



## The conflict of race in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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### Abstract

The Race is defined as a family, tribe, people or, nation belonging to the same stock or a class or kind of people unified by shared interests, habits, or characteristics. In the history it has become the major international issue in the post-colonial world, particularly in relation to cultural study. The cultural history of the world proves that there has been a remarkable discrimination of the human race based on the skin, color, caste, haves and have-nots, as being the global novel. The God of Small Things faithfully represents this sensitive issues prevailing in post-colonial India through its characters. The God of Small Things is a postcolonial novel which reveals the impact of colonization on India and some states of India that emerges in the global scenario, proceeding to aftermath of colonization. The novel mainly focuses on the socio-political life as well as the Christian attitudes and snobbishness and their impact on conventional and innocent Indians or common citizens, particularly the marginalized classes which have been suppressed throughout the history. The Colonial attitudes remained in the undercurrent of so called upper classes and upper castes in India, though the colonizers left it for a long period ago, the trauma of that British race and their colonial attitudes play a remarkable role in shaping the Indian social hierarchy. Of which Arundhati Roy represents here in the novel.

**Keywords:** race, colonization, colonial attitudes, culture

### Introduction

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the neglected class of Indian society. Thus I find it significant to notice the racial issues in the novel.

In the novel she speaks of the subjugation, ignorance and marginalization of the colonized people living in Ayemenem, a small town, in Kerala. Talking of her book and its success with the reporter of the Frontline she uses a metaphor "the heart of Darkness", referring the novel of Joseph Conrad and says, "in Ayemenem, in the heart of darkness, I talk not about the white men, but about the darkness, about what the darkness in about" <sup>1</sup>(Frontline, August 8, 1997). The darkness here means the untold miseries and age old sufferings of the poor, parvarans or untouchables as part of Indian history, whose tale is unsung, unhonoured, in any part of the country except the Bhakti Movement of Basavanna and other Sharanas of 12<sup>th</sup> Century in Karnataka during the reign of Bijjala of Kalyana, which is known as "Kalyana Kranti" (The Revolution of Kalyana).

The white skin represents beauty and purity. So the history, language, culture and beliefs of the white colonizers are forcefully imposed on the colonized and considered superior to the local indigenous culture. In the same away with the time the superior races in India imposed their restriction on the less privileged classes, untouchables and downtrodden, and restricted their life only to work and obey and not to speak of authority. In this way due to the impact of Vedas, Puranas in India the upper class people established their dominance over the marginalized class; it is also in one on the other way colonization of lower caste society by the upper caste in the historical context.

While talking of the title of the novel, the author says, "To me the god of small things is the inversion of God, God's a big

thing and God's is in control of small things... whether it's the way the children see things or whether it's the insect life in the book, of the fish or the stars-there is a not accepting of what we think of as adults boundaries. This small activity that goes on is the under life of the book. All sorts of boundaries are transgressed upon. At the end of the first chapter I say little events and ordinary things are just smashed....<sup>2</sup>. ( Roy's Interview with Linden) Thus, the title implies a polarity between two Gods and what they stand for. Generally God is taken to be big, powerful and dominating. In addition to the small things mentioned by Arundhati Roy, Velutha and Ammu are rendered small, weak and helpless, who are exposed to the operation of Love laws. As victims of caste and gender bias, they are smashed by relentless social Machine. Velutha symbolizes all the small things which are transgressed upon. He is The God of Loss, The God of Small Things.

The novel represents certain postcolonial issues in the form of racial conflict that come up in the caste based society. The novel mirrors the conflict of racial discrimination in the form of Caste, snobbishness, particularly in Kerala in between the Syrian Christians and Parvans or untouchables on one hand and the marginalized female class on the other hand. "The novel is all about atrocities against the small things- childhood and youth, women, young and old and the untouchables. <sup>3</sup>. (Bhatt 44). The power politics and structure of Mammachi, Baby Kochamma and Mathews, K N. M Pillai makes Ammu, Velutha, Rahel and Estha, vulnerable and marginalized. They become victims of the caste system, gender-based inequality, and inflexible law enforcement. Pappachi, the grandfather, adapts to the ways of the Occident by driving a Plymouth and smoking a cigar and possesses all the accoutrements of the British, yet he still believes in the subjugation of women and resents his wife's business and he continues to beat his wife and children. When he heard the news that Mr. Hollick the landlord of the tea-estate, and employer of Ammu's husband demanded Ammu for sexual act to help her husband in the service matter, he rejects it with saying "an Englishman, any Englishman, would covet another man's wife.. Not at all" (Roy-42). He embodied in him the trauma of the colonizer and displays it on the family members until he dies. He adapts the ways of the British, driving the Plymouth and smoking a cigarette and controlling the family with the voice of authority. In many cases he resembles the colonizer. In the same way the boss of Ammu's husband who is the British landlord exploit the workers sexually and demands Ammu to fulfill the limitations of her husband in the service matters, he tells him "You're a very lucky man, you know, wonderful family, beautiful children, such an attractive wife..." "...Baba go away for a while, for holiday, to a clinic perhaps, for treatment, for as long as it took you to get better and for the period of time that you were away, Ammu be sent to my bungalow to be looked after' (Roy-42) in articulating such characters in the novel the author tries to explore how deeply the impact of colonizers was to be found on colonized and how they could exploit the Indians and Indian poverty and Indian women with the power structure.

