Chapter 6

SUBALTERNITY AS REFLECTED IN ART AND ACTIVISM OF ARUNDHATI ROY
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6.1 Introduction

‘Art and Activism: A Study of Arundhati Roy’s Writings from a Subaltern Perspective’ is the title of the research work. The thesis is outlined into six chapters which discuss at length how Roy’s writings are relevant to Gayatri Spivak’s theory of subalternity. This chapter is the concluding chapter of the thesis.

The first chapter of the thesis is entitled ‘Art and Activism in Literary Writers.’ It examines how art and activism blend together in combating the evils of the society. The artists have realized that apart from an aesthetic orientation, creative writing has a social purpose too. Mahasweta Devi, Sara Joseph, and Arundhati Roy amalgamate art and activism for the noble cause of extending their support and cooperation for the poorest of the poor. The activistic writings of these eminent writers are in fact eye-openers to the various unnoticed problems of the subalterns. The activistic writings very often result in the immediate redress of many of the problems of the lower class people. The harmonious blending of art and activism is gaining momentum in literary circles and this tendency is to be further encouraged for a better tomorrow.

The second chapter of the thesis is on ‘Subalternity: An Overriding Concept in Literature.’ It is an in-depth study of the works of Mulk Raj Anand, Toni Morrison, and Arundhati Roy with special reference to subalternity. Subalternity is a universal phenomenon and it transcends the geographical and cultural barriers. Literary artists appropriate the theme of subalternity in their writings so as to depict the social reality. The concept of subalternity includes race, caste, gender, ethnicity and issues related to minority. Anand deals with caste issues in his novel Untouchable.
Untouchability was practised in India and it was one of the measures of segregating the lower class people from the main strata of the society. Morrison handles the racial subalterinity in *The Bluest Eye* and class struggle and cultural escape in *Tar Baby*. The marginalization of Dalit Community is given a pictorial representation in Roy’s *The God of Small Things*. Subalternity is emerging itself to be an overriding concept in literature and the writers reveal the pent up emotions of the subalterns.

Chapter three of this thesis deals with ‘Gayatri Spivak’s Theory of Subalternity.’ In “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Spivak propounds her theory of subalternity. Her theory is based on the principle that ‘the subaltern cannot speak.’ When Spivak says that the subalterns cannot speak, she actually wants to say that the subalterns are not able to have transactions with others. In “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Spivak says that “the subaltern cannot speak” by giving a special emphasis on the element of noise (308). The communication that takes place between a subaltern and a non-subaltern is actually lost due to the element of noise. The goal of communication is achieved only when the desired message is conveyed to the receiver. Though the sender tries his/her level best, the communication is interrupted by the element of noise.

‘Art: Arundhati Roy’s Fictional World’ forms the fourth chapter of the thesis. It is a detailed study of the fictional techniques applied by Roy in her Booker Prize winning novel *The God of Small Things*. The novel is noted for its non-conformist elements and artistic iconoclasm. One unique feature of the novel is its exorbitant use of the vernacular. The stylistic innovations make the novel unique and they bring vitality and exuberance to the novel. The novel is a linguistic experiment
with the English Language. Roy became a well-known figure in the realm of fiction with a single work. It displays the artistic genius of the person with its architectural pattern and figurative and poetic modes. The book has turned out to be an asset in the history of English fiction and it has stood the test of time.

‘Activism: Arundhati Roy’s Non-fictional World’ is the fifth chapter of the thesis. It is an analysis of Roy’s activistic writings. The analysis reveals that Roy has turned out to be an activist for the greater common good. Through her activistic writings, she tried to support Narmada Bachao Andolan and criticized the pseudo developments taking place in the country. Her courage to present things before the Government and authority is very much appreciable. She is an emissary of peace with justice. Roy dislikes war and vengeance as she believes that no positive change can be brought with them. The greatest enemy of the people in the modern world is corruption and Roy has taken the position of an impartial judge to reveal the pros and cons of political activities.

‘Subalternity as Reflected in Art and Activism of Arundhati Roy’ is the concluding chapter of the thesis. It focuses on the theme of subalternity in both the fictional and non-fictional works of Roy. In The God of Small Things, Velutha is the representation of the subalterns who has been silenced by the authorities. Ammu is the counterpart of Velutha in the novel. Through the portrayal of Velutha in The God of Small Things, Roy could present before the world the deplorable condition of the subalterns. As for Ammu, she is a victim of patriarchal society. The untimely death of Ammu in the novel reveals the fact that she has not been allowed to live in this world with her whims and fancies. In her non-fictional
works, Roy speaks for the marginalized sections of the people in independent India. Though the Government of India guarantees its citizens fundamental rights, many of the tribal communities are still not aware of their rights. They become victims of pseudo developments and as a result they have a nomadic existence. Gayatri Spivak’s theory of subalternity has proved to be a reality in the lives of both the fictional and non-fictional subaltern characters. Ammu and Velutha in *The God of Small Things* try their level best to speak to the authorities but they do not listen to them. The authorities push them to the abyss of death.

The condition of the tribal people in the Narmada valley is not much different from that of Ammu and Velutha in *The God of Small Things*. Roy could represent the subaltern reality through her non-fictional works. In all the spheres of lives, the subalterns are being victimized as they lack cohesion and power. Roy strongly believes that through her non-fictional writings, she will be able to exert pressure on the Government to do justice to the underdogs. Roy is committed to serve the humanity and bring out the hidden truth through her non-fictional writings.

