



Reclaiming the Subaltern Voice: A Postcolonial Reading of Marginalized Characters in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Article information

Received: 4th September 2025

Received in revised form: 6th October 2025

Accepted: 8th November 2025

Available online: 20th December 2025

Volume: 2

Issue: 4

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18015508>

Abstract

This article examines the representation of marginalized characters in Arundhati Roy's Booker Prize-winning novel *The God of Small Things* (1997) through the lens of postcolonial theory, with particular emphasis on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the subaltern. The study employs a qualitative textual analysis of secondary sources, including the primary text and existing critical scholarship, to investigate how Roy constructs narrative spaces for characters who exist at the intersections of caste, class, and gender oppression in post-independence India. The analysis focuses specifically on Velutha, the Untouchable carpenter, and Ammu, the divorced woman who transgresses social boundaries through her forbidden love. The findings reveal that Roy employs innovative narrative techniques including fragmented chronology, child perspectives, and linguistic experimentation to disrupt dominant discourses and amplify voices historically silenced by hegemonic structures. The article argues that Roy's novel not only critiques the persistence of colonial hierarchies in postcolonial Kerala but also demonstrates the possibilities and limitations of literary representation in giving voice to the subaltern. This research contributes to ongoing scholarly conversations about postcolonial literature's capacity to challenge epistemic violence and reimagine social relations beyond inherited colonial frameworks.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Subaltern Studies, Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, Caste, Marginalization, Narrative Voice, Indian English Literature, Gayatri Spivak, Untouchability

Introduction

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) emerged as a landmark text in Indian English literature, winning the Man Booker Prize and garnering international acclaim for its lyrical prose and unflinching examination of social hierarchies in postcolonial India. Set in the town of Ayemenem in Kerala, the novel traces the tragic consequences that unfold when members of a Syrian Christian family particularly the twins Rahel and Estha navigate the treacherous terrain of caste, class, and gender boundaries that continue to structure Indian society decades after independence. At the heart of the narrative lies the forbidden relationship between Ammu, a divorced woman ostracized by her family, and Velutha, an Untouchable (Dalit) worker whose exceptional carpentry skills cannot protect him from the violent

enforcement of caste boundaries.

The novel's exploration of marginality raises fundamental questions about representation, voice, and agency that have preoccupied postcolonial theorists. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) interrogates the conditions under which marginalized subjects can articulate their experiences within structures of colonial and patriarchal knowledge production. Spivak argues that the subaltern those rendered voiceless by their position at the bottom of social hierarchies cannot "speak" in any meaningful sense because the very frameworks through which speech is recognized and validated are controlled by dominant groups. This theoretical provocation has generated extensive debate about the possibilities and limitations of representing marginalized voices in literature and academic discourse.

This article investigates how Roy's novel engages with the problematic of subaltern representation. Rather than offering simple solutions, Roy's text illuminates the complexities inherent in any attempt to give voice to the voiceless. Through an analysis of narrative technique, characterization, and linguistic experimentation, this study examines how *The God of Small Things* both amplifies marginalized perspectives and acknowledges the structural constraints that limit such amplification. The research question guiding this investigation is: How does Arundhati Roy's narrative representation of marginalized characters particularly Velutha and Ammu engage with, challenge, and complicate postcolonial theories of subaltern voice and agency?

Literature review

Scholarly engagement with *The God of Small Things* has been extensive and multifaceted since the novel's publication. Early criticism tended to focus on Roy's stylistic innovations, with critics like John Updike praising the novel's "intensely poetic language" while others debated whether Roy's prose constituted literary virtuosity or excessive ornamentation. However, subsequent scholarship has increasingly examined the novel's political dimensions, situating it within broader conversations about postcolonial literature, caste critique, and feminist interventions in Indian writing.

