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## RESISTANCE AND REVOLT IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS: A POSTMODERN PERSPECTIVE

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### Abstract:

*In the post-independence era, it is taken for granted that the oppressive system has disappeared with the demise of the Empire, the emergence of democracy, dissemination of education and advancement of science and technology, but the hegemonic system, may be in lesser degree, continues to plague the Indian society both covertly and overtly. But it does not mean these changes are useless and ineffective. The socio-cultural and political changes, in the postcolonial era, have awakened the hitherto marginalized sections to their rights as independent human beings. Conscious of their rights, they interrogate and challenge the system that denies them basic rights to grow in life. The present paper seeks to examine the theme of resistance to and revolt against the still alive oppressive system in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. The novel represents the theme through the characters of Ammu, Velutha, Rahel and Estha. The way the theme is treated calls for our attention to the large-scale death and destruction looming large on the social horizon. The novelist presents the view that the cardinal virtues of love, trust, tolerance and brotherhood can go a long way in creating social harmony. The argument illustrates the post-modernist view that peaceful-coexistence is urgently needed to save human race from decay and destruction.*

### KEY WORDS:

Resistance, Revolt, science, technology.

### .INTRODUCTION

In the post-colonial era, it is generally assumed that the condition of hitherto marginalized is improving in the wake of political freedom, dissemination of education social measures and legal provisions, but in day-to-day life, the unwritten social norms and cultural codes have still an edge over the written laws; still Indian society is divided into the higher and the lower; the touchable and the untouchable; the powerful and the powerless; the oppressor and the oppressed; the high and the low; the pure and the impure. Social background, religious affiliation, language and cultural codes continue to play a crucial role in shaping inter-personal relationships. But in the changing scenario of the post-modern world, the so-called lesser beings refuse to be cowed down to the oppressive forces. They, unlike their ancestors, resist to and revolt against the life-denying forces both secretly and openly. Though they lose the battle of life in the face of heavy odds, they do not lose courage and hope, and leave the world with a glimmer of hope and regeneration. The next generation continues the battle openly with more force in more radical ways to live an independent life as human beings. The present paper seeks to examine the representation of resistance to and revolt against the complicit laws and the oppressive system in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. The theme of resistance is beautifully developed and illustrated through the marginalized

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characters, especially Ammu, Velutha, Rahel and Estha. Resistance or revolt is manifest in the expression of their individuality and freedom as human beings.

In the post-independence India, the institution of patriarchy continues to operate in various forms, thereby intending to curb the voice and volition of women irrespective of caste and class; region and region, but the modern women refuse to submit to the discriminatory and arbitrary system. In *The God of Small Things*, Ammu, a young Syrian Christian girl, seems to be silent and tolerant in her early days when she is not only beaten up but also deprived of college education by her patriarch father, Pappachi under the irrational excuse “that a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl” (*The God of Small Things* 38). On the other hand, her brother Chacko is sent to Oxford to pursue higher education. However, the Indian law makes provision of equal opportunities for both girls and boys to have an access to education. It is not that Chacko is bright and Ammu is dullard, but the core point is that Chacko is boy and Ammu is girl. Ammu, deprived of higher education, is left with no option, but “to wait for marriage proposals” (*The God of Small Things* 38). In a tradition-bound society, marriage is still being deemed more lucrative proposition than education in the life of young girls, and if they are educated, it is done only for better matrimonial prospects for them.

Ammu is pitted against the system which hideously operates to crush the human needs of an individual. In the beginning, she seems to be subdued under the iron rule of patriarchy, but by and by she gathers courage to interrogate the system that denies her space and grace as a human being. Well-acquainted with the constrictions of the social laws and terrified by her father, Ammu acquires “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” (*The God of Small Things* 172-173). She makes various plans to escape from the stifling family environment and ultimately she escapes when she finds an opportunity to stay with a distant relative in Calcutta. Ammu's departure from Ayemenem is understood as an implicit resistance to the strict patriarchal order. In Calcutta, she marries a Bengali boy, Baba on her own contrary to the complicit laws and wishes of her parents. Ammu's independent decision to marry a Bengali boy is an instance of revolt against the oppressive caste system and religious hierarchy where inter-caste or inter-religion marriages are not only forbidden but also despised.

