



Voices Silenced: Representing Children as Subalterns in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

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Abstract

Postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak initiated the concept of 'subaltern'. The term Subaltern encompasses individuals who are marginalized, oppressed and deprived. Racism and gender are the underlying causes of oppression faced by people. Children are the most miserable group in the subaltern category. The pain that children experience often goes unnoticed. They are compelled to be silenced and unable to speak. The purpose of this paper is to examine how children are depicted as inferior in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. In both novels, children are confronted with physical and emotional abuse from the person who is supposed to love them. It causes trauma in their mind that impacts their entire life. Through the character portrayal of Estha and Rahel in *The God of Small Things* and Kambili and Jaja in *Purple Hibiscus*, Roy and Adichie shed light on major social issue that is abusing and marginalising children. Children are future leaders and their childhood needs to be peaceful and harmonious to shape them into better humans. The scars left by childhood pain last for a long time, forever. The purpose of this comparative study is to establish a safe setting for children.

Keywords: Subaltern, Marginalization, Trauma, Children

Subaltern literature concentrates on the experiences, struggles and perspectives of individuals who are oppressed. Subaltern studies experts strive to recover the voices of oppressed individuals and also aim to alter the power dynamics, which is the primary cause of oppression. Their goal was to create an identity for the people who are marginalized.

Subaltern literature has a strong connection to postcolonial literature. Postcolonial subaltern texts address issues that are faced due to racism, gender and caste. Subaltern literature highlights the division that exists in society by focusing on these issues. According to Guha, the concept of subaltern is an attempt to study, “the history, the politics, the economics and sociology of Subalternity” (39). They also show the oppressed people’s resilience to overcome the oppression.

The primary objective of subaltern literature is to recover lost narratives and reclaim identities. This genre presents history from the perspective of marginalized communities, differentiating it from other forms of literature. Subaltern literature serves as a potent vehicle for fostering social change, engaging in more profound discussions regarding justice and equality. Notable theorists in the field of subaltern studies include Ranajit Guha, Chakravorty Spivak, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Partha Chatterjee and Antonio Gramsci.

Children hold a distinctive position within subaltern literature. Because they face dual form of oppression, because of their age and lack of care. Their voices are unheard due to traditional family constructions and existing social customs. These vulnerable children face physical, emotional and mental abuse. They also become isolated because of misery, family dynamics, offensive household and social anxiety.

In such scenario, Subaltern literature plays an important role in highlighting the issues faced by children. This literature sheds light on their struggles, pain, persistence, courage and also portrays how they overcome the oppression. Mostly in the society, the children are invisible and their struggles are ignored. The society fails to realise the fact that the children are future leaders. Subaltern literature, tries to create positive and healthy environment to children.

According to Carlos Pessoa, subalternity is “the site at which the socially exterior elements reside within a given social formation” (489). In subaltern novels, children are not minor characters, but there are the active participants.

Arundhati Roy is one of the famous Indian novelists. Her works are mostly creating empowerment among the readers. Through her novels, she expresses her deep love for subaltern women and children. As a subaltern writer, she mirrors the numerable challenges faced by children and also exhibits how it destroys their entire future. Through her narration, she makes the readers to experience the pains faced by children. Roy became popular, after publishing her debut novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997). She won the prestigious Booker Prize for this remarkable work. The setting of the novel is Kerala. It says the story of Estha and Rahel from their childhood to adulthood. The main themes of the novels are caste system, family, forbidden love, loss, social norms and mutability.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a Nigerian novelist, Playwright and short story writer. In her novels she mainly focuses on feminism, racism, diaspora issues and identity crisis. In her debut novel *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), she narrates the story of Kambili and Jaja who are living in the abusive environment. Their father always abuses them verbally and emotionally. Still, they are forced to love the abusers. Through her compelling narration, Adichie describes the unnoticed struggles faced by children.

Both Roy and Adichie, tries to bring out the silent struggles faced by children. In their novels children faced abuses both inside the family and outside the family. The scars of childhood abuses not simply left out, but it creates long lasting effects in their life. Children who are living in negative environment likely to have depression and psychological issues. It is stated that, "Our children and grandchildren are shaped by the genes they inherit from us, but new research is revealing that experiences of hardship or violence can leave their mark too" (Henriques). Roy and Adichie try to stress the fact that the children should live in a peaceful, harmonious and fearless atmosphere. Then only they can become a successful person in the future. These writers portray children as symbol of virtue and grief.

