

A Study of Multiplicity of Oppression and Repressive Structures in *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract:

*Oppression has always been taken as linear term when it comes to study the life of people but it has multiple subjectivities which shows that women, men and children suffer not from a single oppression but multiple oppressions. It can be the result of marginalization and domination. Oppression has its different forms based not on gender, class and race separately but collectively; age, sex, disability, nationality and the status that one holds in the society also play a significant role. The status we enjoy, the discriminations we face, is due to our distinctive positions as established by society. The present research is an attempt to explore the multiple oppressions—based on class, race, gender and faith—faced by different communities in India as discussed in the novel *The God of Small Things* (1997) by Arundhati Roy. For this purpose, this research utilizes a theoretical framework encompassing works of Iris Young's *Five Faces of Oppression* (2004) and Louis Althusser's *ISA & RSA* (1971). This research is significant to explore the concept of multiple oppressions by applying it on a fictional work and it adds to the existing body of knowledge by exploring the multiplicity inherent in the nature of oppression in contemporary India by linking it to gender, class, race and belief systems.*

Key words: *Multiple oppressions, Marginalization, Domination, ISA, RSA*

Oppression is not a linear term but has multiple subjectivities, always pervasive and oppressive. Oppression has its different forms based not on gender, class and race separately rather all these forms overlap in multiple ways; age, sex, disability, nationality, belief systems, and marginalization one faces in society all play a significant role in the study of oppression. In this context, this paper aims to analyse the multiple oppressions in the novel *The God of Small*

Things by Arundhati Roy. As the author of both fiction and non-fiction writings, Roy is known as one of the most critical spokespersons of modern Indian society. She received the Man Booker Prize for her debut novel *The God of Small Things* in 1997. Her novel got much fame and was highly praised by hundreds of critics all over the world. *The God of Small Things* is not about an individual or a community but it is about everything. It is about caste exploitation, class differences, women and child abuse. It is a story of prohibited love between Ammu from a Syrian Christian family and Velutha from untouchable caste. It is about those people who have been suppressed or repressed by the society's upper class and pay heavy cost for their social status of being born as a woman or an untouchable. It is a saga of subalterns, who face inhuman treatment at the hands of privileged class. It is a story of grief where love results in unfulfillment, silence, loss and death at the end.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework employed for the present study involves Young's interpretation of oppression incorporated with Althusser's ISA and RSA. Frye (1983) has traced the etymology of the lexicon 'oppression' in the these words: "The root of the word "oppression" is the element of 'press.' The press of the crowd; pressed into military service; to press a pair of pants; printing press; press the button" (p. 11). Iris Young has discussed the nature of oppression in her work *Five Faces of Oppression* (2004). She described that oppression is often taken as the lack of justice. According to her:

Oppression in this sense is structural, rather than the result of few people's choice or policies. Its causes are embedded in un-questioned norms, habits, and symbols in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of the following those rules. (p. 39)

In this context, oppression does not occur when a tyrannical group shows its power over the powerless but it is the name of continuous practices. Oppression occurs due to number of social practices, norms and also different ideologies by institutions. People suffer when they have been divided into different social groups. Young explains the notion of oppression by dividing it into five faces that different groups of people face. The very first criterion of oppression as she described, is exploitation. Exploitation occurs, when one group of people has plenty of wealth

and resources while the other lacks all these things. Thus, people belonging to one group enjoy every luxury while people belonging to the other group suffer.

The second criterion of oppression is marginalization. In marginalization, a group of people is expelled from the community as they lack power, status and are utterly weak. Old people, children, women as well as blacks who have no status and no authority are marginals. They face oppression throughout their lives. The third criterion of oppression has been termed as powerlessness by Young. It depends on the skills or profession that one holds. The one who is expert in any kind of profession is powerful as compared to the one who lacks the skill or the expertise. People always respect those who have some kind of skills or profession even if they belong to some minority class.

