



## **The Discursive Role of Silence in Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things**

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### Abstract

A major contributor to the unique reading experience that Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* lends itself to, is its language. In fact, to say that the novel has an excess of language will not be an understatement. The narrator is chatty, even garrulous, wanting to say and share everything. Yet, what this paper intends to study through a narrative textual analysis of the work, is not the effusiveness of its language, the many linguistic techniques, innovations and experiments that Roy engages in, but the role of silence in the novel, the character it assumes, silence as a politically constituted construct, and the discourse it leads to, shapes and displaces. Sometimes through a studied silence, sometimes through an enforced silence and sometimes through a deliberate and pregnant silence, the narrator seems to be indicating that not every action can be accounted for, through words. Not every relationship can be contained in the constricting spaces of words. By not choosing to describe or rationalize or validate and by taking recourse to silence, the narrator seems to be engaging in the powerful discourse of silence, turning a handicap into a weapon to contest the discursive laws and structures of power. Silence thus stands discursively produced, an archival repository of meaning and memory.

**Key words:** Subversive masculinities, subaltern, caste oppression, gender and novel, marginalized identities.





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*Violence takes many forms...when it is directed at women. Direct forms of violence...rape, molestation, and wife-beating are easy to identify, define and deal with....There are other forms of violence, very subtle, absolutely silent, and therefore, more ingrained ...Among these, the most 'silent' and covert form of violence ... is through a denial of 'voice' in a purely physical sense.*

- **Shoma Chatterjee**

This paper is an enquiry into this form of violence which subjugates and forces the precarious and the disadvantaged into silence, not because they cannot speak but because they are culturally and politically denied a language to articulate. Through a close textual reading of Roy's *The God of Small Things*, the paper looks at the oppressive nature of this violence on men and how it is directed at and leads to the shaping of subversive, counter hegemonic and non-normative masculinities. Additionally, it looks at 'silence' as a politically constituted construct, and the discourse it leads to, shapes and displaces.

Silence enters like a cold draught through a crack in the doorway and envelopes everything till it becomes an excess, paradoxically expressed through words. Words, words and more words are used up, just to talk about silence, describe its extent, attribute it human qualities and construct it, so that it becomes a character, a presence and a discourse in the novel. But an attempt to understand or even trace the structural significance or political relevance of this silence, necessitates a brief outline of the novel.

Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* that won the Man Booker Prize of 1997, also went on to earn the status of the biggest-selling book by a non-expatriate Indian author, taking the literary world by storm. *The God of Small Things* is a tale of love and violence as it unfolds and acquires meaning in the eyes of seven-year-olds. It is a tale of transgression and





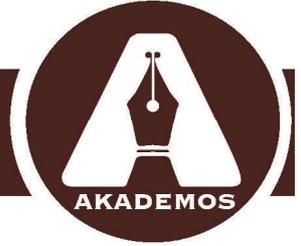
suffering, of trauma and reconciliation. Known for its complex story-telling and linguistic opulence, the novel is a moving, haunting read of a predictable world gone grossly wrong.

The novel centres around Ammu, single, emotionally bereft and socially marked as a woman, who married outside her community and then left her husband and returned to her father's house with her two children, who are regarded in many ways, as additional liabilities. Socially and culturally fixed because of her divorced status, Ammu's choices are limited and therefore when she seeks love, it culminates in multiple tragedies. Velutha, an untouchable Paravan, the man Ammu inadvertently falls in love with, belongs to the lowest rung of the societal ladder because of his caste, besides being a man who has been doing odd jobs for the family since his childhood and is a worker in the factory run by Ammu's brother. There is a possibility that Ammu develops feelings towards Velutha because, in him she may have seen a surrogate father for her fatherless children. It is also possible that she may have seen in him the archetypal lover sought by every woman, especially by a woman like her. Attractive, mellow, honest, well-meaning, kind – he is the embodiment of all that men in Ammu's family have never been. He does not embody the insensitive and misogynistic masculinity of her abusive father or her alcoholic and mercenary husband or her womanizing brother (each in their own way, disrespectful towards women).