Aijaz Ahmad (1992) has offered important critiques of postcolonial theory's tendency to privilege metropolitan perspectives and textual analysis over material conditions in formerly colonized societies (Ahmad). Ahmad's insistence on attending to class relations and political economy provides a useful corrective to approaches that treat colonial discourse as the primary site of oppression. In the context of Roy's novel, Ahmad's framework encourages attention to how caste oppression intersects with economic exploitation, as Velutha's position as both Untouchable and worker subjects him to multiple, interlocking forms of domination.

Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and mimicry have also informed readings of the novel. (Bhabha 1994) argues that colonial discourse produces ambivalent subjects who can subvert dominant meanings through strategic appropriation and repetition with difference (Bhabha).

Several scholars have applied this framework to analyze how characters in Roy's novel navigate between different cultural registers and deploy mimicry as a survival strategy. However, critics have questioned whether Bhabha's emphasis on discursive resistance adequately addresses the material violence that the novel depicts with such visceral intensity.

Spivak's work on the subaltern has proven particularly generative for readings of *The God of Small Things*. Building on the Subaltern Studies collective's efforts to recover histories "from below," (Spivak 271) argues that the subaltern woman occupies a position of double marginalization that renders her especially vulnerable to epistemic violence. Scholars including (Bose 59; Tickell 73) have examined how Roy's representation of Ammu and the other women in the novel engages with Spivak's analysis of gendered subalternity.

More recent scholarship has focused specifically on Roy's treatment of caste. Toral Jatin Gajarawala (2013) situates the novel within a longer tradition of Dalit literary activism and interrogates whether upper-caste writers like Roy can adequately represent Dalit experience (Gajarawala). This question of representational authority who can speak for whom remains central to debates about the novel's political significance. Meanwhile, scholars like (Nayar 88) have examined how Roy's narrative techniques create what he terms "postcolonial affect," generating emotional responses that challenge readers' complicity with oppressive structures.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis methodology, drawing exclusively on secondary data sources including the primary literary text, published critical scholarship, and theoretical frameworks from postcolonial studies. The research design is interpretive and hermeneutic, seeking to generate nuanced readings of the text through close attention to narrative structure, characterization, language, and imagery.

The primary text analyzed is the first edition of *The God of Small Things* published by IndiaInk in 1997. Secondary sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, academic monographs, edited collections, and theoretical texts drawn from postcolonial studies, subaltern studies, feminist theory, and Dalit studies. Sources were identified through systematic searches of academic databases including JSTOR, Project MUSE, and MLA International Bibliography, supplemented by citation tracking and consultation of bibliographies in relevant monographs.

The analytical framework synthesizes insights from several theoretical traditions. Spivak's concept of the subaltern provides the central lens through which marginalized characters are examined, with attention to how structures of caste, class, and gender intersect to produce particular forms of silencing and exclusion. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and ambivalence inform analysis of how characters navigate between different social positions and cultural registers. Additionally, the study draws on narratological concepts to examine how Roy's formal choices including fragmented chronology, shifting focalization, and linguistic experimentation shape the representation of marginalized perspectives.

The analysis proceeds through close reading of selected passages, with particular attention to scenes involving Velutha and Ammu. Rather than attempting comprehensive coverage of the novel, the study focuses on key moments that crystallize the text's engagement with questions of voice, agency, and representation. This selective approach allows for depth of analysis while acknowledging that alternative readings remain possible.

Results

Velutha: The Silenced Subaltern

Velutha emerges as the novel's most explicit embodiment of subaltern marginality. As a Paravan a member of an "Untouchable" caste traditionally confined to the most degrading labor Velutha occupies the lowest position in Kerala's complex social hierarchy. Roy introduces him through the children's perspective as "the God of Small Things," a designation that captures both his extraordinary qualities and the structural limitations imposed upon him. Despite possessing exceptional skills as a carpenter abilities recognized even by those who despise him Velutha cannot escape the dehumanizing logic of caste that reduces him to his birth status.