However, the marriage for Ammu is out of necessity, not out of genuine feelings of love “Ammu did not pretend to be in love with him. She just weighed the odds and accepted. She thought that anything, anyone at all, would be better than returning to Ayemenem” (*The God of Small Things* 39). Soon after the marriage, Ammu comes to know that he is “a full blown alcoholic,” (*The God of Small Things* 40) liar, irresponsible and insensitive man. In the patriarchal system, husband is supposed to be responsible for household duties and protector of the family, but in the case of Baba, this norm is flouted and dishonoured in a way. As for love and excitement, Ammu finds “eight large pegs of whisky” (*The God of Small Things* 40) in his eyes. His irresponsibility towards familial duties is reflected at the time of Rahel and Estha's delivery in the hospital where “he “stretched out on a hard bench in the hospital corridor, was drunk” (*The God of Small Things* 41). It is evident that he is highly insensitive to both Ammu and newly born babies.

Moreover, the Bengali Babu wants to serve Ammu before his boss, Hollick to save his job at the tea estate. When he finds that she is not ready for this ugly bargain, he “lunged at her, grabbed her hair, punched her” (*The God of Small Things* 42). But Ammu, unlike her mother, retaliates with equal amount of violence: “She took down the heaviest book she could find in the book self... and hit him with it as hard as she could” (*The God of Small Things* 42). Thus, Ammu resists to the commodification of female sexuality, using violence as a device for retaliation. She refuses to be controlled by her husband and leaves him when “his bouts of violence began to include the children” (*The God of Small Things* 42). She resists to the system of social disparities (mal) practices in which women are exploited and oppressed in various ways. Unlike her mother, Ammu refuses to accept the situation of insults and rejections. Roy points out that the mother “accepted the female role model imposed on her by the society---docile, submissive, ungrudging, unprotesting” (Roy 56). Ammu refuses to the domestic violence and takes a conscious and bold step in leaving husband's house for Ayemenem. With two growing children Ammu's departure from the husband is understood as an open revolt against the complicit laws which consider a divorced woman a bad or imprudent one.

Ammu does not consider her divorced status as a social stigma and goes ahead in life in cheerful and poised manner, resisting to the commonly held view that “a married daughter had no position in her parents' home. As for the divorced daughter...she had no position anywhere at all” (*The God of Small Things* 45). The way Ammu responds to the situation suggests that she does not bother about social injunctions. Her casual attitude to the cultural codes is a mark of complicit resistance to the unjust social order. In the tradition-bound society, a divorced or estranged woman is forbidden from realizing her emotional and human needs, and she is supposed to lead a life of an ascetic, suppressing all her human needs and desires. But Ammu seeks love, security and respect in the person of a low-caste man, Velutha,

disregarding social injunctions and prohibitions. The relationship is based on deeper human and natural needs, untarnished by the complicit laws. Ammu-Velutha sexual union “marks the victory of 'human nature' over 'the human mind,' of biology over history...” (Roy 61). In the character of Ammu, the novelist illustrates nature's triumph over cultural codes and social laws.

Ammu's open revolt against traditional cultural codes infuriates her mother who claims that Ammu's affair has “defiled generations of breeding...and brought the family to its knees” (Roy 244). She holds the belief that Velutha is impure and dirty and will pollute the purity of her daughter. But Ammu's affair with Velutha falsifies the belief that bodily contact between the upper caste and lower caste defiles the purity of the former. Ammu's breaking the “Love Laws [...] The laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much” (The God of Small Things 33) formulates her revolt against the society that has neglected her for so long. Ammu's revolt exposes the roots and functioning of the impersonal laws which make inroads into the personal relations. She does not stop here; she goes to the police station and argues with the Police Inspector Matthew for illegal detention of Velutha in police custody. In the police station, she registers her protest against the inhuman act by challenging the hegemony and arbitrariness of the custodian of the written laws. Though she meets a tragic end, she refuses to submit to the life-defying forces, keeping her poise and zeal to live a dignified life.

Though Ammu knows that society is strongly against the fulfilment of her needs, she boldly continues to fight against the unjust system to realize her human needs by transcending the social barriers. Though she does not succeed in bringing about any tangible social change, she does not lose courage and refuses to be a silent sufferer like a conventional woman. Ammu's interest in the filmi songs makes her “walk out of her world” “to a better, happier place” (The God of Small Things 44, 332). The songs inspire her to revolt against the cramping social system, though her forced marital alliance ends in estrangement. At such moments, there is “something restless and untamed about her”, and the “infinite tenderness of motherhood” becomes “an unmixable mix”, mixed up as it is with “the reckless rage of a suicide bomber” (The God of Small Things 44). Ammu questions the conditions and does not accept the reality passively as her mother did. Through the character of Ammu, the novelist registers protest against the still alive oppressive social system.