### 6.2 Fictionalization of Subalterns in *The God of Small Things*

In Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, Ammu and Velutha are the tragic representatives of subaltern identity. Ammu, the female protagonist, struggles against incessant exploitation by the male dominated society. Her brother Chacko could become a “Rhodes Scholar at Oxford and was permitted excesses and eccentricities nobody else was” (38). Chacko and Ammu are the children of Pappachi and Mammachi but right from infancy a special attachment is shown towards Chacko by his parents. Pappachi and Mammachi strongly believe that their
son Chacko will be looking after them in their old age. He is going to be the heir of their great family heritage whereas Ammu will be married to someone else and she has no role to play in the Ayemenem House:

Pappachi insisted that a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl, so Ammu had no choice but to leave Delhi and move with them. There was very little for a young girl to do in Ayemenem other than to wait for marriage proposals while she helped her mother with the housework. Since her father did not have enough money to raise a suitable dowry, no proposals came Ammu’s way . . . All day she dreamed of escaping from Ayemenem and the clutches of her ill-tempered father and bitter, long-suffering mother (Roy, *God of Small Things* 38 - 39).

Ammu was free to marry a person of her choice when she was with a distant aunt in Calcutta. Ammu’s decision to marry Mr. Baba is being described by Roy: “She made a mistake. She married the wrong man” (*God of Small Things* 38). Ammu’s married life turned to be an utter fiasco as her husband was an addicted alcoholic. Mr. Baba was on the verge of losing his job as he became a confirmed ‘alcoholic stupor’ (41). In order to avert the punishment, Mr. Hollick, the English Manager, suggested to him:

Baba go away for a while. For a holiday. To a clinic perhaps, for treatment. For as long as it took him to get better. And for the period of time that he was away, Mr Hollick suggested that Ammu be sent to his bungalow to be ‘looked after’ (Roy, *God of Small Things* 42).
Baba succumbed to the pressure of Mr. Hollick and he suggested the proposal of Mr. Hollick to his wife. Infuriated by the suggestion, Ammu could not control herself and she “Took down the heaviest book she could find in the bookshelf – *The Reader’s Digest World Atlas* - and hit him with it as hard as she could” (Roy, *God of Small Things* 42). Ammu returns to her father’s house in Ayemenem with her two children and they became a great nuisance to the Ayemenem House. Ammu became unwanted in her own house especially after the love marriage with a Bengali man and the subsequent divorce. Velutha was a carpenter in Chacko’s pickle factory. He was extremely talented with “a distinctly German design sensibility” (75). Velutha was Ammu’s childhood friend and when she returned to Ayemenem, she got an opportunity to renew her friendship with Velutha. As Ammu was left all alone in the Ayemenem House, she could find some kind of solace from Velutha. She loved him like anything: “She hoped that under his careful cloak of cheerfulness, he housed a living, breathing anger against the smug, ordered world that she so raged against” (Roy, *God of Small Things* 176).

Ammu’s unconditional love for Velutha led to an illicit relationship between them. Velutha’s father Vellya Paapen noticed that “night after night, a little boat being rowed across the river” (78). His son has crossed all the limits by indulging into a sexual relationship with Ammu, a divorcee from the Ayemenem House. Vellya Paapen went to the extent of informing Mammachi what he had witnessed: “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” (Roy, *God of Small Things* 78).
The relationship between Ammu and Velutha came to an abrupt end when Ammu was locked up in her room in the Ayemenem House. Velutha was soon arrested by the police and beaten up to an extent that his life came to an end in the police custody. He was falsely charged with the murder of Sophie Mol. The drowning of Sophie Mol in the Meenachal river was merely an accident. Ammu too had a pathetic end as she committed suicide:

Ammu died in a grimy room in the Bharat Lodge in Alleppey, where she had gone for a job interview as someone’s secretary. She died alone. With a noisy ceiling fan for company and no Estha to lie at the back of her and talk to her (Roy, *God of Small Things* 161).

The two subaltern protagonists in *The God of Small Things* met with their tragic end. Velutha was killed in the Kottayam police station without getting an opportunity to open his mouth and speak out what had actually happened. He was forced to admit the crime and died with a sombre heart. Ammu followed the footsteps of Velutha when she realized that the entire world had misconstrued them. It would be beyond her limit to bring out the truth before the public and punish the guilty. As a subaltern, she was forced to succumb to the pressure and the only way to escape from this unreal world was to commit suicide. The church did not show any kind of respect to Ammu’s dead body as it upheld the rules and regulations:

The church refused to bury Ammu. On several counts. So Chacko hired a van to transport the body to the electric crematorium. He had her wrapped in a dirty bedsheet and laid out on a stretcher. Rahel thought she looked like a
Roman Senator. *Et tu, Ammu!* She thought and smiled, remembering Estha
(Roy, *God of Small Things* 162).

There was no poetic justice to both Ammu and Velutha in Roy’s *The God of Small Things*. Velutha’s death in fact added extra pressure on Ammu’s life and she could not withstand the situation. Nothing happened to the police inspector Thomas Mathew who butchered Velutha into pieces. Mammachi, Baby Kochamma and Chacko were in fact happy with the death of both Velutha and Ammu. The Ayemenem House could retrieve its lost heritage and the children Estha and Rahel suffered the consequences of disturbed parenthood.