The analysis reveals that Roy represents Velutha's subalternity through strategic silences as much as through speech. While Velutha is depicted as articulate and intelligent he attends Communist Party meetings and can discuss politics with sophistication the novel denies readers direct access to his interiority at crucial moments. During the brutal police beating that

ends his life, Roy describes the violence in excruciating physical detail while withholding Velutha's thoughts and feelings. This narrative choice can be read as an acknowledgment of the limits of representation: even a sympathetic novelist cannot fully inhabit the consciousness of those whose experiences exceed the frameworks available to dominant discourse.

Significantly, Velutha never explicitly speaks against the caste system within the novel's present-time narrative. His transgression the relationship with Ammu is enacted through the body rather than articulated in language. When faced with accusation and violence, Velutha does not defend himself or name his innocence. This silence resonates with Spivak's argument that the subaltern cannot speak because the structures through which speech would be recognized are controlled by those who oppress them. The police, the family, and the social order have already determined Velutha's guilt; no words he might utter could alter this predetermined verdict.

Ammu: Gendered Subalternity and Transgression

Ammu's marginalization operates differently from Velutha's, illustrating how gender intersects with other social hierarchies to produce specific forms of subalternity. As a divorced woman in a society that stigmatizes divorce, Ammu exists in a state of social death within her natal family. Roy emphasizes that Ammu has no legal standing: "Thanks to our wonderful male chauvinist society," as Baby Kochamma notes, women like Ammu have no property rights and no claim to family assets. This legal dispossession mirrors the epistemological dispossession that Spivak identifies as constitutive of subaltern status.

Unlike Velutha, Ammu is granted significant interiority in the narrative. Readers access her thoughts, desires, and frustrations through free indirect discourse and moments of focalization. However, this interiority does not translate into social power or effective speech. Ammu's attempts to voice her perspective to name her love for Velutha, to protect her children, to claim her rights are consistently silenced, ignored, or overridden by family members and authorities who possess social standing that she lacks.

The analysis finds that Ammu's transgression her relationship with Velutha represents a form of embodied resistance that challenges both caste hierarchy and patriarchal control over women's sexuality. Yet Roy refuses to romanticize this transgression as a triumphant assertion of agency. The relationship emerges from a context of desperation and confinement, and its consequences are catastrophic for both parties. Ammu dies alone and unmourned, her body cremated by strangers. This tragic ending underscores the material violence that awaits those who challenge entrenched social boundaries.

Narrative Techniques and the Amplification of Marginalized Voices

Roy employs several innovative narrative techniques that work to amplify marginalized perspectives while acknowledging the difficulties of such amplification. The novel's fragmented, non-linear chronology disrupts the authoritative voice of realist narration, preventing any single perspective from claiming mastery over the story. Events are revealed gradually, from multiple angles, and through the distorted lens of memory and trauma. This formal experimentation mirrors the fragmentary nature of subaltern experience, which exists in the gaps and silences of dominant historical narratives.

The prominence of the child perspective particularly the twins Rahel and Estha provides another strategy for defamiliarizing social hierarchies. Children in the novel perceive caste and class distinctions without the naturalized acceptance that characterizes adult consciousness. Their confusion and questions expose the arbitrary violence underlying social categories that adults treat as self-evident. When young Rahel asks why Velutha cannot enter the house through the front door, her innocent inquiry denaturalizes practices that have become invisible through repetition.

Roy's linguistic experimentation also serves to challenge dominant modes of representation. The novel features extensive wordplay, neologisms, and unconventional capitalization that draw attention to language as a site of power. Phrases like "Love Laws" and "History House" acquire the status of proper nouns, suggesting the weight of social structures that determine "who should be loved. And how. And how much." This defamiliarization of language works to expose how apparently neutral terms encode ideological assumptions that maintain existing hierarchies.

Discussion

The findings of this analysis suggest that *The God of Small Things* engages with the problematic of subaltern representation in a sophisticated and self-aware manner. Rather than claiming to give voice to the voiceless in any straightforward sense, Roy's novel illuminates both the necessity and the impossibility of such a project. The text demonstrates acute awareness that representation always involves mediation, translation, and potential appropriation that speaking "for" others risks speaking "over" them.