The fourth criterion of oppression according to Young is cultural imperialism. According to Young (2004), cultural imperialism includes the universalization of a prevailing group's experience and culture, and its foundation as the standard. As an outcome, the prevailing social results, that is, the experiences, qualities, objectives, and accomplishments of these dominant groups become the norm. There are some institutions who construct their own ideologies in order to rule over the poor, the weak and the marginals. People are bound to follow all these ideologies at the cost of their lives. In this way they suffer, face oppression and are humiliated by the cultural imperialism. The final criterion of oppression that Young has described is 'violence'. The weak and the marginals have many fears in their lives as they are raped, beaten, killed or harassed by powerful group of people. So, these are different forms of oppression that people face in their lives.

When it comes to the notion of different Ideologies to study multiple oppressions, Louis Althusser's name is the most significant one. We have incorporated his notions of Ideological State Apparatuses and Repressive State Apparatuses respectively. In his work *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (1971), he says, there are some institutions that construct ideologies to be followed by other people of society. According to Althusser (1971) oppression is:

The task of the exploited (the proletarians), of the exploiters (the capitalist), of the exploiters' auxiliaries (the managers), or of the high priests of the ruling ideology (its functionaries') etc. (p. 133)

Ideological State Apparatuses are based on ideologies and are private in nature, for instance, family, politics, religion and culture while Repressive State Apparatuses function on repression and they are public in nature, for instance, government, army and police. In this context, the aim of this paper is to analyse and interpret the nature and occurrence of multiple oppressions in Roy's *The God of Small Things* utilizing Young's criteria of exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence, and also using Althusser's ISA and RSA.

Ammu and Velutha: Two Forms of Social Oppression

Oppression is considered the negation of human life. The dynamics of oppression are different; they could be due to internal or external forces. As mentioned earlier, this paper applies the work of Iris Young and Louis Althusser in order to study the nature of multiple oppressions by applying it on two specific characters—Ammu and Velutha. Ammu and Velutha suffer tremendously because both are weak and powerless. They both fall a prey to power politics and multi-layered nature of oppression.

Young's Five Faces of Oppression:

In order to study the nature of oppressions, we have used the work of Young. Iris Young (2004) has described five different criteria of oppression in order to explain the concept of oppression comprehensively. People often think oppression as negation of justice. She said that notion of oppression is more expansive and vast than to be limited to just a single criterion. One can find the multiple forms and events of oppression in the novel *The God of Small Things*. It throws light on diverse social issues like suffering of women, patriarchy, child abuse, political domination, social power and discriminating system of gender, class and caste in Indian society. It is the novel of marginalization, exploitation, violence and powerlessness. The leading characters in the novel are Ammu and Velutha who struggled for their rights, freedom, love and identity at the cost of their lives. They struggled for their survival and suffered a lot in the country like India,

where only powerful people have right to live in. There is a clear distinction between class and caste system which has been depicted in the novel. People have been divided in different groups which show a hierarchy of power. In the words of Young, it leads to oppression. As she says:

Oppression, on this view, is something that happens to people when they are classified in groups. Because others identify them as a group, they are excluded and despised. (p. 44)

Ammu and Velutha belong to that oppressed group and have been excluded because they have not enough power to match or compete with the system based upon multiple hierarchies of caste, class, and creed. Young has examined oppression according to following criteria:

1. Exploitation
2. Marginalization
3. Powerlessness
4. Cultural Imperialism
5. Violence

1. Exploitation

We have used these criteria for the analysis in order to reveal the oppressed existence of the protagonists in accordance to different events that happened in the novel. Young says that the phenomenon of exploitation according to Marx's theory is to discuss the existence of class structures in the dearth of authoritative class differences. Young (2004) puts this notion as:

Exploitation enacts a structural relation between social groups. Social rules about what work is, who does what for whom, how work is compensated, and the social process by which the results of work are appropriated operateto enact relations of power and inequality. (p. 46)

Young has borrowed the Marxist terms of have-not for the working class and haves for the capitalists. In this way, the owners exploit the working class by paying them less amount of money as happened with Velutha. Being a paravan, he was supposed to lick the feet of upper class society, but thanks to Mammachi (the capitalist), he was hired to work in her pickle factory.