6.2.1 **Mombatti cannot Speak and Laltain cannot Listen**

The third chapter of *The God of Small Things* is entitled ‘Big Man the Laltain, Small Man the Mombatti’ (88). The characters in the novel are presented from the point of view of big and small. The confrontation between the big and the small finally leads to the total subjugation of the small and the triumph of the big. By the term ‘Laltain’, Roy means the influential people in the society who can exert pressure on others. Laltains have the support from the authority and with this power they bully the Mombatti. The term ‘Mombatti’ refers to the weaker sections of the society. Ammu could derive solace and comfort from Velutha when she was ill-treated by her parents and dear ones in her own father’s home. It was Ammu who took the initiative in loving Velutha, the carpenter of the factory. She loved Velutha heart and soul and physical beauty had no role to play in Ammu’s love towards him. Ammu went to the extent of making an illicit relationship with him and the matter was brought before Mammachi by Velutha’s father Vellya Paapen:
Mammachi’s rage at the old one-eyed Paravan standing in the rain, drunk, dribbling and covered in mud was redirected into a cold contempt for her daughter and what she had done. She thought of her naked, coupling in the mud with a man who was nothing but a filthy coolie . . . His particular Paravan smell. Like animals, Mammachi thought and nearly vomited. Like a dog with a bitch on heat (Roy, God of Small Things 257- 258).

Ammu was locked up in the Ayemenem House and Velutha was arrested by the Kottayam police. Baby Kochamma fabricated the Ammu-Velutha episode in the Kottayam police station. She omitted the initiative taken by Ammu in loving Velutha. Instead, she reported to the police inspector that Velutha tried to molest Ammu. In order to increase the depth of the situation and Velutha’s unruly behaviour, Baby Kochamma added that Ammu was “a divorcee with two children” (259). Baby Kochamma could impress the police inspector with her frantic and scared outlook. Her account of the story was fully fictitious and Velutha became the culprit of the event:

‘Last night it was getting dark - about seven in the evening - when he came to the house to threaten us. It was raining very heavily. The lights had gone out and we were lighting the lamps when he came, she told him. ‘He knew that the man of the house, my nephew, Chacko Ipe, was - is - away in Cochin. We were three women alone in the home.’ She paused to let the inspector imagine the horrors that could be visited by a sex-crazed Paravan on three women alone in a home (Roy, God of Small Things 260).
Velutha had to pay with his life for the loss of Sophie Mol in the Meenachal river. Velutha was charged by the police for the alleged murder of Sophie Mol. The drowning of Sophie Mol was purely an accident while she was playing in a boat. Velutha had no part in the accident except that he was the rower of the boat. The Kottayam police didn’t have the patience to listen to what Velutha wanted to say in the boat accident. Ammu made a visit to the Kottayam police station after the funeral of Sophie Mol. As Ammu knew that the arrest of Velutha was a mistake, she wanted to correct the police. Ammu told the police inspector Thomas Mathew that “there had been a terrible mistake and that she wanted to make a statement” (7). She also wanted to see Velutha who had been kept in the police custody. The police inspector behaved very rudely to Ammu. Instead of taking statements from Ammu, “he stared at Ammu’s breasts as he spoke” (8). He tells Ammu that the police has come to know all they need to know and that the Kottayam police doesn’t take statements from veshyas or their illegitimate children:

‘If I were you, he said, ‘I’d go home quietly.’ Then he tapped her breasts with his baton gently. Tap, Tap. As though he was choosing mangoes from a basket. Pointing out the ones that he wanted packed and delivered” (Roy, God of Small Things 8).

In the boat accident, Velutha couldn’t communicate his innocence to the authorities. If the police inspector had listened to both Ammu and Velutha, the tragedy could have been averted. Gayatri Spivak’s theory of subalternity is applicable in the lives of both Ammu and Velutha. Spivak’s theory of subalternity reiterates the fact that ‘the subalterns cannot speak’ (Can the Subaltern Speak?)
Ammu and Velutha articulated their points of view before the authorities but they were being interpreted from a prejudiced perspective. The theory of communication became a failure in the case of Ammu and Velutha as it was hindered by socio-economic factors. Velutha belongs to a lower caste community and he is a Paravan. In the social hierarchy, the Parayas and Pulayas\(^1\) come last and the police inspector has a lot of freedom to do as he pleases. When Velutha was arrested, there was no agitation or protest against the police from any one. If Velutha had any political support, a better treatment would have been given to him. The authorities did not consider Velutha as an important person and he was haunted by all. He became an unwanted person by his own father Vellya Paapen, the political party, the workers in the factory and finally the twins.

Ammu committed suicide out of her frustration towards the patriarchal society, family and authorities. As she was a Mombatti, nobody listened to her. When she wanted to marry a person of her choice, she wrote to her parents but they didn’t reply. Ammu’s inter-caste love marriage became a failure and she had to suffer the consequences of it. She didn’t make any complaint to anyone but when a crucial time came to her life to save the life of her beloved, Ammu reacted strongly. It became a vain attempt on her part and she realised that the entire society was dead against her. The police inspector insulted Ammu in the police station as he knew that she had no support even from her family. The condition of a Mombatti woman is pathetic. The society does not take into consideration the views and aspirations of Mombatti women. They become victims of Laltains.
6.2.2. Victimization of Subalterns as Scapegoats

The subaltern characters Ammu and Velutha are victimized as scapegoats in Roy’s novel *The God of Small Things*. Velutha is a victim of caste subalternity. He is the representation of untouchable in the novel. He is black in complexion and there is an irony with the name Velutha as it suggests ‘something white’. In the novel, “He was called Velutha - which means White in Malayalam - because he was so black” (73).

