
Power Relationships and Social Construction in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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ABSTRACT

The God of Small Things, a highly stylized novel, was first published in 1997. It got rave reviews and won the prestigious Booker Prize the same year. Ever since, it has been read, re-read and commented upon by critics and scholars. They have explicated it from various perspectives, yet surprisingly the Foucauldian perspective is conspicuous in them by its absence. It is surprising because *The God of Small Things* is a text which is eminently amenable to a Foucauldian reading.

Foucault believes that concrete human beings gain their subjectivity through three axes of subjectification : truth, power and ethics (Simons 185). It implies that human beings get constituted as subjects. As subjects they show a certain duality. They are subjugated to the signifying discourses of truth and power-relations which are socially determined. But at the same time they are subjects (having the powers of a doer as the subject of a sentence) free to offer resistance to repressive discursive practices and to choose ethics as the guiding principles of their lives (Afterword 212). But the discourse should not be understood in the narrow sense of just a way of speaking or writing but as “the whole 'mental set' and ideology which encloses the thinking of all members of a given society. It is not singular and monolithic - there is always a multiplicity of discourses – so that the operation of power structures is as significant a factor in (say) the family as in layers of government” (Barry 176).

Foucault insists on the specificity of the power-structures and the discourses operating in different societies. He says that each society “has its regimes of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those charged with saying what counts as true” (*Power/Knowledge* 131).

As *The God of Small Things* portrays a fictional universe situated in mid 20th century traditional Indian space, the specificity of its “regimes of truth” is not difficult to pin-point. It was a space saturated with the discourses of patriarchy and casteism. Although Kerala, the locale of the

fictional action, was ruled by the Communist Party in late 1960s, yet it had not been able to make any dent in the patriarchal and casteist consciousness of the people. Socio-economically and culturally, the society was divided into layers of well-to-do upper-caste Hindus and Syrian Christians on the one hand, and layers of poor lower-caste people on the other, with the untouchables forming outer fringe of this structure. Among the upper and lower castes, the women were the excluded section and they were generally maltreated. The untouchables formed a class unto themselves and they were without any rights whatsoever. Of course, after independence, the condition of the untouchables had started improving a little yet for all practical purposes, they were the outcastes of the society.

Compared to his father Vellya Paapen and brother Kuttappen, Velutha's condition is remarkably better. He is an educated, trained mechanic and a worthy carpenter – a master craftsman who was even employed in “Paradise Pickles and Preserves” along with other touchable workers. “Mammachi (with impenetrable Touchable logic) often said that if only he hadn't been a Paravan, he might have become an engineer” (GOST 75). Of course, other workers resented his presence, yet they relented on the condition that he should be given less salary. Velutha did not mind it because as Mammachi thought he should have been “grateful that he was allowed on the factory premises at all, and allowed to touch things that Touchables touched. She said that it was a big step for a Paravan” (GOST 77).

Velutha represents the forces of change, yet the society sets limits to such change. The traditional and conservative social set up accepts quantitative changes but is not ready for qualitative ones. And that sets up the scene for the tragedy that follows. Velutha transgresses the socio-cultural limits imposed on him by the casteist discourse and has to pay for it with what he has – his body, his life.

The women form a subservient class in the patriarchal discourse. They are at the mercy of the men-folk. Pappachi often beats Mammachi with a brass vase. He sends his son Chacko to England for higher studies but thinks it a wastage 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. And as a divorced daughter from a love-marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochamma's outrage. As for a divorced daughter from an intercommunity love marriage – Baby Kochamma chose to remain quaveringly silent on the subject” (GOST 45-46). The woman as a daughter has no claims to her father's property. Chacko told Rahel and Estha “that Ammu had no Locusts Stand I” (GOST 57). He clearly told Ammu, “What's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine” (GOST 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*. If the Ideological State Apparatuses of the Church and the political party in power join hands and enlist the services of Repressive State Apparatus of police to support casteistic and patriarchal discourse, the macro-structure of the master-discourse becomes really repressive. Such a master-discourse can be ruthless, coercive and violent as not only Ammu and Velutha but even Estha and Rahel find to their horror.

