

TRESPASSING LANGUAGE: A STUDY OF TRANSGRESSIVE DISCOURSES IN *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*

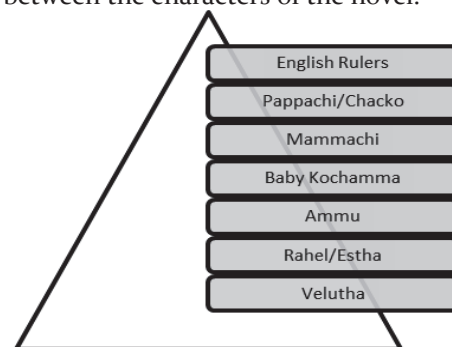
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Abstract: *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy mirrors the situation in Kerala in the late 60s and early 90s. The novel minutely captures the multi-layered structure of the then society-- how different orders become superimposed on each other and as a result multi-layered power play come into effect. The concept of transgression is expanded from individual to the cultural in terms of norms/laws and violation of the same. Each of the marginalized characters in this novel emerges out of the continuous crossing of boundaries as set by the dominant characters. Language is central to our existence and is the most important system of human expression. The careful study of language has also led social scientists to come up with social theories/concepts. Power has always been exercised through language and refuting the same led to linguistic transgression. This narrative is rich in various forms of language. I would like to broadly fit them in to three categories- verbal language, gestural language and silence. In most of the instances in the narrative, silence has been imposed on the marginalized/oppressed, whereas, gestural language and verbal language are the tools of subversion when the characters are relegated to the margins of the society- leading to traversing of the margins. The aim of the present paper is to look at how social transgression finds its manifestation in language and how the counter language interrogates the discourse of the powerful.

Keywords: The God Of Small Things, Linguistic Subversion, Power, Transgression.

Introduction: *The God of Small Things* (Roy, 1997) is an important work in the genre of Indian Writing in English not only because it brought home the first Booker but also because of its unusual narrative structure and the way the English language has been used. Set in Kerala, the novel mirrors the situation in the state in the late 60s and early 90s. The narrative moves back and forth between the two decades, thus, presenting a non-linear narrative from the perspective of Rahel. The novel revolves around the lives of the members of a Syrian Christian family of Ayemenem. Benaan John Ipe (pappachi) was the head of the family and the dominant member of the Ayemenem household. However, pappachi died before the turn of events and mammachi (Shoshamma Ipe) became the head of the family. The other members of the family were Baby Kochamma (Navomi Ipe), Chacko, Ammu, Sophie Mol, Margaret Kochamma, Rahel and Estha. Though mammachi was the head of the family, it was Chacko's decisions that counted because he was the son of the family and mammachi remained the ceremonial head of the family. Ammu and Chacko are siblings, both divorced, stayed in the Ayemenem household. However, Chacko being the son of the family had greater acceptance than the divorced daughter. Ammu's children, Rahel and Estha were also unwanted in the Ayemenem household as opposed to their half-British cousin Sophie Mol because they were the children of the daughter of the family and also because of its anglophilic bias. Margaret Kochamma is Chacko's divorced wife who comes to visit the family and Unmarried Baby Kochamma was the sister of pappachi and grand aunt of Rahel and

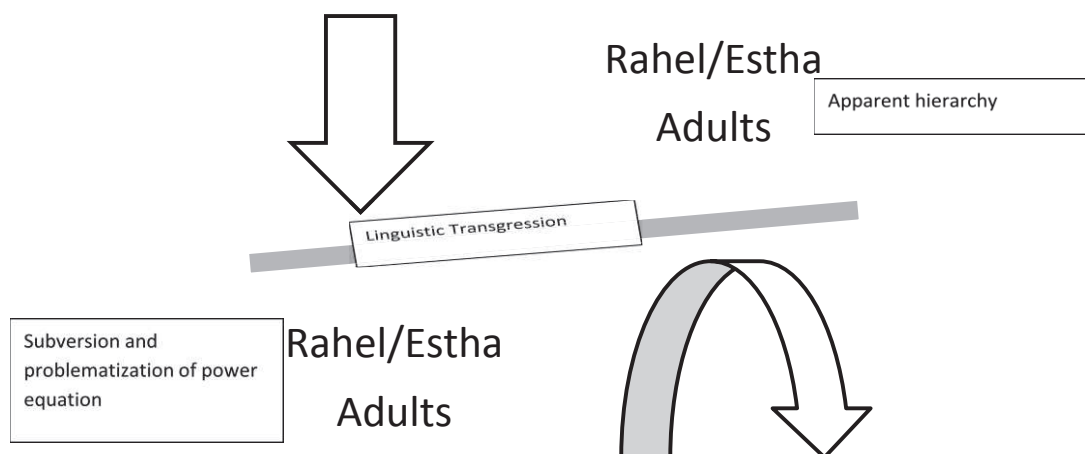
Estha. Velutha, a paravan is the untouchable carpenter who worked in the Ayemenem household. Velutha is an active member of the Marxist party and also falls in love with Ammu. This is more or less a brief sketch of the characters in the novel. Some of the characters are dominated by some of the characters, in turn they are again dominated by someone else, hence, the process of domination takes place in vicious cycles. The characters in the novel appear to fit into a unidirectional societal hierarchical structure but if we have a closer look we can see how the unidirectional power structure is rendered multidirectional as the story unfolds which we will deal with in the latter half of this paper. Let us have a look at the apparent hierarchical structure that exists between the characters of the novel.



