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Postcolonial Legacy Of Arundhati Roy's *The God Of Small Things*: Exploring Cultural Hybridity, Mimicry, And Marginality

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Abstract:

This paper examines Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* through a postcolonial lens, focusing on the themes of cultural hybridity, mimicry, and marginality. Set in postcolonial India, the novel disrupts binary notions of colonialism by exploring the relationships between the colonizers and the colonized, particularly in the context of the caste system and gender roles. Roy's work challenges the oriental discourse of Europeans and highlights the struggles of marginalized groups, including the Untouchables and upper-class women. This analysis delves into the ways in which Roy's novel abrogates the privileged center, exploring the intersections of feminism, caste segregation, and untouchability. Ultimately, the paper reveals how *The God of Small Things* critiques the social and religious constitutions of gender and castes, exposing the power dynamics that punish transgressions and silence marginalized voices.

Key words: Feminism, untouchability, mimicry, marginality, relationship, gender equality, cultural hybridity.

***Heart of darkness*:**

Arundhati Roy's novel, *The God of Small Things*, critiques colonialism and its discourse by subverting the metaphor of "*heart of darkness*." Joseph Conrad's novella, *Heart of Darkness*, exemplifies the European colonial discourse, which portrays the colonized as primitive, barbaric, and irrational, in contrast to the colonizers, who represent light, knowledge, and civilization.

Conrad's novella reinforces this binary, depicting Africa as a land of darkness, while the European colonizers are the source of light. However, Roy challenges this notion by introducing the character of Kari Saipu, an Englishman who has "gone native." Kari Saipu represents the colonial idea of degeneration, where the colonizer adopts native customs and becomes morally and physically corrupted.

Roy ridicules this idea by portraying Kari Saipu as "Ayemenem's own Kurtz," highlighting the exploitation of colonial powers. By reversing the metaphor of "*heart of darkness*," Roy represents the colonizer's land in the colony as the true *heart of darkness*, rather than the colonized land.

This subversion challenges the colonial discourse and its binary oppositions, instead revealing the complexities and nuances of colonialism. Roy's novel exposes the power dynamics of colonialism, where the colonizers exploit and oppress the colonized, and the supposed "civilizing mission" is actually a mask for domination and control.

Through her critique of Conrad's novella and the colonial discourse, Roy's novel offers a postcolonial perspective that challenges the dominant narratives of colonialism and highlights the voices and experiences of the marginalized.

Arundhati Roy's novel, *The God of Small Things*, mocks the colonial notion that the colonized land is a "land of darkness." The character of Kari Saipu, an Englishman who has "gone native," exemplifies this idea. Roy ridicules the colonial concept of "going native," where the colonizer supposedly degenerates morally and physically by adopting native customs.

Kari Saipu, who wears native clothes and speaks Malayalam, is dubbed "Ayemenem's own Kurtz" and the "heart of darkness." Roy reverses the metaphor of "*heart of darkness*," using it to represent the colonizer's land in the colony, rather than the colonized land.

Furthermore, Roy subverts the colonial idea of the "other" by having Estha and Rahel, the native characters, refer to the History House (Kari Saipu's residence) as the "house on the other side of the river." This reversal challenges the European colonial discourse, which viewed native people as the "other" to the colonizers.

By using these literary devices, Roy critiques colonialism and its discourse, highlighting the power dynamics of exploitation and oppression. Her novel offers a postcolonial perspective that challenges dominant narratives and amplifies the voices of the marginalized.

Arundhati Roy's novel, *The God of Small Things*, challenges the colonial idea of "going native" by ridiculing the notion that colonizers can truly become part of the native culture. Roy uses the character of Kari Saipu, an Englishman who has "gone native," to highlight the exploitation of colonial powers. By referring to Kari Saipu as the "*heart of darkness*," Roy reverses the metaphor used by colonizers to describe the colonized land, instead applying it to the colonizer's own land in the colony.

The History House:

The History House, owned by Kari Saipu, serves as a symbol of India's colonial history and its struggle for independence. Roy uses the house to represent the way colonial history was written by the British without true understanding or input from Indians. Chacko's statement, "To understand history...we have to go inside and listen to what they're saying," highlights the need to look beyond surface-level narratives and truly engage with the past.