Velutha is a naturally gifted man and he has been employed in Chacko’s pickle factory ‘Paradise Pickles & Preserves’. Velutha is referred to as “little magician” and he is highly efficient in making “tiny windmills, rattles, minute jewel boxes out of dried palm reeds, he could carve perfect boats out of tapioca stews and figurines on cashew nuts” (Roy, *God of Small Things* 74). Mammachi was very fond of Velutha but with a certain amount of distance as he was an untouchable. It was out of the strong recommendation of Mammachi that Vellya Paapen had sent Velutha to the untouchable’s school. When he grew up as a young man, Velutha accomplished himself as a carpenter. He had a special inclination to possess a set of carpentry tools. Though he was an untouchable, Mammachi utilized Velutha’s ability in producing various things:

He built Mammachi a Bauhaus dining table with twelve dining chairs in rosewood and a traditional Bavarian chaise longue in lighter jack. For Baby Kochamma’s annual Nativity plays he made her a stack of wire - framed angels’ wings that fitted onto children’s backs like knapsacks, cardboard clouds for the Angel Gabriel to appear between, and a dismantleable manger
for Christ to be born in. When her garden cherub’s silver are dried up inexplicably, it was Dr Velutha who fixed its bladder for her (Roy, *God of Small Things* 75).

Velutha was in charge of machines in the factory and he could carry out repairing works with the professional skill of an engineer. Mammachi rehired Velutha in the factory after his disappearance for four years to an unknown destination. The workers in factory were not in good terms with Velutha. The post of Velutha in the factory is that of a carpenter but he is kept in charge of general maintenance by Mammachi:

> It caused a great deal of resentment among the other Touchable factory workers because, according to them, Paravans were not *meant* to be carpenters. And certainly, prodigal Paravans were not meant to be rehired. To keep the others happy, and since she knew that nobody else would hire him as a carpenter, Mammachi paid Velutha less than she would a Touchable carpenter but more than she would a Paravan (Roy, *God of Small Things* 77).

Caste issues paved way for Velutha’s downfall despite his craftsman skill and fiery spirit. The subaltern identity kept him aloof from the factory workers as Ammu and her children were in the Ayemenem House. Ammu’s parents and her dear ones do not accept her to be the part of Ayemenem House especially after her inter-caste love marriage. Ammu’s brother Chacko managed the entire factory and her position deteriorated to that of a mere worker. The ostracism faced by Ammu in the Ayemenem House in fact forced Ammu to seek new relationship with the people outside the Ayemenem House. Ammu did not waste much time in finding a
soul mate for the rest of her life. The gradual detachment from the Ayemenem House increased the pace of her attachment towards Velutha, the untouchable factory worker. The new venture was initiated by Ammu and Velutha just succumbed to the pressure and responded to her call.

The relationship between Ammu and Velutha was an ideal one for each other but others could never accept it and turned it as illicit, unnatural and shameful. Baby Kochamma fabricates the story and registers a complaint against Velutha in the Kottayam police station for his attempt to molest Ammu. The Ammu-Velutha episode was given a new twist so as to give maximum punishment to Velutha and also to protect the prestigious family name of the Ayemenem Home. They also wanted to hide the truth that the new relationship was initiated by Ammu. Meanwhile Sophie Mol loses her life in a boat accident in the Meenachal river when Velutha takes the children for a cruise. Velutha was in trouble and he was accused of abducting Sophie Mol, Estha and Rahel. The rumour was spread that it was not a boat accident but a deliberate attempt on the part of Velutha to kidnap the children. Baby Kochamma devised a plan in which she forced the twins to point their fingers at Velutha as their abductor. As a last resort, Velutha approached comrade Pillai. Velutha was a member of the Communist Party and he thought that K. N. M. Pillai would be able to do something for him. The police inspector Thomas Mathew wanted to enquire about Velutha and a jeep was sent to bring comrade K. N. M. Pillai to the police station. The police inspector wanted to know from Pillai whether Velutha had any political support. Pillai could have helped Velutha as he had approached him on the previous night for seeking his help. Pillai
denied his association with Velutha in the police station so as to gain more political support from the factory workers:

Comrade Pillai told Inspector Thomas Mathew that he was acquainted with Velutha, but omitted to mention that Velutha was a member of the Communist Party, or that Velutha had knocked on his door late the previous night, which made Comrade Pillai the last person to have seen Velutha before he disappeared . . . He merely assured Inspector Thomas Mathew that as far as he was concerned Velutha did not have the patronage or the protection of the Communist Party. That he was on his own (Roy, God of Small Things 262 - 263).

Velutha was a card-holder of the Communist Party. Comrade K. N. M. Pillai does not like Velutha on the basis of caste issues. Pillai had gone to the extent of requesting Chacko to dismiss Velutha from the factory so as to get more political support from the factory workers. Pillai is more concerned about votes and any kind of punishment to Velutha in the name of discipline will be a welcome reward to both Pillai and the factory workers. The workers in ‘Paradise Pickles & Preserves’ do not accept Velutha’s extra-ordinary ability in making things. They feel jealous of his artistic talent and they do not co-operate with him. The views of the factory workers have been summed up by Pillai to Chacko:

‘That Paravan is going to cause trouble for you’ . . . ‘Take it from me . . . get him a job somewhere else. Send him off’ . . . ‘He may be very well okay as a person. But other workers are not happy with him. Already they are coming to me with complaints . . . You see, Comrade, from local standpoint, these
caste issues are very deep-rooted.’ ‘But see, Comrade, any benefits that you
give him, naturally others are resenting it. They see it as a partiality. After
all, whatever job he does, carpenter or electrician or whateveritis, for them he
is just a Paravan. It is a conditioning they have from birth. (Roy, God of Small
Things 278 - 279).