Power is the key element in discussions of discourse (Mills, 1997). Earlier attempts of 'critical linguistics' were based on a static view of power relations where language texts were representative of existing power relations (Fairclough, 1992). The power politics of discourse is a major theme in *The God of Small Things* (Roy, 1997). The various factors that shape the power dynamics in the novel are age, caste, gender,

linguistic identity, ethnicity, political identity and economic status. Each of the characters in the novel conforms to the social norms based on these factors. We also see in the text how the societal norms are violated by the characters when they subvert by defying the power positions as entitled to these factors. As seen from the above diagram, Rahel and Estha are marginalized on the basis of age and also because they are born out of inter-religion marriage, raised by a single divorced mother in the class-ridden, patriarchal, anglophilic, Syrian Christian society. Velutha is marginalized on the basis of caste and Ammu on the basis of gender. However, in the relationship between Ammu and Velutha, caste takes the upper hand. Velutha is brutally punished for the transgressive act of loving Ammu. Ammu is also punished, however, the act of transgression brings out two different kinds of punishment for Ammu and Velutha. In the relationship of Rahel/Estha and the adults, the factor of age comes into play. Though the diagram above brings to the fore the apparent unidirectional hierarchical power structure, a careful study of the text shows how the relationship between the powerful and the one controlled is problematized. This violation of hierarchy and the interrogation of power positions is covertly damaging to the system. Transgression is the crossing of boundaries or limit set by the more powerful in the society. A limit is a narrow zone of line that needs to be crossed in an act of transgression (Foucault, 1977). Transgression and limit depend on each other and share a complex relationship. A limit could not exist if it was absolutely uncrossable and similarly, transgression would be pointless if there was no limit that existed. The concept of transgression is expanded from the individual to the cultural in terms of limits set by the society and the violation of the same. Each of the characters in the novel emerges out of continuous crossing of limits set by the society or

the more powerful. The possible outcome of transgression is subversion that transforms established societal norms. The chosen text is replete with various forms of transgression. With the act of transgression, the apparent hierarchical power structure is subverted. The apparent dominant characters are also dominated in some way or the other. For example, if we look at the relationship between Ammu and Velutha, Ammu belongs to the upper caste and Velutha belongs to the lower caste, on the other hand, Ammu belongs to the marginalized on the basis of gender. However, caste takes the upper hand in determining the relationship between the two characters. Ammu, after a failed marriage comes back unwanted to the Ayemenem household and falls in love with Velutha who belongs to the lower caste which can almost be considered a forbidden act or an act of transgression but on the other hand, Chacko's union with the lower caste women on similar lines is not considered an act of transgression because the factor of gender comes into play where Chacko being male was entitled to the bodies of those women because we see the other members of the family being supportive of and considering it to be a norm. While Ammu's union with Velutha was termed as 'rape' later in the novel, Chacko's union with the lower caste women were considered natural 'men's needs'. Therefore, it can be argued that while Chacko conforms to the norm, Ammu transgresses. This act of sexual transgression by Ammu actually problematizes the power equation between her and Chacko. On the other hand, the linguistic transgression of Rahel and Estha problematizes the power equation between the adults and them. Therefore, it is seen that multiple factors are responsible in overthrowing the norms of the society and thus, the unidirectional hierarchical power play is a myth because there are layers of subversion within it.



The above is a diagrammatic representation of how the apparent hierarchical relationship between Rahel/Estha and the Adults is subverted because of linguistic transgression. Rahel and Estha are not allowed to speak in Malayalam which is their mother tongue and if 'caught', a small fine would be deducted from their pocket money and would be made to write 'I will always speak in English. I will always speak in English.' a hundred times each. As a response, they read backwards, break up phrases and join syllables. There is apparent linguistic subversion in this particular instance but again, there are subversions that take place that is not so apparent. We will discuss all the types of subversion in the subsequent sections of this paper.

As discussed earlier, we see that subversion is being depicted at times through the linguistic behavior of the character directly or through the language of the narrative itself. It is to be noted that discourse is not only the site for contestation of power, it is the type of 'power which is to be seized' (Foucault, 1970). We see how in the narrative, the character of Velutha is silenced throughout the novel apart from the instances where we see him participating in a political march and his union with Ammu. Therefore, it can be argued that the linguistic behaviors of the characters are not only limited to verbal language only, rather, through the absence of verbal language and gestures as well. Thus, language acts as a lens through which the narrative can be looked at. Power has always been exercised through language and refuting the same leads to linguistic transgression. This particular narrative is rich in various forms of language. I would broadly like to fit them into three categories- verbal language, gestural language and silence. In most of the instances in the narrative, silence has been imposed on the marginalized or the oppressed, whereas, gestural language and verbal language are tools of subversion when the characters are relegated to the margins of the society, leading to traversing the margins.

