamma's outrage" (45). The woman as a daughter has no claims to her father's property. Chacko tells Ammu, "What's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine" (57). Thus casteism and patriarchy are the major discursive practices which form the backdrop of the tragic drama

unfolded in *The God of Small Things*. Thus in Foucauldian terms it is quite apparent that power is co-existent within the social fabric and that relations of power are interwoven with all kinds of relations. Foucault argues that power is a set of relations which are dispersed throughout society rather than being located within particular institutions such as the State or the government.

The God of Small Things is a text of subversion. It presents things which would be impossible to tell to anyone else – the madness of biological urges, the incestuous embrace, and the hideous violence of the master discourse from the point of view of the victims, the marginalized, untouchables, women and children. In this novel, the discourse of the ‘love laws’ is based on the principles of rigorous inclusion and exclusion. Within the context of the specific Indian conservative sexual discourse it implies that (a) an upper-caste man can have sexual relations with woman of lower caste but (b) a lower-caste man cannot have similar relations with a woman of an upper caste and (c), love of siblings has to be ‘pure’, free from any taint of sexuality. The novel shows two transgressions. The first one is by Ammu and Velutha who flout the law about sexual union of a low caste, an untouchable man with an upper caste woman. Their desires are aptly described as a form of ‘madness’ in more senses than one. They are mad in their libidinous desire of each other but they are ‘mad’ also because they do not realize the consequences of their actions in terms of retribution from the patriarchy, casteism, political party and the police – the so called guardians of public morality. Ammu’s transgression of the caste, class and religious boundaries mounts a rebellion of a kind against her marginalization as a woman. Aijaz Ahmed calls her “a woman of grit” (Ahmed 39), but according to a view it “appears doomed from the very beginning because of the nature of the society where she had to seek shelter with her twins after her divorce and also because of the incapacity of her kin to provide an adequate model of redefining the self” (Surendran 40). Thus smothered by social injustice, Ammu rebels against the established social norms of the

society by establishing illicit relations with Velutha and even she goes to the police station and argues against the detention of this lower caste and lower class person. In this way Ammu resists oppressive and repressive social and political structures. She does not succeed in bringing a tangible change but puts a brave fight for realizing her dreams. The retribution is swift and severe as Velutha is tortured to death and Ammu is disowned and thrown out of the Ayemenem House, deprives not only of shelter but also of her twin children.

The second transgression is the incestuous relationship of Rahel and Estha which may be treated as a consequence of the first one. The seven year old twins, Rahel and Estha were subjected to such emotional stress that their personalities were distorted forever. As a result both were emptied of all emotions and none could develop a meaningful relationship later on and they just drifted through life. Rahel went to study in a school of architecture in Delhi, even got married to an American girl, went to Boston, but failed to lead a normal life. Estha was divorced and came back to Ayemenem to lead a sad and lonely life. In Foucauldian terms, the incestuous relationship of Estha and Rahel is a form of resistance to the normalizing hegemonic discourse of 'love laws'. Actually, the price of their incest was much more, not only their childhoods had been robbed, but the entire lives of Estha and Rahel had been destabilized. Critics have been engaged with the question of incest in the book. Uravashi Barat says that participation 'in forbidden relationships is undeniably an assertion of selfhood, but it is also undeniably an expression of love and interpersonal communication' (Barat 97). Sumanyu Satpthy prefers to call it a contradiction "that the novel failed to resolve" (Satpathy 142) but Amina Amin feels that the issue has been "left for the readers to decide" (Amin 111).

Clare O' Farrell points out that in his early writings Foucault "adopts the classical view of power as repressive" (Farrell 98). In the specific context of the conservative Indian discourse of patriarchal and casteist practices which judges the morality of an action on the basis of its conformity to the age-old

“Love Laws”, the power to punish in such circumstances, is considered absolutely natural and necessary. Velutha is tortured to death in the most savage manner as he is grievously injured by the policeman who beat him mercilessly. If the power-structure of police tortures Velutha physically, the power-structure of family tortures Ammu emotionally. She is first locked up in her room, isolated from her twins in order to break up her resistance, to cow her down and to discipline her. And then she is thrown out of her house to fend for herself in the open space of the outside world. Thus suffering from asthma, deprived of her children, ill-equipped to work and without shelter, she struggles to the end and ultimately dies.

Foucault in his later writings such as *Discipline and Punish* developed the hypothesis of disciplinary power. It “produces individuals as both its objects and agents” (Boyne 110). It aims to keep people under surveillance, to control their conduct and behaviour, and to optimize the usefulness of their bodies – to make them docile. “A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 136). *The God of Small Things* shows how power/knowledge discourse seeks to turn Rahel and Estha into ‘docile bodies’ and how the two twins were given drills in spelling-corrections and compositions to make them learn English. Similarly, Baby Kochamma asserts her power and forces them to speak in English at home so that they will not cut a sorry figure in front of Margaret and Sophie Mol. In this novel, it is not that just Ammu and Velutha who undergo power repression and offer resistance, the other characters are also caught in the relational network of the power-structures. Rahel and Estha, the seven years kids defy the power of Ammu and Baby Kochamma and refuse to behave in the manner they were ordered to. Baby Kochamma offers resistance to the religious discourse and family power to turn a Roman Christian in the hope that she would be able to be near Father Mulligan in the Convent in Madras. In short, Foucault’s observation that all relations are power relations in which resistance is inbuilt

is proved valid if we look at the interpersonal relations of the characters in *The God of Small Things*.

Conclusively, one could agree with the statement that “Foucault is one of the few writers on power who recognize that power is not just a negative, coercive or repressive thing that forces us to do things against our wishes but can also be a necessary, productive and positive force in society” (Gaventa 2). Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, one of the masterpieces of the Modern Indian English Fiction era can justifiably be analyzed from the point of view of Michel Foucault’s theory of Power/Knowledge Discourse. The novel provides us an absorbing account of ruthless and repressive power of discourses and ideological practices. The novel shows how the individual resistance is brutally crushed by the master discourses of caste, class and gender in the age old Indian social and patriarchal systems. In recent interviews, Roy has herself drawn attention to the connection between power and knowledge, and has criticized in her characteristic way the role of education, especially higher education to preserve and justify the actions of governments and institutions. For Roy, any specialist knowledge must be treated with suspicion for protecting its own logic and approach. She holds them (the specialists) responsible for “politically trying to prevent people from understanding what is really being done to them” (Roy, *The Chequebook and the Cruise Missile* 73). To sum up, it may be stated that Roy’s idea of oppression in the broad sense is subsumed in the issues of female marginalization and entrenched social inequalities. *The God of Small Things* opens up in the thematic and ideological sense, to a number of positions in Foucauldian Discourse of power, as attempted between power and powerlessness and the endless circular conflicts they are engaged in.

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