Alike women, the lower caste people in the Indian society have been subjected to various prejudices and punishments. Under the overriding belief that they are incapable of doing brain work are associated with mean and menial jobs. Mammachi remarks that if Velutha hasn't been a Paravan, he might have become an engineer. It is because of this negative and parochial belief that most of the low-caste boys lose interest in education and adopt the ancestral occupations. But Velutha subverts the view by getting education and becoming a skilled carpenter and a good mechanic, though “Parvans were not meant to be carpenters”(The God of Small Things 77). Velutha's services in the factory as well in the family are indispensable. Though the whole Ipe family depends more and more on Velutha, it does not appreciate him for his skill and human attributes. Though he is better mechanic than other higher caste mechanics, he is paid less salary than what is paid to them.

Velutha does not think himself parvan or powerless, rather he goes in the world with head up as he is filled with “an unwarranted assurance” (The God of Small Things 76) and is not submissive like his father, but the father gets disturbed at his unusual manner: “In the way, he walked. The way he held his head. The quiet way he offered suggestions without being asked. Or in the quiet way he disregarded suggestions without appearing to be rebel” (The God of Small Things 76). This is because Velutha is the most free of societal structures, being an outcaste or untouchable, and therefore “excluded from the caste system altogether” (Smith 43). He has the ability to transform life rather than simply endure it. Velutha revolts against the nagging and negating behaviour of his father and one day leaves home as protest against the tradition-bound mentality of his father: “The untouchables are not allowed to touch anything that Touchables touched” (The God of Small Things 73). The way Velutha touches things in the Ipe family and walks constitutes revolt against the discriminatory caste-system. In Velutha, the author creates a character that revolts against not only the Love Laws but also against “all laws of a class- and caste-based society” (Roy 61).

Velutha falls in love with Ammu against the social norms. It does not mean that he is oblivious of the consequences; rather he is fully cognizant of the harsh treatment meted out to persons who attempt to transgress the rigid social order. In the person of Velutha, nature prevails over culture, so his revolt against the culture is spontaneous and out of genuine psychosexual and social needs. Nothing is wrong about his love for Ammu as well as children because it is based on reciprocity of genuine demands. In Ammu, Velutha finds love, respect and recognition from the upper classes, and Ammu and children find love and security in the person of Velutha. However, Velutha's sexual affair with Ammu is primarily a revolt against to the cultural codes. For his daring act, Velutha is arrested in the false case of rape. His brutal death in the police custody uncovers the ugly face of the colonial forces. His death speaks how “Change is one thing.

Acceptance is another” (The God of Small Things 264). Though Velutha is mercilessly killed, he does not cry and cringe before the so-called guardians of law. The police crush his body, but fail to subdue his free and firm spirit.

Some critics keep the view that the death of Ammu and Velutha at the hands of oppressive forces reveals pessimistic attitude of the novelist, but they fail to look at the words: “Tomorrow! Tomorrow! (The God of Small Things 379) uttered when they get separated. It is right that the anti-human system succeeds in crushing their bodies, but fails to crush their spirit. The way their affair continues undermines the social laws. Ammu and Velutha's clear desire to be with each other “challenges monolithic social norms and becomes a matter of life and death” (Lanone 130) It is their conscious decision that helps them transcend the social and moral boundaries. Their affair presents the possibility a heterogeneous culture, subverting the predetermined norms of Love Laws. Moreover, their fight against the stale and stifling system gets extended to the next generation.