Ammu's affair is ironically a huge scandal and can threaten the family's reputation unlike her brother Chacko's innumerable sexual escapades with the female workers of his pickle factory. The relationship is both doomed and short-lived. The extent of the deep-rooted fear in the collective unconscious of a conservative, caste-ridden society is palpable as Velutha is wrongly framed by the police to hush up the scandal and tortured to death, and Ammu ends up bearing yet another cross – she is now an infamous adulteress. The family disintegrates with Ammu eventually succumbing to cortisone, her boy Estha 'Returned' to his father and her girl Rahel packed off to a boarding school. Like tramps with loose ends, the twins continue to float like driftwood in different directions till Estha is 're-Returned' and Rahel comes seeking her twin to the ancestral Ayemenem house where they unite in silence and rewrite history.

### **The Paradox: Linguistic Excess and Castration**

*The God of Small Things*, when it was published, was loved and hated equally, lauded and denounced in equal measure. It got extreme responses: In his introduction to the book Arundhati Roy *The Novelist Extraordinary* R. K. Dhawan says how '...the chairperson of the



Booker Prize judging panel, Professor Gillian Beer of Cambridge University praised the book's use of language and said that the judges had been engrossed by it' complimenting the author for her 'extraordinary linguistic inventiveness' (12) while in one of the essays which features in the same book, Somdatta Mandal quotes several people from Meera Syal who attributed the success of the book to the 'whiff of the exotic' it brought, through a 'storyline based in lush Kerala', combined with 'Roy's dusky looks' and completing the 'ethnic package' (28), to literary figures like Amitav Ghosh congratulating Arundhati Roy for being the creator of 'the best thing that could have happened in the 50th year' (referring to India's 50 years of independence from British rule), at the same time expressing worry over 'English writing in India' fast becoming an 'artificial scene' and 'literature' slowly acquiring 'a sort of arrogance' (32), to a literary stalwart like Nayantara Sehgal not bothering to mince her words: 'There is too much artifice. All those capital letters and repetition. Often I could not understand whether we were in the past or in the present' (32).

The point in the novel when Mammachi, Ammu's caste-conscious Syrian Christian mother finds out about her daughter's affair with a menial, low-born servant and sends for Velutha to 'spew her blind venom, her crass, insufferable insults' threatening to 'have' him 'castrated' and 'killed', fails to elicit any kind of reaction from Velutha. All he can bring himself to say is 'We'll see about that' which is 'what' later helps build the case against Velutha as 'Baby Kochamma...enhanced and embroidered' it, 'into threats of murder and abduction for Inspector Mathew' (Roy 284). The tirade culminates in Mammachi spitting into Velutha's face which stuns him, making him turn and leave, the non-verbal act causing more repulsion in him than a fusillade of anathemas and expletives. Reacting to Mammachi's outburst in the same language would have been meaningless as a verbal counterattack or justification would never be able to sear or make a dent on Mammachi's 'impenetrable Touchable logic' (75). Velutha does not say anything because he cannot and also because he does not have a language. The socially, economically and historically marginalised and underprivileged have been tutored and conditioned for centuries to remain silent. Language, as it is wielded in the form of a political weapon, is biased and the possession of the privileged, the ones occupying the powerful and higher echelons in a highly stratified society.