Velutha's strategic silences at crucial narrative moments can be interpreted as Roy's acknowledgment of the limits of her own representational authority. As an upper-caste, English-educated writer, Roy occupies a position of privilege relative to the Dalit subjects she depicts. By withholding direct access to Velutha's consciousness during his most vulnerable moments, the novel resists the temptation to claim intimate knowledge of experiences that exceed the author's social position. This restraint represents an ethical response to Spivak's critique of well-intentioned intellectuals who inadvertently silence subaltern subjects through acts of representation.

At the same time, the novel's formal innovations create spaces where marginalized perspectives can register without being fully assimilated to dominant frameworks. The fragmented chronology, child perspectives, and linguistic experimentation work to unsettle readers' assumptions and create openings for alternative ways of seeing. If the subaltern cannot speak within existing structures of knowledge and power, Roy's text attempts to transform those structures to create, however provisionally, conditions under which marginalized experience might become legible.

The novel's treatment of Ammu raises important questions about the intersection of gender and other forms of marginalization. Ammu's greater access to narrative interiority compared to Velutha might suggest that gender oppression is more amenable to literary representation than caste oppression. However, this reading risks establishing a problematic hierarchy among different forms of subalternity. A more productive interpretation recognizes that Ammu and Velutha occupy different positions within intersecting systems of oppression, and that Roy's varied representational strategies respond to these different positions rather than ranking them.

The implications of this analysis extend beyond the specific text to broader questions about postcolonial literature's political possibilities. Roy's novel suggests that literature cannot simply "give voice" to the voiceless, as if marginalized subjects were simply waiting for a more sympathetic medium through which to speak. Instead, the novel models a practice of representation that remains attentive to its own limitations, that acknowledges what cannot be said even while striving to expand the domain of the sayable.

This analysis also contributes to ongoing debates about representational authority in postcolonial contexts. Critics like Gajarawala have questioned whether upper-caste writers can adequately represent Dalit experience, suggesting that only Dalit writers possess the standpoint epistemology necessary for authentic representation. While this critique raises important concerns about appropriation and speaking for others, it risks essentializing both caste positions and literary authority. Roy's novel, through its self-reflexive engagement with the limits of

representation, offers a model for responsible cross-caste representation that neither claims complete knowledge nor abandons the ethical imperative to bear witness to injustice.

Conclusion

This article has examined the representation of marginalized characters in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* through the lens of postcolonial theory, with particular attention to Spivak's concept of the subaltern. The analysis reveals that Roy's novel engages with questions of voice, agency, and representation in sophisticated ways that neither claim to resolve the problematic of subaltern speech nor abandon the effort to amplify marginalized perspectives.

Through close reading of the novel's treatment of Velutha and Ammu, the study has shown how Roy employs strategic silences, fragmented narration, child perspectives, and linguistic experimentation to create narrative spaces for characters who exist at the margins of social recognition. These formal innovations work to defamiliarize dominant social categories and expose the violence underlying apparently natural hierarchies of caste, class, and gender.

The findings suggest that *The God of Small Things* models a practice of ethical representation that remains attentive to its own limitations while striving to transform the conditions under which marginalized experience might become legible. Rather than speaking for the subaltern, Roy's novel creates conditions that might allow readers to hear the echoes of voices that dominant discourse has silenced.

Future research might extend this analysis in several directions. Comparative studies could examine how other Indian English novelists including Dalit writers like Bama and Omprakash Valmiki approach the representation of caste marginality, potentially illuminating how standpoint shapes representational strategies. Additionally, reception studies could investigate how readers from different social positions interpret Roy's representation of subaltern characters, testing whether the novel's formal innovations succeed in generating the defamiliarizing effects this analysis has identified.

Ultimately, *The God of Small Things* demonstrates that postcolonial literature can serve as a site for working through rather than resolving the vexed questions that attend any attempt to represent marginalized others. In a world where systems of caste, class, and gender continue to produce devastating inequalities, such literary engagement remains both necessary and necessarily incomplete.

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