The most important characteristic of the discourses of truth is that they hide the essential nature of all relations which are suffused with the operations of power. The discourse of truth and the exercise of power are always intertwined. It is so because there “can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operates through and on the basis of this association.” (*Power/Knowledge* 93). Similarly, there cannot be the discourses of truth if

power is not exercised. Discourse of truth does not mean that the discourse is objectively true, genuine or authentic. It simply means that it is considered true by the society which cannot penetrate the superficial ideological layer of “common sense” view of life. The real ideological nature of the discourse of truth remains concealed to the common masses.

The God of Small Things is a text of subversion. It presents “things it would be impossible to tell to anyone else” – the “madness” of biological urges, the incestuous embrace, the hideous violence of the master discourse from the point of view of the victims, the marginalized—untouchables, women and children. It shows the “unreason” of the discourse of truth to subvert the logic of master discourse.

The discourse of truth 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/women of lower castes 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 narrative shows two major transgressions. The first one is by Ammu and Velutha who flout the law about the sexual union of a low-caste, an untouchable, man and an upper-caste woman. Their desires are aptly described as a from 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 combine – the guardians of the public morality. The retribution is swift and severe. Velutha is tortured to death and Ammu is disowned and thrown out of Ayemenem house to fend for herself, deprived 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 transgression. The seven year old twins, Rahel and Estha were subjected to such emotional stress that their personalities were distorted for ever. Estha was made to stand a false testimony against his beloved Velutha to “save Ammu” which coupled with sexual abuse at Abhilash Talkies, metaphorically robbed him of his childhood as well as the speech. His voice was muted. He became totally quiet. Rahel, who identified herself fully with her twin brother, was emptied of all emotions. They are rightly described as Quietness and Emptiness. Neither could develop meaningful relationships. They just drifted through life. Rahel went to study in a school of architecture in Delhi, even got married to an American McCaslin, went to Boston, but failed to lead a normal life. She was divorced and came back to Ayemenem to meet her brother when he was re-returned by his father.

In Foucauldian terms, the incestuous relationship of Estha and Rahel is a form of resistance to the normalizing hegemonic discourse of “love-laws”. It is a commentary on the “unreason” of the discourse of truth which had exacted “a Small Price” – “Two lives. Two children's childhoods. And a history lesson for future offenders” (GOST 366).

Clare O'Farrell points out that in his early writings Foucault “adopts the classic view of power as repressive.” (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. “They [Estha and Rahel] heard of thud of wood on flesh. Boot on bone. On teeth. The muffled grunt when a stomach is kicked in. The muted crunch of skull on cement. The gurgle of blood on a man's breath when his lung is torn by the jagged end of a broken rib” (GOST 308). He is grievously

injured by the policemen who beat him impelled by “feelings that were primal yet paradoxically wholly impersonal. Feelings of contempt born of inchoate fear – uncivilization's fear of nature, men's fear of women, power's fear of powerlessness” (GOST 308).

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, to break up her resistance, to cow her down, to discipline her. And then she is thrown out of her house to fend for herself in the “open space” of the outside world. Suffering from asthma, deprived of her children, ill-equipped to work and without shelter, she struggles on. The “open space”, paradoxically, turns into a prison. A prisoner of the guilt-complex, she dies an untimely death in a grimy room of Bharat Lodge in Alleppey.

Foucault also refers to the pastoral aspect of functioning of power. The modern society has become a “singularly confessing society”.... One confesses in public and in private, to one's parents, one's educators, one's doctor, to those one loves; one admits to oneself, in pleasure and in pain, things it would be impossible to tell to anyone else, the things people write books about One confesses – or is forced to confess.” (*The History of Sexuality* 59). The disciplinary power operates through surveillance, confession and punishment. Rahel was first blacklisted in Nazareth Convent when she was caught outside her Housemistress's garden gate decorating a knob of fresh cow dung with small flowers. Six months later she was punished with expulsion, after repeated complaints from senior girls. She was accused of hiding behind doors and deliberately colliding with her seniors. She was questioned by the Principal about her behaviour. She was first cajoled, then caned and starved. She eventually confessed that she had done it to find out whether breasts hurt. “In that Christian institution, breasts were not acknowledged. They weren't supposed to exist, and if they didn't could they hurt?” (GOST 16). She was expelled a second time for smoking. She was expelled again for setting fire to her Housemistress's false hair bun, which, under duress, Rahel confessed to having stolen.