In her book *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*, Deborah Cameron analyses the alienation of women from language observing that:

Silence is a symbol of oppression, while liberation is speaking out, making contact....It is an uneasy feeling that your words are not yours at all - they





have been somehow co-opted or taken away and turned against you...it is a powerful resource that the oppressor has appropriated, giving back only the shadow which women need to function in a patriarchal society. From this point of view, it is crucial for women to reclaim language. (8)

If this is true for one section of the discriminated against, it holds equally true for another, perhaps more discriminated against section, which occupies the lowest rung in the societal hierarchy in question – an untouchable Paravan. Mammachi's 'Touchable logic' indicates how prejudices and beliefs are deeply entrenched and secularly travel across religious boundaries from Hindus to Christians. As a Syrian Christian<sup>1</sup> Mammachi wields as much power to silence Velutha an untouchable, as she would have, if she had been an upper-caste Hindu. By threatening to have Velutha 'castrated', Mammachi is only reiterating that which generations of Paravans have been undergoing for centuries at the hands of the upper castes at a symbolic level. The fact that Velutha is unable to respond to her threat is evidence of his linguistic castration.

The ensuing passage describes Velutha's urge to cling to and reappropriate language and through it, whatever little that remains of the world which no one in his social position can lay claim to:

His mind, desperately craving, some kind of mooring, clung to details. It labelled each thing it encountered.

Gate, he thought as he walked out of the gate. *Gate. Road. Stones. Sky. Rain.*

Gate.

Road.

Stones.

Sky.

Rain. (285)

The graphological presentation of these words, first horizontally and then vertically alludes to the attempts made by Velutha's chaotic senses to register them one at a time, his insistence on relating to them, on laying claim to them and wanting to possess them through language. It is an anxious effort to reclaim language which will help rectify or change his voiceless state.

The desperate fight to stop one from losing oneself in silence, of losing one's consciousness by an all-engulfing darkness devoid of language, makes him delve in the recesses





of his memory and grope for acquired chunks of language learnt in his formative years like the poem about a train or the numerals:

He began to count. Something. Anything. *One two three four five six seven eight nine ten eleven twelve thirteen fourteen fifteen sixteen seventeen eighteen nineteen twenty twenty-one twenty-two twenty-three twenty-four twenty-five twenty-six twenty-seven twenty-eight twenty-nine... (285)*

Velutha's mind fails to go beyond artificially crafted chunks of language (a poem where the arrangement of words are not his doing but were learnt by him in childhood like the numerals that were again handed down to him) which portrays the always-already absence of real language which he experiences truly only now. He is desperately trying to seek words, feel them in his mouth and ascribe some meaning to them, hungering for words that will equip him in some way. He is actually at a point where language has deserted and disowned him - making him realise the finitude of his social position in addition to the finitude of his existence.

But all his frantic attempts to restore order through salvaging language are in vain as his grip on the world, familiar through language, slowly begins to slacken:

The machine drawing began to blur. The clear lines to smudge. The instructions no longer made sense. The road rose to meet him and the darkness grew dense....His mind, suddenly, impossibly old, floated out of his body and hovered high above him in the air, from where it jabbered useless warnings. (285)

There is a separateness between the mind and the body. The mind, dispossessed of the body has become incoherent which the body governed by senses no longer understands. This tragic and irreparable fissure that develops between the mind and the body is in the aftermath of the death of language for Velutha.

The futility of the persistent effort of speaking in an alien tongue is glaring in Velutha's subsequent interaction with Comrade Pillai (the local Communist Party leader) who he approaches for help and counsel. As he tries to relate to Pillai all that had transpired:

Velutha heard his own voice beat back at him as though it had hit a wall...he could hear himself slipping into incoherence. The man he was talking to was small and far away, behind a wall of glass...Once again Velutha heard himself say something which made no



difference to the man he spoke to. His own voice coiled around him like a snake...Velutha watched Comrade Pillai's body fade from the door. His disembodied, piping voice stayed on and sent out slogans...The voice went on. Sentences disaggregated into phrases. Words...And there it was again. Another religion turned against itself. Another edifice constructed by the human mind, decimated by human nature. (287)

The narrative does not mention the exact words uttered by Velutha to Comrade Pillai, again suggesting the absolute linguistic alienation he experiences.