However, Chacko also notes that Indians have been "locked out" of their own history, forced to observe from the outside and only seeing "shadows" and hearing "whispers." This serves as a powerful commentary on the way colonial powers controlled the narrative of Indian history, denying Indians agency and voice.

Through these elements, Roy critiques the dominant narratives of colonialism and highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of history, one that acknowledges the perspectives and experiences of the marginalized.

Chacko's remark about smelling the smells of history is a powerful metaphor that alludes to the caste system in Indian society. The sense of smell is often associated with memory and emotion, and by invoking it, Roy highlights the need to confront the uncomfortable truths of India's past, including the oppression of Dalits and Untouchables.

Baby Kochamma's comment about the supposed smell of Paravans (a caste considered Untouchable) reinforces this theme, revealing the deep-seated prejudices and biases that perpetuate the caste system.

The History House, symbolizing India's colonial and caste-ridden history, becomes the site of Velutha's tragic murder, emphasizing the dark legacy of oppression and violence against marginalized communities. Roy's vivid description of the murder scene, contrasting the efficient and responsible actions of the Touchable Policemen with the brutal atrocities that might have been expected, serves to underscore the systemic nature of this violence.

By choosing the History House as the site of this tragedy, Roy underscores the idea that India's history is marked by the oppression of Dalits and Untouchables. The house becomes a powerful symbol of the darkness at the heart of Indian society, a darkness that Roy argues is more significant than the colonial legacy of the White man.

In her interview with Frontline magazine, Roy clarifies that the darkness she refers to is not just colonialism, but the deeper, more insidious darkness of the caste system and untouchability. This elaboration reinforces the idea that Roy's novel is not just a critique of colonialism, but also a powerful indictment of the social and cultural structures that perpetuate oppression and violence in India.

The Postcolonial Others:

Ranajit Guha's essay provides a nuanced understanding of the terms "elite" and "subaltern" in the context of colonial India. Guha argues that the elite consists not only of European colonizers but also includes dominant indigenous groups who have access to power and privilege through their association with the colonial government, education, wealth, or social status. These elites have the ability to shape their own interests and exert influence in political and economic spheres.

In contrast, Guha defines the subaltern as the polar opposite of the elite, encompassing all members of society who lack political and economic agency, identity, and the ability to articulate their own interests. The subaltern represents a negative space, characterized by disempowerment, opposition, and marginalization. This category is not defined by specific class, caste, or race but rather by their exclusion from power and privilege.

Guha's framework highlights the complex dynamics of power and oppression in colonial India, where both external colonizers and internal elites collaborated to maintain their dominance over the subaltern masses. This understanding of the subaltern as a negative space emphasizes the need to acknowledge and amplify the voices and experiences of marginalized groups, who have been historically silenced and excluded from dominant narratives.

In the context of Arundhati Roy's novel, The God of Small Things, Guha's concepts of elite and subaltern can be applied to the characters and their social positions. The characters of Baby Kochamma, Chacko, and Kari Saipu represent the elite, with their access to power, privilege, and social status. In contrast, characters like Velutha, Ammu, and the twins, Rahel and Estha, occupy subaltern positions, facing marginalization, oppression, and disempowerment.

The incident highlights the oppressive nature of the caste system, where individuals like Velutha and his father Vellya Paapen are deemed "untouchable" and are not allowed to enter the homes of "touchables" (caste Hindus and Christians) due to the fear of "pollution". This fear is rooted in the belief that physical contact with someone from a lower caste can contaminate the higher-caste individuals and their surroundings.

However, the narrative also exposes the hypocrisy of this system. Despite the "touchables" avoiding physical contact with Velutha and Vellya Paapen, they have no qualms about consuming food (coconuts) that has been handled and plucked by the "untouchables". This contradiction underscores the absurdity of the pollution and untouchability concepts.