Paravans—the untouchables—were not supposed to work with the touchables. Arundhati Roy has depicted the same condition of exploitation in her words in the novel as:

To keep the others happy, and since she knew that nobody else would hire him as a carpenter, Mammachi paid Velutha less than she would a Touchable carpenter but more than she would a Paravan. (p. 77)

If we look back at history, whenever working class raised voice for their rights or if they demanded to increase their wages they were exploited in various ways. In the novel, when the workers of the pickle factory demanded an increase in their wages, they were forced to shut their mouths.

Women face the same situation of exploitation when they are paid less or simply excluded from the right to property. According to Young:

Women's oppression consists not merely in an inequality of status, power, and wealth resulting from men's excluding them from privileged activities. The freedom, power, status and self-realization of men is possible precisely because women work for them. (p. 47)

Chacko, the brother of Ammu, was allowed to exploit women workers in his factory. Even Mammachi, her mother, was aware of her son's activities and she also arranged a separate door in his room to fulfill his 'man's needs'. As Roy depicts in the novel:

She was aware of his libertine relationships with the women in the factory, but had ceased to be hurt by them. When Baby Kochamma brought up the subject, Mammachi become tense and tight-lipped. 'He can't help having a Man's Needs,' she said primly. (p. 168)

On the other hand, his sister, Ammu, was not allowed to have an affair or romantic relationship with anyone. Ammu did work in factory just like her brother, but she was not expected to have the same status and property as her brother had. Roy puts this situation in the following words:

Though Ammu did as much work in the factory as Chacko, whenever he was dealing with food inspectors or sanitary engineers, he always referred to it as *my* factory, *my* pineapples, *my* pickles.(p. 57)

Being a woman, Ammu had to work equally as a man but was not given the same status as a man. Women have been used as a commodity and a property of men in history. It has been

deemed 'natural' and 'pre-ordained' for women to serve men or to provide sexual pleasure to them. As in the novel, when Ammu's husband reveals his desire to force Ammu to sleep with his boss in order to save his job, it exhibits how deep and insidious the nature of women's exploitation is. So women at every location/space—be it the domestic sphere or the professional space—have been exploited in order to maintain status, power and wealth for the sake of patriarchal capitalists. The next face of oppression that Young has described is marginalization. It is the second form of oppression.

2. Marginalization

After exploitation, marginalization is another form of oppression in which the marginalized which include the racially marked like the Blacks, East Indians, Africans and the people from underprivileged classes are excluded from the dominant group of people. A large number of people including men, women, children and old are expelled because of no status in the society. In the words of Young (2004):

Marginalization is perhaps the most dangerous form of oppression. A whole category of people is expelled from useful participation in social life and thus potentially subjected to severe material deprivation and even extermination. (p. 50)

In *The God of Small Things*, a large community of people has been depicted as marginalized. Ammu was expelled from the family because of her relationship with a man from a lower class. Even she was barred from standing with other family members at the funeral ceremony of her niece.

Though Ammu, Estha and Rahel were allowed to attend the funeral, they were made to stand separately, not with the rest of the family. Nobody would look at them. (p. 5)

Hence, because of being in a relationship with Velutha (the untouchable), all her connections with her family and society were severed. She was considered unworthy to live in the house only because she chose to exercise her freedom of choice just like any other man. Family was not willing to accommodate her as she had developed a relationship with a paravan—the untouchable. There is another instance in the novel which shows Ammu as marginalized. As a

divorcee after the failure of her first marriage, she had to face the intense marginalization from her family in particular, and from society in general.

She subscribed wholeheartedly to the commonly held view that a married daughter had no position in her parent's home. As for a divorced daughter, according to Baby Kochamma, she had no position at all. (p.45)

This is not just the case with women but men are also expelled from the society because of racially marked identities. Velutha suffered because he was black in color and from a lower class. His caste marked him as marginalized and he was deprived of all human rights. Being educated, skilled in carpentry, he was able to get a job in a factory but society was unable to accept him as an intelligent and educated person. At every step, he has to face the prejudice inherent in people's behavior. As Mammachi acknowledges his intelligence in the following words:

Apart from his carpentry skills, Velutha had a way with machines. Mammachi (with impenetrable Touchable logic) often said that if only he hadn't been a Paravan, he might have become an engineer. (p.75)

Ammu becomes marginalized due to her relationship with Velutha and even after death, her dead body was rejected to be buried by church.