The act of denying language to her characters on Roy's part and yet using language so powerfully to describe emotional and existential turmoil people experience when they have a consciousness but no power to articulate, implies that certain people who belong to certain categories have no voice and no language to talk about their situation. They are always spoken about, spoken to. There is a discourse surrounding them but this discourse dehumanises them. It denies them a subject status. Even when they have an opportunity to express or articulate, they are unable to find a voice or an appropriate language to do it. They are so irreversibly alienated from language that they prefer to withdraw in the realm of silence, opting out of the Symbolic order.

There is no recourse for the dispossessed, incapable of wielding language politically but to retreat in the shroud of silence. The death of language is elaborately played out and its utter vulnerability exposed as language readily lends itself to be manipulated and distorted by the user. The single line uttered by Velutha in response to Mammachi's outburst is enough to serve as a cue for Baby Kochamma who constructs an entire alternative narrative out of it for Inspector Mathew of the 'Touchable Kingdom'. Predictably, no one feels the need to confirm the authenticity of this narrative. In fact Baby Kochamma later goes on to construct more alternative narratives that will safeguard her interest and none of these narratives are ever challenged as it is convenient to keep them afloat for the sake of preserving and maintaining the existing order and arrangement of things. Fabricated and alternate versions of reality are a precondition to maintaining hegemonic institutions, in this case the caste hierarchy.

It is important, for Velutha's torture at the hands of the inspector to be justified, that he be villainised and presented as a threat. Baby Kochamma's narrative does just that. The merest words 'We'll see about that' (284) uttered by Velutha are more than adequate for a whole narrative to be spun; in fact the words are arbitrary and completely unnecessary. Even if they



hadn't been uttered, the narrative would still have been spun. It is really about the institutional ratification that words enjoy. It is not what is uttered so much as the source of the utterance, that is significant. Language is malleable and operates through power centres to validate narratives. In that sense then, there are only a select few who possess language.

### **Silence preferred to Fragile and Fatal, Vulnerable and Destructible Language**

A similar instance of the inherent susceptibility of language and its possessors' overwhelming urge to manoeuvre it according to their wishes and convenience manifests in the part when Estha is taken to the police station after Velutha is brutally beaten up, manipulated by the family members and by the police into looking at Velutha behind the bars and made to utter a single word 'Yes' that will confirm the latter's identity:

The lockup was pitch-dark. Estha could see nothing, but he could hear the sound of rasping, laboured breathing...Someone switched on the light. Bright. Blinding. Velutha appeared on the scummy, slippery floor. A mangled genie invoked by a modern lamp....The inspector asked his question. Estha's mouth said Yes. Childhood tiptoed out. Silence slid in like a bolt. Someone switched off the light and Velutha disappeared. (320)

A single word of affirmation by Estha becomes equivalent to testifying against Velutha because the narrative that will condemn Velutha is pre-constructed. The narrative of the novel does not give the reader access to the Inspector's question because it makes no difference. Like the earlier instance, the minimum will suffice for the purpose of fabrication and conviction.

One word takes away Estha's innocence locking away his childhood forever. If language could bring about the death of a loved one, and the death and separation of one from one's former self, then it is best that language should be relinquished. Estha's embracing of silence is not an active attack on language but a passive resistance to it, stemming from the horror of his helplessness and vulnerability in the face of language and the devastation it has led to.

Silence sedates Estha. It has a numbing effect on Estha and is in sharp contrast with the cacophony that language creates. It is likened in its grip to an octopus that has taken control over Estha: '...quietness...sent its stealthy, suckered tentacles...Estha...grew accustomed to the uneasy octopus that lived inside him and squirted its inky tranquilizer on his past' (12).



Estha immerses himself in silence and tries to lose himself in it or rather lose the memory of the past in silence. The presence of language for Estha is actually a torment. Only quietness defines the adult Estha. His one striking identity marker which he bears like a cross is his quietness. It is his silence: 'Estha would walk past, not rude, not polite. Just quiet' (14).