Velutha approached K. N. M. Pillai for help after he had been insulted by
Mammachi by spitting on his face. Velutha tried to communicate everything to
K. N. M. Pillai so as to absolve him from further agony. But Pillai did not listen to
him. Instead, he took this opportunity to discourse upon party discipline:
“Comrade, you should know that Party was not constituted to support worker’s
indiscipline in their private life” (Roy, God of Small Things 287). Velutha was
disowned by the political party in which he owed his allegiance and as a result he
was left defenceless before the police. In order to keep upright the family prestige
of the Ayemenem House, Velutha became a scapegoat. The death of Velutha
seemed to be a necessity for the Laltains to put an end to all the background events
related to Ammu-Velutha relationship. The death of Velutha in the police custody
was not an accident. It was a deliberate attempt on the part of police to silence him
forever. If he is allowed to live, there will be future possibilities to get things
corrected. The police did not give him any opportunity to open his mouth. They
attacked him just like a beast. The animosity of the police is being described as:

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. Blue-lipped and
inner-plate-eyed, they watched, mesmerized by something that they sensed but didn’t understand: the absence of caprice in what the policemen did (Roy, *God of Small Things* 308).

There were two strong allegations against Velutha. The first one was that he tried to molest Ammu. The second allegation was that he tried to abduct the children and in that process one of them was killed. The Kottayam police was really in trouble when the rape victim did not turn up with complaints. Ammu made her position clear before the police when she went to the police station. The children also confessed that “they had gone of their own volition” (Roy, *God of Small Things* 314). In this crucial juncture, Baby Kochamma was summoned by the police inspector Thomas Mathew. In order to escape from the situation, the police inspector suggested to Baby Kochamma a two-way method: “Either the rape-victim must file a complaint. Or the children must identify the Paravan as their abductor in the presence of a police witness” (314 - 315). If Baby Kochamma failed to carry out any of the methods, she would be charged with “lodging a false FIR” by the police inspector (315). Since the former method was beyond Baby Kochamma’s limit, she opted for the latter one. Baby Kochamma devised the sequence of events in which she tried her best to make the children agree to her plan of actions. She threatened the children in the following manner:

‘So now you’ll have to go to jails’ . . . ‘And your mother will go to jail because of you. Would you like that?’ . . . ‘Three of you in three different jails. Do you know what jails in India are like?! . . . ‘If you want to save her, all you have to do, is to go with the Uncle with the big *meeshas*. He’ll ask you
a question. One question. All you have to do is to say “yes”. Then we can all
go home. It’s so easy. It’s a small price to pay’ (Roy, *God of Small Things* 317 - 318).

The children liked Velutha very much. But when a crucial moment came in his
life, they deserted him in lieu of saving their mother. Velutha’s end was pathetic
and he disappeared from this world when Estha’s mouth said ‘yes’ to the police
inspector’s question (320). Velutha was destined to suffer and the authorities did
not allow him to live in this world. The disregard of Velutha is being described as:

Their Work, abandoned by God and History, by Marx, by Man, by Woman,
and (in the hours to come) by Children, lay folded on the floor. He was semi-
conscious, but wasn’t moving. His skull was fractured in three places. His
nose and both his cheekbones were smashed, leaving his face pulpy,
undefined . . . Four of his ribs were splintered, one had pierced his left lung,
which was what made him bleed from his mouth . . . His spine was damaged
in two places, the concussion had paralysed his right arm and resulted in a loss
of control over his bladder and rectum. Both his knee caps were shattered
(Roy, *God of Small Things* 310).

Velutha’s death in the police custody evoked no ripples in the society. No one
complained; in fact, his death brought cheer to many except to Ammu and her
children. Ammu became all the more isolated in her own family after her love-
affair with Velutha. Ammu could not grasp the victimization of Velutha as a
scapegoat for his attempt to love her and the pathos increased when Ammu knew
that her own children were involved in the final betrayal. She could not withstand
the grim realities and as a mark of protest she committed suicide. The church took revenge upon her by not permitting to bury her body in the church cemetery. The church had two obvious reasons to state: first of all Ammu had a background of inter-caste love marriage and secondly she committed suicide. As per the laws of the Church, one has no right to take his/her own life. The male chauvinistic society punished Ammu for taking initiatives in life. She too became a scapegoat of the society and died of grief and lack of support.

6.3 **Representation of Subaltern Reality in the Non-fictional Works of Arundhati Roy**

Roy represents the subaltern reality in her non-fictional works. She has opted for this particular medium so as to bring out the truth in black and white. Roy’s non-fictional works are in fact the outcome of her wide and extensive research on different topics that have adverse effects upon the society. She has taken up the challenge of representing the subaltern reality in her non-fictional works as against the stiff opposition from the Government, political parties and multinational companies. The people of the country have the right to know the truth but very often they are being misguided by the newspapers with their partisan spirit. When India conducted the nuclear tests in May 1998 at Pokhran, the Indian media glorified the historic act and joined hands with the Government in its celebration. India has a subaltern identity among the world communities and the nation is placed in the category of third world countries. In *The End of Imagination*, Roy pokes fun at the Government of India for conducting nuclear tests. Though the country possesses nuclear weapons, its people are suffering from so many problems.
In *The Greater Common Good*, Roy has given a vivid description of the tribal people who suffer in the name of development. The book brought out the harmful consequences of the Sardar Sarovar Dam. The facts and figures given by Roy in *The Greater Common Good* are in fact appalling and the Government of India does not have a record of the displaced tribal people in the Narmada valley. The Sardar Sarovar reservoir alone would displace 85,000 families as per the record of Narmada *Bachao Andolan* (Roy, *Greater Common Good* 22).