The church refused to bury Ammu. On several counts. So Chacko hired a van to transport the body to the electrical crematorium. He had her wrapped in a dirty bed sheet and laid out on a stretcher. (p.162)

Being children of a divorcee, Estha and Rahel have to face the same kind of marginalization throughout their lives. They were mentally shattered because society did not accept them. Even their uncle, Chacko, considered them a big trouble for him. He was a selfish man who never considered them as a part of family. In the novel, we can see many people have become marginalized only because they were unable to cope with the socially constructed racial, gender, and class identities and statuses.

After marginalization, the third form of oppression is powerlessness.

3. Powerlessness

The third criterion which Young has given the name of powerlessness deals with authority and power. Powerlessness refers to the condition where one group of people are more skilled and professional than the other group. In other words, people who lack any kind of power are categorized in powerlessness. As she says:

The powerless are those who lack authority and power and even in this mediated sense, those over whom power is exercised without their exercising it; the powerless are situated so that they must take orders and rarely have right to give them. (p. 52)

In this sense, the working class who have to work for the capitalists are powerless, as they just produce goods and receive orders from their owners. In the words of Young, professionals are considered powerful in the way that they have knowledge and skills as compared to non professionals. In *The God of Small Things*, Chacko is powerful because he has learnt the knowledge of modern technology and has an Oxford degree which he has brought to Ayemenem while Ammu—his sister—is less educated, powerless and therefore, she faces discrimination. In this way, Chacko enjoys respect everywhere. In the case of Velutha, the opposite holds true as being a man of color, black and belonging to the lower caste. He is a professional man because of his skills and knowledge regarding the machines but he still faces humiliation everywhere because blacks/ untouchables are not considered or accepted as professionals. Marginalization, powerlessness and exploitation all refer to a single form of oppression that is power. These forms of oppression occur due to division in social labor which describe who works, his/her quantity of work and for whom he/she works.

The next criterion of oppression which Young (2004) has described is cultural imperialism, which has universal appeal in the sense that it is not limited to just power relations but it is the establishment of norms.

4. Cultural Imperialism

Young has also discussed cultural Imperialism as the cause of oppression. In her words, cultural Imperialism is:

To experience cultural imperialism means to experience how the dominant meanings of a society render the particular perspective of

one's own group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one's group and mark it out as the Other. (p. 54)

Culturally imbedded behaviors and customs are strong enough to demolish an innocent life only because it is the system and oppressed are not supposed to raise their voice against those stereotypes. *The God of Small Things* is purely based on the oppression of cultural imperialism. According to Young (2004), ideologies are constructed by powerful institutions. These ideologies decide who will suffer and who will enjoy the journey of life.

To put it in a simple way, that how cultural imperialism causes oppression; take the example of Rahel when she returns to Ayemenem after her divorce. The concept of divorce as it has been customized since very long time is taken in a terrible way by the people of society. After divorce, the divorcee is considered a sinner and even taken as marginalized. In the novel, when Comrade Pillai inquires about Rahel's life, his reaction was like:

'We're divorced, Rahel hoped to shock him into silence. 'Die-vorced?' His voice rose to such a high register that it cracked on the question mark. He even pronounced the word as though it were a form of death. (p. 130)

This is the cultural impact on the mind of people and it truly destroys one's life.

Chacko in the novel has been depicted as a scholar from Oxford and is an imperialist in the sense that he never misses a chance to exercise his power over oppressed. He belongs to a privileged class and caste and therefore, culturally accepted as powerful. He is a lecherous person and has illegitimate relationships with women of working class. Roy has depicted him as a pragmatic man. He is a clever, educated astute calculator who lives only for his own life. There are some norms of culture which are helpful for one group of people but are worse for other group at the same time. For instance, men are allowed to have many illegitimate relationships with other women but women are forbidden to develop a single relationship as happened in the novel. As compared to his sister Ammu, Chacko violates every boundary of norms and appears as a man of honour despite his involvement in the illegitimate relationships with other women. Ammu was strictly forced to end her love for Velutha because he was untouchable but on the other side there was no check and balance on Chacko, instead he was helped by his mother to fulfill his 'Man's Needs'. So, in this way, Chacko as a cultural imperialist enjoys lavishness of life making his

sister invisible or the 'Other' at the same time. The next criterion of oppression is violence as described by Young (2004). Violence refers to fear of people who are marginals and expelled from the society.