The repeated use of the term "touchable" in the narrative serves to emphasize the artificial nature of these distinctions. By using this term to describe both people and objects, Roy highlights the arbitrary boundaries created by the caste system. The irony lies in the fact that the "touchables" are willing to benefit from the labor of the "untouchables" (by consuming the coconuts) while maintaining a facade of separation and superiority.

Through this incident, Roy critiques the caste system's attempts to maintain a false sense of purity and highlights the inherent contradictions and hypocrisies that underpin it. By inverting the notion of purity and pollution, Roy challenges the dominant discourse and encourages the reader to question the legitimacy of the caste system's oppressive structures.

Mammachi's story about paravans being expected to crawl backwards with a broom to sweep away their footprints illustrates the exercise of hegemony by the dominant class. The use of the word "expected" suggests that this behavior was not forced upon the paravans, but rather was a societal norm that they were expected to follow. This is a classic example of Gramsci's notion of hegemony, where the ruling class asserts its authority through non-coercive means, convincing the population that their interests align with those of the dominant class.

In this case, the hegemonic elites (upper caste individuals) exert control over the lower castes (paravans) by creating a societal expectation that reinforces their dominance. The paravans are socialized to believe that it is their duty to avoid "defiling" the upper castes, and thus, they internalize their subordinate status. This internalization is a key aspect of hegemony, as it allows the dominant class to maintain power without resorting to coercion.

Gramsci's concept of hegemony highlights how power is exercised through cultural and ideological means, rather than just through force or coercion. In The God of Small Things, Roy illustrates how the dominant class maintains its power by creating and reinforcing social norms, expectations, and beliefs that perpetuate their dominance. The novel critiques this hegemonic structure, revealing the ways in which it perpetuates oppression and marginalization.

By exploring the dynamics of hegemony, Roy's novel provides insight into the complex power structures that shape Indian society, particularly in relation to caste and social hierarchy. The narrative encourages readers to question the dominant discourse and challenge the internalized beliefs and expectations that perpetuate oppression.

Mammachi's description of paravans crawling backwards with brooms and sweeping away their footprints symbolizes the erasure of their existence from history. This act of erasure is a result of the hegemonic class's control over the narrative, making the paravans believe that their existence is a pollution that needs to be eliminated. The paravans are forced to internalize their own inferiority and marginalization, leading to a loss of identity and agency.

The novel highlights the various ways in which the hegemonic class exercises control over the lives of paravans, including restricting their movement, dress, and speech. The idea of pollution is used as a tool of oppression, making the paravans believe that they are inherently impure and must take steps to avoid "polluting" the upper castes. This is a classic example of Gramsci's notion of hegemony, where the dominant class asserts its power through non-coercive means, shaping the beliefs and values of the subordinate class.

The character of Vellya Paapen exemplifies the effects of this hegemonic control. His feelings of indebtedness to Mammachi's family and his subsequent docility are a result of the internalized oppression he has faced. The fact that he is termed an "Old World Paravan" suggests that he is a product of a bygone era, one in which the backward crawling and humiliation of paravans was normalized. Vellya Paapen's story highlights the long-term effects of hegemonic control, where the oppressed internalize their own subjugation and become complicit in their own marginalization.

Through these examples, Roy's novel critiques the ways in which power is exercised and maintained in Indian society, particularly in relation to caste and social hierarchy. The narrative encourages readers to question the dominant discourse and challenge the internalized beliefs and expectations that perpetuate oppression.

When Vellya Paapen informs Mammachi about Velutha and Ammu's relationship, her rage leads her to physically push him, which is a shocking violation of the taboo against touching an Untouchable. Vellya Paapen is taken aback, not just by the physical contact but also by the fact that a Touchable has touched him. This moment highlights the deeply ingrained social norms that dictate the behavior of both Touchables and Untouchables.

Mammachi's rage and Vellya Paapen's subsequent groveling and offer to kill his own son demonstrate the extreme fear and internalized oppression that pervades the lives of Untouchables. Vellya Paapen's docile nature is further evident in his attitude towards Velutha, whom he fears due to his son's confidence, assertiveness, and lack of hesitation. These traits, desirable in Touchables, are seen as insolence in an Untouchable, underscoring the dichotomic idea of untouchable/touchable and the rigid expectations surrounding each caste.