In the beginning of *The God of Small Things*, Rahel is coming from America to Ayemenem. She and her brother Rahel cannot live an ordinary life, because of their past painful experiences. Then the novel portrays the past incidents as flashback. The family members considered the children as unwanted visitors. Even their mother Ammu is always angry with them. So, in the house each and every second is very painful for them. They are marginalized and humiliated, for being the children of divorce parents.

The children become the victim of tragic experiences of loss, violence, negligence and embarrassment. They faced physical abuse both in their father's house and in their mother's house. They always witnessed their parents fighting. They didn't get the love and care which they very much in need. They always longed for love. The house atmosphere is very painful for them and always they are in fear.

In *Purple Hibiscus* novel, Kambili and Jaja's father ruled the house like a dictator. He expected that everything should be in order. If his expectations are not fulfilled, he will punish them severely. Even the children witness, father abusing their mother. Through the portrayal of their harrowing experiences, Adichie similarly addresses the theme of lost innocence. Their childhood freedom has been stripped away and they are subject to constant scrutiny. In this repressive environment, their ability to express their thoughts and opinions is severely curtailed. Even the abuse affects the children's school performance.

In a stifling atmosphere, the children seek comfort and resilience in one another. Their profound connection is illustrated through their unspoken communication and mutual understanding. Adichie depicts these children as emblematic of the prevailing social structure. Their emotional ties enable them to endure the painful surroundings, forged through shared suffering and reciprocal affection. Through these young characters, Adichie critiques the societal framework that oppresses them.

Both novels intricately weave the theme of child abuse throughout the narrative. Emotional abuse frequently leaves enduring scars on children's lives and influences their futures. In *The God of Small Things*, the characters Estha and Rahel confront emotional neglect and severe criticism from their family, particularly from Baby Kochamma. Once she scolds them by saying, "They're sly. They're uncouth. Deceitful. They're growing wild" (Roy 155). She exploits the children for her own purposes, instilling a sense of guilt in them and causing them to feel unwanted.

Ammu's relationship with Velutha significantly contributes to the emotional distress experienced by the children. Ammu's neglect causes the children to endure suffering, rendering them unable to attain the emotional support they require. Once Ammu says that "If it wasn't for you I wouldn't be here! ... I would have been free! I should have dumped you in an orphanage

the day you were born! You're the milestones around my neck!" (Roy 258). The children are perpetually in a state of emotional upheaval, yearning for love while facing constant rejection. In Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, a prominent form of emotional abuse involves silencing the children. The ongoing criticism and lofty expectations exerted by Eugene lead to emotional turmoil, fear and anxiety. Kambili and Jaja are forbidden from speaking, expressing their feelings or demonstrating defiance. Additionally, Eugene's physical abuse toward his wife Beatrice profoundly impacts the children, who live in a constant state of fear within this toxic environment. Kambili explains, "I went upstairs then and sat staring at my text book. The black type blurred, the letters swimming into one another, and then changed to a bright red, the red of fresh blood. The blood was watery, flowing from Mama, flowing from my eyes (Adichie 35). The children's apprehension regarding their abusive father is intertwined with their diminished self-esteem. Due to their father's abusive conduct, the children struggle to establish their identities, leading to feelings of self-doubt and worthlessness. The children perceived themselves as unworthy of affection. The abuse from their father left them feeling isolated and bewildered.

Physical abuse can severely hinder a child's overall development. When a child is punished, even for minor infractions, it can have lasting effects on their personal, emotional and psychological well-being. Such acts of physical abuse foster an atmosphere of fear and anxiety, which may ultimately result in tension, depression, isolation, and a diminished sense of trust in caregivers. Kambili says that "Fear. I was familiar with fear, yet each time I felt it" (Adichie 196). Additionally, physical abuse can adversely impact children's social behaviors and academic achievements.

In *The God of Small Things*, the physical abuse inflicted by Uncle Chacko on the Twins exemplifies toxic familial dynamics. Following the death of Sophie Mol, Estha, who was already emotionally fragile and burdened, faced further beating and blame from Chacko regarding the tragedy. He shouts at them as "Get out of my house before I break every bone in your body!" (Roy 233). Chacko directed his frustrations and inability to process his emotions onto the vulnerable Estha, using physical abuse as a means of expressing his anger. This abuse had a devastating effect on Estha.