Estha's open rejection of language stems from the fear of the manipulative ability of the spoken word. In the spoken word he sees the power to destroy, to devastate and reconstruct alternative and manifold versions of the truth. Guilt and trauma of Velutha's death followed by loss of meaning on being yanked out of the world he knew so well and 'Returned' to his father, Estha's biggest defence against the world becomes his silence. Also, with all those he loved gone, there is no one left to communicate with. There is nothing left to communicate. Velutha's death and the ensuing tragedy result in the death of language for Estha.

Estha seeks refuge in a protective, womblike silence which can be seen as a retreat or a returning to a pre-Symbolic, foetal stage. Estha stops talking and no one actually bothers to notice the transformation since he is a commodity. His silence is not a resistance or a manifestation of his anger or resentment. It is his withdrawal from the world. It is his own bit of contribution to the project of turning him into a commodity which everyone has undertaken and overseen. He makes him invisible, retreating into the shadows, refuting the world's efforts to judge him, assess him or even have an opinion of him. He deprives the world of a perspective as commodities cannot be subjects. He is not a doer. Things happen to him. Therefore, he does not adopt the puppy. The puppy adopts him.

### **Silence for That Which Lies Beyond the Realm of Language**

Like two wandering tramps, the twins Rahel and Estha go on with their lives, till they meet again and unite in a way that defies all values and conventions that are coded in language and discourse. Language is inadequate to interpret or explain their union. Their world and the space which they come to occupy has to be beyond the reaches of the spoken/written, involuntarily acquired/consciously learnt word.

Rahel and Estha's eventual reunion, which is a reunion of 'Quietness and Emptiness' is a return to the realm of the Imaginary, a step to preserve and heal their battered beings and retreat into a pre-Symbolic stage to the stage where, 'They had known each other before Life began'





(327). The process of the two coming together involves the shedding or giving up of culturally constituted subjectivities full of limits and borders, their linguistically determined identities and 'sexed' bodies<sup>ii</sup>, their discursive beings which is why: There is very little anyone could say to clarify what happened next. Nothing that (in Mammachi's book) would separate Sex from Love. Or Needs from Feelings' (328).

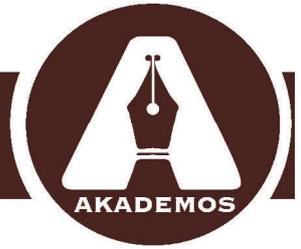
The admittance by the narrator to 'very little anyone could say to clarify' indicates the impossibility of a language to describe this coming together of the twins. There is no language to describe certain actions because they cannot be justified or explained through words which are pre-loaded with meaning. Language can only slot actions into binaries of good or bad, desirable or reprehensible, moral or immoral, or limit their act to the reductionist code of 'incest'. Thus some things are best left unspoken or unwritten as there is no language to enable or facilitate an organised accounting of what happens between Rahel and Estha. Seen thus, the union of Rahel and Estha becomes a metaphor for survival, having given up meaningless conformism and transcended an existence defined by nomenclature and labels.

The narrator resists from entering or even initiating a discourse to give agency to action and not words. Discourse will only try to monitor, and regularise and institutionalise and then hegemonize certain practices. The core truth of human identity, the shapes desire can take, cannot be channelled through the constricting tributaries of discourse which will try to outline them or assign a shape, a position and a structure to them. By rejecting the refuge of language, Roy is giving discourse the slip. By not giving a language to her characters, by denying them and the reader the right to a discourse, Roy actually succeeds in attacking hegemonic language and creating a counter-discourse of silence, thus subverting and turning the dominant discourse on its head.

### **Silence as a Construct**

Silence in the novel has a character of its own. It does not represent the static and motionless. It stands to symbolise an alternate if not very conspicuous world that is in a constant state of flux. The narrative of the novel abounds in dynamic verbs that animate and breathe live into inanimate entities to underpin the invisible and inconspicuous elements in existence, silently and incessantly at work. Things inanimate have a rhythm and a momentum of their own.