5. Violence

The last but not the least criterion of oppression that Young has described, is violence. Violence is the kind of fear that people of marginalized group face. In the words of Young:

Finally, many groups suffer the oppression of systematic violence. Members of some groups live with the knowledge that they must fear random, unprovoked attacks on persons or property, which have no motive but to damage, humiliate or destroy the person. (p. 56)

Acts of violence occur when there is unequal distribution of justice or one group feels superior to another. In a patriarchal society, male members enjoy a privileged centralized existence and female members obey and sacrifice at every step. As in the novel, Ammu and Mammachi have been depicted as the victims of violence. When Ammu refuses to go to her husband's boss in order to please him, her husband beats her brutally. This is how patriarchal hegemony asserts itself in a male dominant society. They consider women as puppets who are born to obey them. Even when women get some kind of talent men get furious as happened with Mammachi in the novel.

Every night he beat her with a brass flower vase. The beatings were not new. What was new was only the frequency with which they took place. One night Pappachi broke the bow of Mammachi's violin and threw it in the river. (pp. 47-48)

This is the limit of oppression that men cannot bear women's talent and create problems in women's success. They create hurdles in the work of women so they could be suppressed by men. Velutha also suffers throughout his life because he was from lower class. He was suppressed and oppressed by the powerful people of the society when he tried to raise his voice; he was supposed to be kicked out of the society. When Comrade Pillai gave suggestion to Chacko to send him anywhere else, he said:

They must launch their own struggle. They must overcome their fears. 'Of whom?' Chacko smiled. 'Me?' 'No, not you, my dear Comrade. Of centuries of oppression.' (p. 280)

It shows not only lower class has a fear to be suppressed but upper class of the society has also the fear to be overthrown by the struggle of lower class. They have fear if they help them with money or education, they would be disregarded by them. Their only task is to rule over the downtrodden. They make plans to oppress poor working class and always use them for their own advantages. They cannot be friends with them. In this way, multiple oppressions aggravate the suffering of women, men and children when they do not have enough power to resist it or re-define their lives. In order to analyse how different institutions are responsible to cause multiple oppressions, we have incorporated Althusser's idea of Ideological State Apparatuses and Repressive State Apparatuses which imply socially constructed ideologies.

Althusser's ISA & RSA

There are some institutions which are responsible for a person's oppression which Althusser named as Ideological State Apparatuses and Repressive State Apparatuses. Althusser (1971) said:

I shall call Ideological State Apparatuses a certain number of realities which present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions. (p. 143)

The different ideologies behind all these institutions play an important role in one's life. Individuals are bound to follow these ideologies, as for them, these are solely meant to be followed. There is a difference between two kinds of state apparatuses. According to Althusser (2014):

The Repressive State Apparatus 'functions' primarily on repression (physical or not). The Ideological State Apparatuses function primarily on ideology.(pp. 92-93)

Therefore, ideological and repressive state apparatuses play different roles according to the already constructed ideologies. In the novel, there are different institutions which function on pre-determined ideologies. For example: family, religion, politics, culture, government and police. These ideological and repressive state apparatuses function predominantly and massively. For instance, the role of family in the life of a woman causes oppression and similarly the other

institutions too. Women, as shown in the novel, live an oppressed life in a home which is headed by a male individual. As Ammu, her mother and Baby Kochamma and Rahel's lives are controlled by the head of the home. All these women have no authority to live their lives according to their wishes. They do whatever they are asked to do. Mammachi suffered because of her husband. She faced severe beatings and was stopped by her husband from playing violin. Her dream to be the best player of violin was shattered by the patriarchal violence.