The disciplinary power is best exercised through panopticism. Bentham used the cognate term “Panopticon” for a prison “in which all of the prisoners had individual cells in a ring-like building, and could thus be observed from a tower placed at the hub of this ring.... The whole point of this arrangement was that the prisoners should know that they were being observed – or crucially, that they might be being observed. This constant possibility is always present in the prisoner's mind, and thus the force of discipline is no longer just 'outside', and capable of being avoided or hidden from, but 'inside', in the prisoners' own mind.” Thus the prisoners internalize the constraints of power and get “caught up in a power situation of which they themselves are the bearers” (Waugh 512).

Probably the best example in *The God of Small Things* of the effects of panopticism is the conduct of Vellya Paapen. He has so thoroughly internalized the discourse of casteism that he is terrified to see Velutha's sexual rendezvous with Ammu. He, himself, rushes to the Ayemenem house to reveal the secret. “Vellya Paapen told Mammachi what he had seen. He asked God's forgiveness for having spawned a monster. He offered to kill his son with his own bare hands. To destroy what he had created” (GOST 78). Foucault says that where “there is power, there is resistance,” (*Discipline and Punish* 201). But this resistance is very rarely successful in transgressing the limits imposed by subjectifying power relations and at the same time fashioning “new forms of subjectivity.” (*The History of Sexuality* 95).

It is not that just Ammu and Velutha undergo power and offer resistance; the other characters are also caught in the relational network of the powers-structures. Mammachi, who is regularly

beaten by her husband, defies him to set up “Paradise Pickles and Preserves” and makes it commercially viable. Pappachi, jealous of his wife's success, sews buttons on his shirt publically to denigrate the working women in general and Mammchi in particular, but she ignores his tantrums. Rahel and Estha, the seven year old kids defy the power of Ammu and Baby Kochamma and refuse to behave in the manner they were tutored to behave. Baby Kochamma offers resistance to the religious discourse and familial power to turn a Roman Christian in the hope that she would be able to be near father Mulligan probably 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*.

What the text shows is that the characters are constituted in the discursive practices of patriarchy and casteism. The protagonists Ammu and Velutha try to transgress the prohibiting limits set to their oppositional resistance by the discourses of truth, so they become targets for exclusion and elimination by the power of master discourse. The characters wield power in their interpersonal relationships. There are shifts of power from one character to another but such exercise of power remains limited within the “safe” confines of the master discourse.

Jon Simons points out that “Foucault advocates an ethical relation to oneself, whose corresponding mode of subjectification is an aesthetics of the self, which has recourse neither to knowledge nor to universal rules” (196). Rejecting the humanistic discourse Foucault believes that individuals are not bestowed with a “given” self or subjectivity. This subjectivity is created through interpersonal exercise of power. “But one can relate to oneself as an object of art which one must create” (196). This becomes possible only if we “detach our ethical relations with ourselves from the government of others, from universal moral rules and from scientific (especially psychological) knowledge” (196).

Such an aesthetics of existence Foucault may well have drawn “from his understanding of the transgressive potential of becoming gay.... The wider significance of gay friendship is not simply sexual pleasure but the proliferation of new forms of relations between people beyond those currently sanctioned, namely, marriage and the family” (Simons 198).

The aesthetics of existence implies the constitution of subjectivity in the ethical choice, not in the discourses of power/knowledge and moral laws. Looked at from this perspective, the twin transgressions in *The God of Small Things* are not strictly ethical choices. Ammu and Velutha transgress the love-laws rooted in the master discourse of patriarchy and casteism. Their transgression is dictated by social and biological reasons. To the extent that it shows a defiance of oppressive social discourse, it is an act of resistance. Estha and Rahel also transgress the love-laws rooted in universal morals. Their transgression is dictated by social and psychological reasons. Theirs is also an act of resistance in so far as it defies the conventional authoritative discourse. Though certainly acts of resistance, these transgressions can not be called ethical choices because they are neither conscious attempts at exploring “new forms of relations” nor acts of open defiance. Such furtive attempts of resistance remain inherently incapable of forging new subjectivities and new identities.

In short, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* provides us an absorbing account of ruthless and repressive power of discourses of truth. It creates a dialectic between the power relations at the macro-structural levels and the characters' resistance at the micro-individual level. The novel shows how the micro-individual resistance is brutally crushed by the master discourses of truth. But in doing so, it succeeds in showing the limits of discourses of power and truth by

displaying the horror of “power's fear of powerlessness.”

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