In the characters of Ammu and Velutha, resistance to and revolt against the oppressive system assume fiercer form. They resist to the system to have self-fulfilment, not to upset the social harmony. As middle class children, they befriend Velutha, resisting to the social norms of pure and impure. In the Ipe family of Anglophiles, there is a rule that all members must converse in English, and if any member is caught while using vernacular, he or she is likely to be punished. But Rahel and Estha speak their native language, Malayalam in private. Though they are made to write, "I will always speak in English" (The God of Small Things 36) one hundred times as punishment, they do not stop talking in Malayalam. Thwarted by Baby Kochamma, they find another way to revolt in reading English lines backward. At school, they resist to Miss Mitten's lessons by instead of reading the book forwards, “they read it aloud to her backwards” (The God of Small Things 59). They refuse to accept formalized English as their language. It does not mean that they hate English; rather they enjoy American/English films such as The Sound of Music. They create a new language out of the old one, merging "Indian" culture with English. In this way, they struggle to come out of the confined territories to interpret their lives with individual freedom by interrogating the structures of caste, community, language, gender and religion.

At school, Rahel does not comply with the education codes. She expresses her individuality and freedom by decorating her Headmistress's garden gate with a knob of fresh cow dung with small flowers, but to the school, it is an act of “depravity” or “moral perversion” (The God of Small Things 16). The second time, she embarrasses the school authorities by slamming doors and colliding with her seniors and admits to the principal that she had done it to find out whether breast hurts. But in the Christian school, “breasts were not acknowledged” ((The God of Small Things 16). It is more than clear that our education system is still sticking to the norms of stifling sexual morality. She smokes openly in the school premises, even more she sets fire to the false hair bun of the Housemistress. The principal expels her from the school, considering her danger to the school norms. Instead of managing a councilor for her, they adopt the stale and stereotype method of punishment to the erring students. Though Rahel is not ignorant of the fact that she is likely to be punished for her unusual behaviour and action, she does not mind the impending punishment.

In her adulthood, Rahel expresses her freedom by marrying Larry McCaslin, but she “drifted into marriage like a passenger drifts towards an unoccupied chair in an airport lounge” ((The God of Small Things 18). When she realizes that “he held her as though she was a gift. Given to him in love. Something still and small. Unbearably precious” ((The God of Small Things 19), she divorces him without losing any time the moment he stops to fulfil her needs. As a highly educated and modern girl, Rahel resists to the stereotyped view that woman is an object, especially sex object and refuses to accept the fate of conventional woman. As a free woman, she, unlike her mother, is not restricted by the mental restriction of Hindu or Christian tradition. This is why, at her return to Ayemenem, she answers an old man who asks about her marital status by “We're divorced” ((The God of Small Things 130), without worrying what will the old man assume about her answer.

Rahel's expression of incestuous love for her twin brother Estha is her implicit resistance to the social order which denies an individual human love. “Rahel watched Estha with the curiosity of a mother watching her wet child. A sister a brother. A woman a man. A twin a twin” (The God of Small Things 93). In the relationship with Estha, Rahel redefines social relationships, transcending the boundaries of traditional morality. The new relationship is a result of their conscious act to defy and challenge the system that denies happiness to an individual. As they are product of nature, culture fails to prevent them reuniting after along period. Roy challenges the monolithic notion of sexual difference which categorizes women as a group based on their gender, patriarchal control and violence.

Estha's modes of resistance are speechlessness and withdrawal from the stifling situation. He tries to avoid any kind of interaction within or without family. Gradually, he stops talking altogether. Though his silence is not accusing and protesting, it takes the form of resentment and refusal. He refuses to go to college after passing school. In the school, he refuses to take part in group activities. At home, he engages himself in

the activities like sweeping, cooking, swabbing and washing clothes. Estha develops “an active dislike to Miss Mitten” (The God of Small Things 60) for not having knowledge of Malayalam. The entire family tries to separate Estha and Rahel, but it is their commonness and love that reunites them and the way they cross the bounds of the forbidden love is an act of strong resistance to the oppressive societal norms. Their reunion provides a heavy blow to the complicit laws.

The forgoing discussion reveals that even in the post-colonial period the oppressive forces continue to operate in inter-personal relations. The complicit laws in the name of social harmony crush the body of an individual, but fail to crush his or her spirit and zeal for meaningful life. Despite the heavy odds, the so-called little persons resist to the disvalues in various ways. They are not afraid of the impending physical or mental punishments and carry on their battle against the disvalues and inadequacies. In the novel, no doubt, the powerless suffer in various ways, but their sufferings cannot be dissociated from the loss of the powerful. The paper makes the postcolonial view that peaceful co-existence can make the world worth living. The novelist conveys the message that broadmindedness, love, trust, sympathy and tolerance can bridge the gap between two extremes of the social order.

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