The people of Narmada valley are threatened by the constant submergence of their homes, land and property. Every monsoon claims the lives of the tribal people. The tribal people become constant victims of various contagious diseases spread by the vectors. In *The Greater Common Good*, Roy shatters the Nehruvian concept of Big Dams as temples of modern India. In *The Shape of the Beast*, Roy speaks about the lucrative motives of the politicians and the multinational companies behind the construction of big dams:

Big Dams are gold mines for politicians, bureaucrats, the construction industry . . . But the really sad, ugly part has less to do with the government than with the way our society is structured. More than 60 per cent of the millions of people displaced by dams are Dalit and adivasi. But adivasis account for only 8 per cent and Dalit about 15 per cent of our population. So you see what’s happening here – a vast majority of displaced people don’t even weigh in as real people (6).

*The Greater Common Good* gave an insight into the deplorable condition of the victims of the Narmada Valley Project. It proposes to build 3,200 dams, out of
which 30 will be major dams, 135 medium and the rest small. The Sardar Sarovar in Gujarat and the Narmada Sagar in Madhya Pradesh come under the banner of multipurpose mega-dams that can “hold more water than any other reservoir on the Indian subcontinent” (18). The hazardous consequences of the Narmada Valley Development Project are being brought out by Roy in *The Greater Common Good*. Roy says:

> It will alter the ecology of the entire river basin of one of India’s biggest rivers. For better or for worse, it will affect the lives of twenty-five million people who live in the valley. It will submerge and destroy 4,000 square kilometers of natural deciduous forest (*Greater Common Good* 18).

As against the stiff opposition by the people of the Narmada valley, the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam is in its full swing. The people in the Narmada valley continue to suffer in the name of development and they have been denied the right to live in their own homeland. Roy was severely criticized for sentimentalizing and romanticizing adivasi lifestyles without being factual in *The Greater Common Good* by critics like Ramachandra Guha and B. G. Verghese. In *The Shape of the Beast*, Roy vindicates the charges by saying:

> I was not going to write on ‘behalf’ of anyone but myself because I think that’s the most honest thing to do – in our society particularly, the politics of ‘representation’ is complicated and fraught with danger and dishonesty. Two, I was not writing an anthropological account of the lifestyles of people that I knew very little about. I was writing about social justice, about the politics of involuntary displacement, about what happens to people who are forcibly
uprooted from an environment they know well and dumped in a world they
know nothing about – a world in which, instead of a forest and a river and
farmlands, they have unemployment and a tin shack . . . At no point in my
essay have I even attempted to describe adivasi lifestyle, let alone romanticize
it (16).

Roy has produced some brilliant essays in *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* and *An
Ordinary Person’s Guide to Empire*. In all her essays the underlying theme is the
victimization of the subaltern. Globalization, privatization, terrorism and communal
riots are all targeted against the weaker sections of the society and very often they
become prey to such things. Roy extends her helping hand to the subalterns by way
of representing their problems in her non-fictional works. Her non-fictional works
are free from religious bias and partisan spirit. She has taken up the challenge of
representing the various atrocities faced by the subalterns in her essays as she
knows that the subalterns themselves cannot communicate to the authorities.
Gayatri Spivak’s theory of subalternity uphold the contention that ‘the subaltern
cannot speak.’ The theory becomes relevant in this context when the subalterns are
not able to speak and communicate their ideas to the authorities.

6.3.1 **Tribal Community cannot Speak and Authorities cannot Listen**

The complex case of Sardar Sarovar Project is still a nightmare for the tribal
people. They were protesting against the project from the day of its inception. The
Government of Gujarat is taking the leading step for the construction of the Sardar
Sarovar Project and its impacts and benefits are being shared by four states namely,
Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Rajasthan. As per the details given by
NBA, the estimated cost of the Sardar Sarovar Project is 44,000 crore. The tribal people do not protest against the huge amount of money that is being wasted for this project but they do protest against the height of the dam. When the foundation stone was laid for this project by Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of the country, the height of the dam was fixed at 49.8 meters (Roy, *Greater Common Good* 16). But due to political and private interventions, the Sardar Sarovar Dam has since been heading for a height of 138.68 meters. In *The Greater Common Good*, Roy has given a statistical data that shows the gradual displacement of the tribal people:

In 1979, the number of families that would be displaced by the Sardar Sarovar reservoir was estimated to be a little over 6,000. In 1987 it grew to 12,000. In 1991 it surged to 27,000. In 1992 the Government acknowledged that 40,000 families would be affected. Today, the official figure hovers between 40,000 and 41,500. (Of course even this is an absurd figure, because the reservoir isn’t the only thing that displaces people. According to the NBA, the actual figure is about 85,000 families - that’s half a million people) (22).

When the construction work began for the Sardar Sarovar Dam way back in 1988, NBA protested against it and appealed to the Government for all works on the Narmada valley to be stopped. As the tribal people were illiterate, they did not know how to carry out the protest. NBA directed the tribal people to develop solidarity among themselves so as to fight against the Government regime. The displaced tribal people were ready to move to a new destination provided they should be resettled in an equitable way. The Government was not ready to
rehabilitate the displaced villagers. Instead, the Government wanted to lure the people with cash compensation. The tribal people carried out different forms of strike such as *dharna*, *hartals*, *bandh*[^2] and picketing for winning immediate attention of the Government. The Government in fact used force to suppress the uprising of the tribal community:

> The dam site and its adjustment areas, already under the Indian Official Secrets Act, was clamped under Section 144 which prohibits the gathering of groups of more than five people. The whole area was turned into a police camp. Despite the barricades, one year later, on 28th September 1990, thousands of villagers made their way on foot and by boat to a little town called Badwani, in Madhya Pradesh, to reiterate their pledge to drown rather than agree to move from their homes (Roy, *Greater Common Good* 25).