Language of Silence: The character of Velutha is silenced throughout the novel. We never for a single instance come across the verbal voice of Velutha. However, he is seen participating in a political procession and also in the instance where he defies the love laws by loving Ammu. Belonging to the lowest rung of the socio-economic ladder, Velutha is not assigned any kind of verbal language by Roy in the text. He is seen interacting with the children Rahel and Estha and playing with them, though the readers do not come across the verbal voice of Velutha. He doesn't even respond to Rahel when she calls out to him from the car while he is seen participating in the political march. This could be out of embarrassment to be associated with the bourgeoisie class. This particular instance of 'silence'

could be interpreted as a form of power. In his union with Ammu, we also do not come across any instance of the verbal voice of Velutha. He is also brutally punished by the police for the false accusations of killing Sophie Mol and raping Ammu. In the process of the punishment, Velutha is killed, thus, devoicing him forever.

Baby Kochamma also takes refuge in the convincing power of language to save herself from lodging a false FIR against Velutha. She manipulates and convinces both Rahel and Estha to blame Velutha for the entire misfortune that came upon the family in order to save Ammu. In the Kottayam police station, after having a conversation with the inspector, Baby Kochamma separately talks to both Rahel and Estha and convinces them to say whatever she instills in their minds. She chooses Estha among the two because he is more 'practical'. Estha's voice is here of Baby Kochamma's and not his own voice and this is how the voice of the children is suppressed. After the incident at the police station, Estha stopped talking completely and was projected into lifelong quietness. He stopped interacting with people altogether. Whenever, Comrade Pillai would call out to him, "Estha would walk past, not rude, not polite. Just quiet" or for that matter when he went out to the market, he never haggled with the shopkeepers.

Verbal Language: The instances of the language of subversion are in abundance in the text. The children in the novel, namely, Rahel and Estha are forced to speak in English. As a result, they read backwards STOP as POTS and BE INDIAN BUY INDIAN as NAIDINI YUB NAIDINI EB, broke up phrases and joined syllables stopped it became stopitted, Barn Owl became Bar Nowl and they were very cautious about their Prer NUN sea ayshun. They look up dictionaries to find out meanings, get re-directed to finding meanings of other unknown words and finding multiple meanings for particular words in different contexts. Their experiment with the English language also proves that they have a control over the foreign tongue almost like a native, which is different from the rest of the family. The language creates a world for Estha and Rahel which is separate, which according to Miss Mitten is 'satanic'. Though all the characters speak the same language, the children have a different discourse of their own which is different from the adults.

The other instance of subversive language is that of between Baby Kochamma and Father Mulligan. Baby Kochamma fell in love with Father Mulligan and looked for opportunity to interact with him. First she tried to seduce him through her small acts of charity and then she would come up with Biblical doubts to find a chance to talk to Father Mulligan. Later in life when Baby Kochamma joined the convent in Madras, she grew restless and unhappy there and took refuge

in the fictional character of Koh-i-noor to communicate her troubles to her father. She wrote puzzling letters to her father and the letters could be interpreted as instances of subversive language because she wasn't allowed to write direct letters about her plight at the convent and thus resurrected the character of Koh-i-noor.

Gestural Language: Bourdieu (1991) argued that language is not only a means of communication but also a medium of power. His theory focused on concept like symbolic capital as opposed to Marxian concept of economic capital. In a society where power exists in every nook and corner, it turns out to be a vicious circle that we have already discussed. However, Bourdieu argues that we have to be able to discover it in places where we do not expect it to be present. It is that 'invisible' power which is exercised with the involvement of both the powerful and powerless who are often not aware that they are subject to symbolic power. The chosen text is replete with instances of 'symbolic power' which are mostly gestures and not instances of verbal language that problematizes the relationship between the powerful and powerless. Certain gestures of Velutha frightened his father, Vellya Paapen. He wasn't even sure as to what actually scared him. "It was nothing that he had said. Or done. It was not *what* he said, but the *way* he said it. Not *what* he did, but the *way* he did it".

Certain gestures like the way he walked or held his head intimidated his father. Later came his direct act of transgression of loving Ammu.

Larry McCaslin, Rahel's husband was offended by the look in her eyes. Whenever they made love, Rahel's eyes behaved as if they belonged to someone else. Larry McCaslin wasn't sure about what the look meant and placed it somewhere between indifference and despair. Therefore, the look in Rahel's eyes intimidated her husband which later culminated into the incestuous encounter between Rahel and Estha.

It is therefore, clear from the above discussion that social transgression is manifested through language. The character of Velutha and Estha were devoiced because of the power politics of discourse, Similarly, Rahel and Estha and Baby Kochamma subverted the rules of the English language in their process of transgression and finally Velutha and Rahel subverted by means of gestural language. The counter language that is created, interrogates the discourse of the powerful. This is how language is trespassed and transgressive discourses are formed. As already discussed earlier the various forms of language-silence, gestural and verbal constitute Language as a whole. Transgression is manifested in more ways than one and all of it finds its manifestation in the several discourses that constitute language.

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