In *Purple Hibiscus*, the father of Kambili and Jaja, Eugene, inflicts physical abuse upon them in an effort to maintain the family's honor. He employs harsh punishments as a means of discipline. On one occasion, Eugene violently beats Kambili simply for drinking tea at their aunt's house. Kambili expresses with pain that "he poured the hot water onto my feet, slowly, as if he were conducting an experiment and wanted to see what would happen" (Adichie 194). Additionally, he severely assaults Jaja, resulting in the deformation of his finger. The physical abuse occurs behind closed doors, compelling the children to accept it as a normal aspect of their lives. In Jaja's situation, this maltreatment drives him to rebel against his father. Psychological abuse often leads to profound fear and diminished self-esteem. In *The God of Small Things*, a notable example of psychological abuse is Ammu's abandonment of her children, as she is unable to care for them due to her own trauma. This neglect fosters a deep sense of isolation in the children. Whatever happen in the house, they blame the children. Estha's unpleasant experience with Orangedrink Lemondrink man creates a mental tension between him. Even his mother Ammu fails to notice this issue. This incident psychologically affects him a lot. The author explains, "As Estha stirred the thick jam he thought Two Thoughts ... (a) *Anything can happen to Anyone* and (b) *It's best to be prepared*" (Roy 201-02). Ammu's abusive words make the children to love her less.

In *Purple Hibiscus*, the children face many psychological issues due to the trauma they face in the house. Because of that, they rarely speak and avoid talking to others. Kambili describes, "I cleared my throat, willed the words to come. I knew them, thought them. But they would not come. The sweat was warm and wet under my arms" (Adichie 48). The children always prefer isolation. They don't talk with their classmates in school. Jaja and Kambili, within themselves speak only through their eyes. Sometimes, when they try to speak, the words won't come, out of fear. Kambili portrays, "My cousins laughed, Amaka glanced at Jaja and me, perhaps wondering why we did not laugh, too" (Adichie 82).

In both novels, the children are forced to love their abuser. It creates mental tension and psychological trauma. In *The God of Small Things*, the children feel happy, when they are together. They get comfort in each other's presence. They recalled small things in their life and found pleasure in it. In *Purple Hibiscus*, the children witness father abusing their mother. But they can't do anything against him. This made them guilty and sad. This guilt makes Jaja to

take responsibility for his father's death. Kambili narrates, "The Policemen came a few hours later ... Jaja did not wait for their questions; he told them he had used rat poison, that he put it in Papa's tea" (Adichie 291).

The negative effects of domestic violence, leave a long-lasting mark in children's life. Violence produces unnecessary tension in children's mind and it affect their overall growth. The trauma experienced in childhood continues to impact them throughout their adult lives. Childhood trauma can leave enduring scars on children. In Roy's *The God of Small Things*, even in their young age, the children cannot move away from the pains of the past. Estha isolates himself from the society and Rahel faces issues in her marriage. Thus, both of them face struggles in maintaining relationship with others. They become silent and emotionless. They always feel rejected. At the end, they come to realization that only they both can love and understand each other. According to the novel, "They had known each other before Life began" (Roy 329).

In common children considers their father as their role model and want to follow his steps. But in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, the children's father is an abuser. Beatrice (mother) faces physical and mental abuse from her husband. At last, she poisoned her husband. But his death, doesn't make any changes in their life. After that she suffers from mental illness. Jaja spends his time in prison. Kambili is forced to take the family responsibility at the young age. Thus, effects of domestic violence completely destroy their life. Eugene, the children's father spoils the children's life before and after his death. They are silenced again. Kambili recounts, "There is still so much that we do not say with our voices, that we do not turn into words" (Adichie 297).

Both Roy and Adichie, through their narration brings out the difficulties faced by children. Positive environment is very much needed for the holistic growth of a children. Both writers stress the fact that children should be taken with care and love. If they fail to get it, it leads to emotional turmoil. Domestic violence should be avoided in order to give bright future for the children. By depicting the sufferings faced by voiceless children, this paper brings awareness towards protecting them.

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