The tribal communities in the Narmada valley couldn’t convince the authorities about the various atrocities that they had faced in the name of development. They tried to speak but the authorities did not listen to them. As the Government turned a deaf ear to their plea, NBA filed writ petition in the Supreme Court of India for getting a stay on the Sardar Sarovar Project. The honourable Supreme Court of India partially listened to their plea and accorded a complete stay on the developmental activities in the Narmada valley in January 1995. NBA was really happy to receive the news that the Supreme Court of India respected the suffering humanity in the Narmada valley. The happy moment did not last long when the highest pinnacle of justice, the Supreme Court of India, declared its final verdict on the Sardar Sarovar Project on 18 October 2000. The ‘Majority Judgment’ of the

[^2]: *bandh* is a Hindi term meaning 'shutdown' or 'block'
Supreme Court of India was against the expectations of the tribal communities and the court gave its unconditional support for the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam to its targeted height of 138.68 meters:

The Sardar Sarovar reservoir, when the dam reaches its full height, is going to submerge about 13,000 hectares of prime forest land. (In anticipation of submergence, the forest began to be felled many greedy years ago). Between the Narmada Sagar dam and the Sardar Sarovar dam, 50,000 hectares of old-growth broadleaved forest will be submerged. Madhya Pradesh has the highest rate of forest cover loss in the whole of India (Roy, *Greater Common Good* 48).

NBA represented the pathetic and deplorable condition of the tribal communities of the Narmada valley before the honourable Supreme Court of India. The tribal people spoke well about their difficulties and problems but unfortunately no transaction took place between the speaker and the listener. The Supreme Court of India did not take into consideration the complaints raised by the tribal communities in the Narmada valley. It is evident from the fact that the ‘Majority Judgment’ of the Supreme Court of India spoke well about Big Dams and its advantages:

The petitioner has not been able to point out a single instance where construction of a large dam has, on the whole had an adverse environmental impact. On the contrary the environment has improved . . . At the time of Independence food grain was being imported to India but with the passage of time and the construction of more dams the position has been reversed. The
large-scale river valley projects per se all over the country have made India
more than self-sufficient in food (Roy, *People Vs Verdict* 32).

The tribal people could not communicate to the Supreme Court of India what
they actually wanted. The Supreme Court of India did not listen to the actual
problems of people. As a result, the court denied justice to the people and allowed
them to undergo the same tyrannical situation. In the ‘Majority Judgement’ of the
Supreme Court of India, there was a failure in interpreting things from the part of
the court and there was no failure in articulation by the tribal communities. Gayatri
Spivak’s theory of subalternity becomes meaningful in this context when the tribal
communities are not able to have transactions with the authorities for securing their
fundamental rights.

6.3.2 Subjugation of Subalterns as the Destitute in the Modern India

The atrocities against the weaker sections of the society have become a common
phenomenon. Power, money, influence and politics are always with the Laltains
and the Mombattis are destined to suffer the consequences not of their actions but
that of others. The Constitution of India guarantees special rights and privileges to
the Schedules Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Minorities. The Government and the
Supreme Court of India are the safeguarders of the rights and privileges of the
weaker sections of the society but very often they take decision on the basis of facts
and figures. The ‘Majority Judgement’ of the Supreme Court of India on 18
October 2000 shattered the hopes and aspirations of the tribal communities in the
Narmada valley. They are now in a dilemma and they can now only witness the
piling up of the Sardar Sarovar Dam to its maximum height of 138.68 meters. As
the height of dam goes up, more land and forest come under submergence. It makes the lives of the tribal community miserable in the modern independent India. They have nowhere else to go except to cling on to their native place. Reacting to the ‘Majority Judgment’ of the Supreme Court of India, Justice V. R. Krishna Iyer says:

I appeal to the judicial conscience of the highest court and the equity sense of the Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra cabinets not to put one stone more on the dam until the last and the least human who is rendered homeless, consequence on Narmada Dam is given shelter in dignity. If a review of the judgement is necessary I am sure the judges of the High Bench will unhesitatingly do what the refugees of ‘Dam Development’ need as an aspect of Social Justice. Development is never at the expense of distress inflicted on the poor, as Mahatma Gandhi has taught us and the constitution in its vision cautions us (Roy, People Vs Verdict 69).

The people of India are bound to obey the Supreme Court of India as it is the highest court in the country. The major criticism against the ‘Majority Judgement’ was that it did not specify anything about the rehabilitation process to be carried out in the tribal settlement. The tribal people became refugees of the modern war against development. Development is a positive thing which should be carried out for the good of the society. Development without human consciousness would lead to the disintegration of the nation. The ground reality in the Narmada valley is comparable to anarchy compounded with confusion and chaos. Roy has given a
clear analysis of the ‘Majority Judgement’ of the Supreme Court of India in The Shape of the Beast as:

The Supreme Court judgement on the Sardar Sarovar is a tremendous blow - the aftershocks will be felt not just in the Narmada valley, but all over the country . . . The worrying thing is not just that the Court has allowed construction of the dam to proceed, but the manner in which it disregarded the evidence placed before it. It ignored the fact that conditional environmental clearance for the project was given before a single comprehensive study of the project was done. It ignored the Government of Madhya Pradesh’s affidavit that it has no land to resettle the oustees . . . It ignored the fact that not one village has been resettled according to the directives of the Narmada Water Disputes Tribunal Award (3 - 4).