The damp in the air is almost like the ‘quietness’ in Estha’s mind which ‘arrived... stayed and spread’ (11) till it had taken over him and engulfed him completely, changing him forever. This quietness is described through dynamic verbs to foreground it as a gradually increasing presence than a mere state of being. Quietness becomes a phenomenon, incessantly at work. ‘Quietness’ is also personified and given a human or rather a demon-like form. It seems to be some kind of a monster mother which cradles Estha to ‘the rhythm of an ancient, foetal heartbeat’ at the same time sending its ‘stealthy, suckered tentacles’ into his skull, ‘dislodging old sentences, whisking them off the tip of his tongue’ (11-12). It nourishes and devours Estha at the same time, exercising creative and destructive powers simultaneously.

Silence sometimes sits between Baby Kochamma and Rahel ‘Noxious. Swollen’ (21) and sometimes ‘gathered its skirts and slid like Spiderwoman, up the slippery bathroom wall’ (93). After ‘dinner smells...’ were ‘...tired of waiting’, they ‘climbed off the curtains and drifted through the Sea Queen windows to dance the night away on the dinner-smelling sea’ (123).

Silence described thus, seems to have agency and influence. It is a backlash of words and is quick to take over once language has proven its ineptitude, exhausts itself or makes itself scarce.

## **Conclusion**

Sometimes through a studied silence, sometimes through an enforced silence and sometimes through a deliberate and pregnant silence, the narrator seems to be indicating that not every action can be accounted for, through words. Not every relationship can be contained in the constricting spaces of words. By not choosing to rationalize or validate and by taking recourse to silence, the narrator seems to be engaging in the same powerful discourse of silence turning a handicap into a weapon to contest the discursive laws and structures of power. Silence thus stands discursively produced, an archival repository of meaning and memory.

In their scathing attacks, literary stalwarts were relentless in criticizing the novel for its linguistic overindulgence and extravagant display of language which they thought were cloying distractions that were overdone and meddled with its flow. However, what makes *The God of Small Things* an unusual novel, and can account for its marked difference from other works in the genre and its continuing popularity, is the rendering of its story which, shorn of the manner, embedded in the perspective from which it unfolds, would be akin to the plot of a regular



formula novel. And despite the lavish language of the novel, silence plays a crucial role in conveying that, which is beyond the realm of language and cannot be contained or represented through a limited framework of words or their arrangement within the confines of language, however innovatively it is structured. The effusiveness of the novel stands in sharp contrast with the cryptic, threadbare ejaculations or the dull, repetitive exponents to describe the most horrifying and life-altering incidents. These are the precise points in the narrative where language is abandoned or abandons the users. The narrative style oscillating between linguistic restraint and linguistic exuberance becomes an artistic articulation of linguistic futility accentuated by an intentional problematization through language.

### Notes:

<sup>i</sup> A widespread belief (especially among the Syrian Christian Community) that Syrian Christians of Kerala were originally Brahmins who were converted to Christianity. Read PT, T. (2018, April 13). Outlook SocietyReportage. Retrieved November 18, 2019, from outlookindia.com: <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/bishop-demolishesthe-biggest-conversion-myth-of-kerala/310974> .

<sup>ii</sup> To have a better understanding of the notion of the “sexed” body, read Sarah Salih’s analysis of Judith Butler’s Bodies: “We create subjects all the time through our presumptions of them and locate them ideologically” (Salih 93).

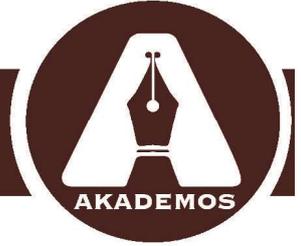
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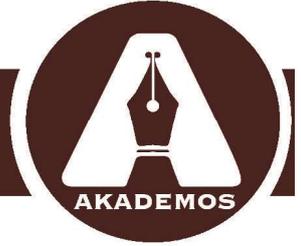
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