The narrative also explores the notion of "good" and "bad" Untouchables, exemplified by the contrast between Velutha and Kuttappen. While Velutha is assertive, aware of his rights, and questioning, Kuttappen is simple, humble, and naïve. The hegemonic class deems Kuttappen a "good" Untouchable because he conforms to their expectations of submissiveness and lack of knowledge. In contrast, Velutha's awareness and assertiveness make him a "bad" Untouchable, threatening the dominant discourse.

This dichotomy highlights the power dynamics at play, where the hegemonic class maintains control by dictating what is acceptable behavior for each caste. The narrative critiques this system, revealing how it perpetuates oppression and marginalization. By portraying the internalized oppression of characters like Vellya Paapen and the contrast between Velutha and Kuttappen, Roy's novel sheds light on the insidious nature of caste-based discrimination and the need for resistance against it.

Concept of mimicry:

Homi K. Bhabha's concept of mimicry suggests that the colonized culture's attempt to imitate the dominant colonial culture results in a mocking or parodying of that culture. This is because the colonized culture can never fully replicate the colonial culture, and therefore, remains "not quite, not white". This leads to a state of cultural hybridity, where the colonized subject is caught between their native identity and the colonial identity they attempt to assimilate into.

Arundhati Roy's novel, The God of Small Things, exemplifies this concept of mimicry through its use of language and character names. The novel is written in English, but incorporates Malayalam words and phrases, creating a linguistic hybridity that reflects the cultural hybridity of the characters.

The names of two characters, Baby Kochamma and Sophie Mol, are also bilingual, combining English and Malayalam. This blending of languages and cultures highlights the characters' caught-in-between status, where they are neither fully Indian nor fully British.

Baby Kochamma, for instance, is a Syrian Christian who has internalized British values and customs, but still retains elements of her native culture. Her name, Baby, is a Westernized nickname, while Kochamma is a traditional Syrian Christian surname.

Similarly, Sophie Mol's name combines the Western name Sophie with the Malayalam surname Mol, indicating her mixed cultural heritage.

Through these examples, Roy's novel illustrates the concept of mimicry, where the colonized culture attempts to imitate the dominant culture, but ultimately ends up creating a hybridized identity that is neither fully one nor the other. This hybridity is a key theme in the novel, reflecting the complex cultural dynamics of postcolonial India.

Pappachi's character in The God of Small Things exemplifies the concept of mimicry, where the colonized subject attempts to imitate the dominant colonial culture. As an Imperial Entomologist working for the British, Pappachi adopts the dressing style of his British bosses, wearing a three-piece suit and gold pocket watch every

day, even in the sweltering heat of Ayemenem. This sartorial choice is a deliberate attempt to mimic the British, signifying his aspiration to align himself with the colonial power.

Furthermore, Pappachi's pride in owning a Plymouth car, bought from an Englishman, and his eagerness to show it off to others, demonstrates his desire to emulate the British lifestyle. His refusal to believe Ammu's story about her husband's boss, Mr. Hollick, and his willingness to please white visitors, even to the point of fawning, reveal the extent to which Pappachi has internalized the values and opinions of the colonizers.

Pappachi's behavior is a classic example of mimicry, where the colonized subject seeks to gain acceptance and approval from the dominant culture by imitating its customs, values, and beliefs. However, this mimicry also highlights the power dynamics at play, where the colonized subject is forced to subjugate their own identity and agency to appease the colonial rulers.

Through Pappachi's character, Roy critiques the legacy of colonialism and the ways in which it continues to influence the lives of Indians. Pappachi's mimicry of British culture serves as a commentary on the enduring impact of colonialism on Indian society, where the desire to emulate the dominant culture can lead to a loss of traditional identity and cultural heritage.

Chacko's character in The God of Small Things perpetuates the flawed mimicry of the British, inherited from his father Pappachi. His "Oxford mood" is a manifestation of this mimicry, where he adopts the attitudes and behaviors of the colonizers, such as reading aloud in a pompous tone, quoting from texts, and emphasizing the importance of English language proficiency.