The Maheshwar Dam, India’s first private hydro-electric power project, continues to disrupt the normal lives of the tribal people in the Narmada valley. In “Power Politics”, Roy brings out the pros and cons of the Maheshwar Dam in great detail. The Dam is estimated to submerge sixty-one villages. The poor villagers belong to the ancient communities such as Dalits, Kevats and Kahars who are actually ferry men, fisher folk, sand quarriers, and cultivators of the river bed (Roy, Power Politics 175). Most of the villagers do not have agricultural land and the only source of their livelihood is from the river. Once the Maheshwar Dam is completed, the fisher folk villagers will not have any access to the river and they will lose their source of livelihood from the river. As per the Government statistics, the poor landless villagers do not come under the purview of ‘Project Affected’ and
they will not be “eligible for rehabilitation” (Roy, *Power Politics* 175). The authorities acquired the homes and lands of Jalud village way back in 1985. When the villagers protested against the injustice, the authorities inflicted more pain upon them:

Cement was poured into their water pipes, their standing crops were bulldozed, and the police occupied their land by force. All twelve families are now landless and work as wage labourers. The new ‘private’ initiative has made no effort to help them (Roy, *Power Politics* 175).

In order to declare her solidarity to the destitute of modern India, Roy along with 4,000 people set out to capture the Maheshwar Dam site. The protesters were beaten very badly by the police and finally they were all arrested. Roy was also arrested and to her greatest chagrin, she was “pushed into a private car that belonged to the S. Kumars” (180). Roy accuses the police for acting on behalf of private agencies “where even the police have been privatized (*Power Politics* 180).

In the name of development, the subalterns are very often subjugated even in the modern India. The tribal people become prey to developmental projects and as a result they will be forced to leave their native lands. Most of the tribal communities do not have proper documents for their lands and it is easy for the Government to chase them away. The destitute in the name of development are increasing day by day and it is the result of not having a National Rehabilitation Policy for the Government. The cash compensation that the Government pays to the ‘project affected’ is very low and it will be very difficult for them to purchase new land with a bare minimum of money:
As a result farmers who had 10 acres of land will barely manage 5. Small farmers with a couple of acres, become landless labourers. Rich become poor. Poor become destitute. It’s called Better Management (Roy, *Ordinary Person’s Guide to Empire* 262)

As India is heading towards one of the developed and powerful nations of the world by the year 2020, a lot of homework has to be done for attaining the status. The Government of India cannot go ahead by neglecting the tribal communities who are affected by developmental projects. Each and every developmental activity should be carried out for the good of the society without coveting the fundamental rights of its citizens. Proper studies should be conducted before launching any major projects and developments should be carried out on the basis of the recommendations by the expert committee. Proper rehabilitation of the victims should be carried out before undertaking any developmental activity so as to reduce the growing destitute in the modern India. It is with the earnest efforts and good will of the administrators, bureaucrats and politicians, the growing disparity between the rich and the poor can be reduced. The real spirit of India should come from its villagers and that will definitely pave way for the strength of the nation.

6.4 Conclusion

The underlying theme of subalternity is reflected in the ‘art’ and ‘activism’ of Roy. She is an artist cum activist of the contemporary period. In her fictional work *The God of Small Things*, Roy has presented the subaltern characters Ammu and Velutha and they are the embodiment subaltern identity. Gender subalternity is
represented by Ammu in the novel and her counterpart Velutha stands as a victim of caste subalternity. Women become prey to the patriarchal dominance in the society and as a result their roles are being predetermined by male-folk. The patriarchal society still controls women and confines their activities to the four walls of the house. Women are not allowed to take initiatives in their lives and if they disobey they will have to suffer the consequences as in the case of Ammu in *The God of Small Things*:

As she grew older, Ammu learned to live with this cold calculating cruelty. She developed a lofty sense of injustice and the mulish, reckless streak that develops in Someone Small who has been bullied all their lives by someone Big. She did exactly nothing to avoid quarrels and confrontations. In fact, it could be argued that she sought them out, perhaps even enjoyed them (181-182)

Caste subalternity is vividly portrayed through the life of Velutha in *The God of Small Things*. Velutha is being discriminated in the name of caste. Though he is an excellent worker in the factory, the co-workers do not like him. They are jealous of Velutha for his ability to carry out certain works with precision and accuracy. Velutha could not get any kind of mercy from the political party, police and finally the children. He was renounced by them all and nobody protested against Velutha’s death in the police custody:

He stepped onto the path that led through the swamp to the History House. He left no ripples in the water. No footprints on the shore . . . The God of

Roy makes a transition from her artistic to activistic writing through her non-fictional works. The fictional subaltern characters of *The God of Small Things* are being replaced by the real subalterns in her non-fictional works. The change is from fiction to reality and from the impossible into the possible. The genuine attempt to represent the sufferings of subalterns in the non-fictional works of Roy was in fact an eye-opener to the authorities. The tribal communities became refugees in their war against developmental projects without proper rehabilitation. The non-fictional works of Roy show the commitment of the writer towards the society. She prefers to be identified with the suffering humanity and protests against all kinds of atrocities. Roy’s whole-hearted support and co-operation to NBA has in fact rejuvenated the spirit of its followers. The war against injustice will go on until they convert their dreams into reality and the impossible into the possible for claiming the crown.

Roy’s works affirm Gayatri Spivak’s theory of subalternity. The theory propounds the argument that ‘the subaltern cannot speak’ and by ‘speaking’ Spivak means exchange of ideas between the speaker and the listener. The fictional and the real subalterns try their best to communicate their problems to the authorities but no positive change does take place in favour of the subalterns. The problem lies not with the articulation by the subalterns but with its interpretation by the authorities. The authorities are not ready to listen to the subalterns and as a result the communication system fails to achieve its objective. The failure in the
communication system results in the eternal suffering of the subalterns. It is high
time that the authorities changed their attitude towards the subalterns.

Notes

1 *Parayas* and *Pulayas* are the two prominent Scheduled Caste communities in Kerala.

2 *Dharna, hartal* and *bandh* are the different forms of strike carried out by the people to agitate against the authorities.
Works Cited