Pappachi was a jealous man and his main concern was only to be dominant in the family. After the death of Pappachi, the control and authority was shifted to Chacko. Ammu suffered the same oppression because of family's restrictions on her life to live a life of freedom. So the institution of family has a big hand in heightening the oppression. Several issues occur due to family as joint family system is part of Indian culture. Another important institution is religion which makes one's life easy to live for some people and terrible for others. Due to religious restrictions, Baby Kochamma and Ammu were unable to marry outside of their belief of Syrian Christianity. They were forced to live within the boundaries of their belief and when they broke laws, family did not welcome them with open heart. Even after death, Ammu was refused by the Church to be buried under the boundary wall because she did not marry a Syrian Christian. So, the women in the novel suffer because of these socially constructed ideologies.

Syrian Christians believed themselves as the people with superior faith in the state of Kerala but the reality was against it. They used their religion as a stick to derive their benefits from the lower class. It would be better to say that they had mixed religion with politics in order to be more wealthy persons in state. So they had plenty of lands, factories and other luxuries of life. In reality, they were no descendants of their faith as they were 'an obstacle race'. The ideological state apparatuses such as the family and the church play a considerable part in the formation of different infrastructure of the society. As Althusser (1971) pointed out:

... the number of Ideological State Apparatuses is smaller and their individual types are different... Alongside the Church there was the family Ideological State Apparatus, which played a considerable part, incommensurable with its role in capitalist socialist formations. (pp. 150-151)

The God of Small Things is a big satire on the different political beliefs. These political beliefs divide the people into ruling class and the one who show resistance and fight for their rights. The ruling class use oily tongues in order to win the seats but the poor remain poor and are silenced by the ruling class. Politics has an upper hand in the lives of characters described in the novel. There is a hierarchy of power in the system that one individual is headed by the other. The oppressors resist with the help of processions but they always fail due to the hurdles created in the way of struggle by the ruling class as they never want to be defeated at the hands of working class. In Roy's work, Naxalites struggled for their rights in order to compete with the bourgeois but were exploited in return by the political game of power. Politics ideologies keep the balance of injustice between the class of bourgeois and proletariat. Chacko was a Marxist by heart but had exploited the powerless and needy women. Velutha who was a naxalite ended in despair because of his political beliefs. He was murdered by the police due to a little misunderstanding.

In this novel, repressive state apparatus is police which has been highlighted by Roy. Police is another institution which has its own ideology and imposes its rules to be followed by the public. The protectors of laws violate every law made for them by the government. The oppression that Velutha faced at the hands of police is a significant event which highlights the power of police to exploit the poor. The sketch of police has been drawn by Roy in a satirical way skillfully. It is how police 'cartoonplatoon' killed an innocent man who did nothing but was blamed to kidnap the kids. The allegations were simply false and planned by ruling class (Baby Kochamma) and police. In order to save the honor of family or to maintain the privilege of bourgeois class, they took an innocent life without any regret. This is the oppression that lower class of the society has to face at the hands of the upper class as did Velutha. In this way, people of the society are forced to follow these ideologies, ridiculous customs and hierarchical systems of power. It is written nowhere that a woman cannot marry a person out of cast or class but if she does then she is kicked out of the family as happened with Ammu in the novel. She was forced to follow the patriarchal system of the society and when she resisted, the laws were imposed on her by her family.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have analysed multiple oppressions by applying Young's concept of *Five Faces of Oppression*. One by one all the forms of oppression have been analysed by applying them on the novel. Ammu and Velutha have been exploited and marginalized because of their miserable conditions. Ammu suffers because of gender and belief system while Velutha suffers because of racism, political beliefs and religious ideology. Oppression in the form of cultural imperialism shows that how persons like Chacko from privileged class are the major cause of oppression for others because of their prestige in the society. Oppression in the form of violence shows how Ammu and her mother faced violence because of patriarchal structures. In the same way, Velutha faced violence because of his low status in the society. After analyzing forms of oppression, we have analysed different institutions by applying Althusser's concept of ISA and RSA based on constructed ideologies which cause multiple oppressions. Different characters in the novel are forced to follow these socially constructed ideologies and have no other way to escape. Therefore, these institutions are highly responsible for destroying the lives of different characters in the novel.

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