Chacko's actions, like his father's, are driven by a desire to please the colonizer and demonstrate his own cultural superiority. By quoting from Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby, he attempts to showcase his intellectual prowess, just as Baby Kochamma does by quoting from The Tempest in front of Margaret.

The novel highlights the irony of this mimicry, particularly in the scene where Chacko makes the twins look up the word "Anglophile" in the dictionary. This moment underscores the absurdity of the colonized subject's desire to emulate the colonizer, even to the point of embracing the term that describes their own subjugation.

Furthermore, the punishment meted out to the twins for speaking Malayalam instead of English is a stark reminder of the colonial legacy, where the imposition of English was a tool of cultural suppression. Baby Kochamma's actions mirror those of the British colonizers, who sought to erase Indian languages and cultures in favor of their own.

Through these examples, Roy critiques the enduring impact of colonialism on Indian society, where the desire to mimic the colonizer has led to a loss of cultural identity and linguistic heritage. The novel highlights the need for Indians to reclaim their own languages, cultures, and identities, rather than perpetuating the flawed mimicry of the British.

Arundhati Roy's characters, Pappachi, Chacko, and Baby Kochamma, exemplify the concept of mimicry, as described by Homi Bhabha. They attempt to emulate the culture of their colonizers, but their efforts are flawed and ultimately result in a "blurred copy" that resembles mockery rather than mimicry.

Baby Kochamma's fondness for American television shows, such as The Bold and The Beautiful and Santa Barbara, illustrates her preference for Western popular culture over Indian culture. Her fascination with the "shiny clothes" and "smart, bitchy repartee" of the characters on these shows demonstrates her desire to escape into a world that is perceived as more glamorous and sophisticated than her own.

Similarly, Pappachi's adoption of Western attire, including his three-piece suit and gold pocket watch, and Chacko's "Oxford mood" and quoting from Western texts, are all attempts to mimic the culture of their colonizers. However, these efforts are ultimately unsuccessful, and they come across as foolish or pretentious.

By portraying her characters in this way, Roy is mocking the postcolonial Indian elites who attempt to mimic Western culture. She is highlighting the absurdity of their efforts and the ways in which they are ultimately unable to fully replicate the culture they aspire to.

Roy's use of mimicry as a literary device also serves to underscore the power dynamics at play in colonial and postcolonial relationships. The colonized subject's attempt to mimic the colonizer is a manifestation of their desire for acceptance and approval, but it also reinforces the dominant culture's superiority.

Through her characters' flawed mimicry, Roy is critiquing the legacy of colonialism and the ways in which it continues to influence Indian society. She is encouraging readers to question the value placed on Western culture and to reclaim Indian culture and identity.

Conclusion:

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is a powerful exploration of the oppression of marginalized groups, particularly the "Untouchables" and women, in a postcolonial setting. Through her novel, Roy sheds light on the brutal traditions and social taboos that perpetuate exclusion and violence against these groups. By giving voice to the powerless, such as Velutha and Ammu, Roy highlights the everyday injustices and despair faced by those on the fringes of society.

The novel critiques the patriarchal ideology that underpins the oppression of both women and "Untouchables," demonstrating how this ideology determines the standards of conduct for these groups. The violence perpetrated against "Untouchables" like Velutha is a direct result of this ideology and moral system.

Furthermore, the novel explores the plight of postcolonial citizens, who are caught between their own culture and the imposed or mimicked culture of their colonizers. This sense of displacement and disorientation is captured in Chacko's poignant statement, "Our dreams have been doctored...We belong nowhere."

Throughout the novel, Roy emphasizes the importance of identity and the struggle to find one's own voice and ideas. The characters' search for identity is a testament to the need to reclaim their own culture and heritage in the face of colonialism and oppression.

The God of Small Things is grounded in historical realities, blending colonial tradition and local reality to create a rich and nuanced narrative. Roy's masterful storytelling and vivid characters bring to life the complexities of postcolonial India, making the novel a powerful exploration of identity, culture, and social justice. Ultimately, the novel is a call to action, urging readers to confront the injustices and inequalities that persist in our world today.

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