Ammu feels unwelcome at Ayemenem. She is doubly marginalized as she is considered a patriarchal and colonial possession. Mammachi, who has put up with years and years of incessant beating, marginalization and humiliation, is quite

discontent with her rebellious, and now divorced daughter. Baby Kochamma also despises her even more because she feels that Ammu is "quarrelling with a fate that she, Baby Kochamma herself, felt she had graciously accepted. The fate of the wretched Man-less women." (Roy44-45).

The Racial issues in the novel articulated in the character of Rahel and Isha. If Ammu is on the margin in the house hold as she got love marriage with different segment of the society and become the real victim having sexual affair with Velutha, her children are even more marginalized. They are "Half-Hindu Hybrids whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian would even marry", (Roy 44) in the eyes of Baby Kochamma. Their helpless position makes Ammu very protective towards them and even if she is "quick to reprimand" them she is "even quicker to take offence on their behalf" (Roy 42). Even though Ammu is despised by her family, she is also sometimes feared by them because they can sense an 'unsafe edge' in her, being "a woman that they had already damned, [who] now had little left to lose, and could therefore be dangerous" (Roy 44). "It was what she had battling inside her, an unmixable mix, the infinite tenderness of motherhood and the reckless rage of a suicide bomber." (Roy 44). this suggests that the opposing forces that haunts Ammu within her; as a mother she protects her children but as an individual, she is desperate to break free and rebel against the 'smug, ordered world' that enveloped her.

The character of Velutha, the parvan of the society as depicted in the novel, lives ever fixed mark in the eyes of the readers. It articulates how people of such a kind live in patience in the dominance of the upper caste tolerating age old practices and humiliations. Velutha, the young, hardworking, skilled carpenter is a factory worker in Ayemenem, he is appointed by Mummachi just to exhibit her kindness, she gives him less salary compared to the other touchable carpenters but in reality she never allows him to enter into the house, he is given permission only to enter the factory, which was inevitable for Mummachi, because she could not get such a skilled labour in the town to work for low wages.

Velutha, is subordinated and marginalized. Being a Paravan and an untouchable, the society he lives in is still regards his caste as inferior and unclean however he is educated and leading a respectable life on his own earning. Roy portrays a euphemistic picture of his status when he appears in Ammu's dream: "he left no footprints in sand, no ripples in water, no image in mirrors."(Roy 206), this is a reflection of the subaltern position of the Untouchables in the post colonial India. Mammachi tells her grandchildren about those days when "paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan's footprint." (Roy 71).

The name of Velutha means, "White in Malayalam- because he was so black." (Roy 70). Untouchables are denied the fundamental human rights. They are not permitted to enter the house of the upper classes, or walk on "public roads" or even "cover their upper bodies, or to carry umbrellas." (Roy 71). They have to even cover their mouths with their hands while speaking so that their polluted breath is not a nuisance to others. Velutha is encouraged to go to a school for Untouchables only. Velutha faces inhuman treatment by his

own countrymen because: "If they hurt Velutha more than they intended to, it was only because any kinship, any connection between themselves and him, any implication that if nothing else, at least biologically he was a fellow creature-had been severed long ago." (Roy 293) Caste acted as a colonial crapulence.

But with the passage of time, Velutha develops the sense of conscious of his state and wish to come on the front line in life and society and establishes his identity; apart from educating, he becomes a trained carpenter, when traditionally a paravan should focus on the trivial 'smaller things' like toddy tapping or picking coconuts. He secretly becomes a member of the Communist party and participates in political marches and rallies. Eventually, he crosses the most forbidden line of all and live on his own earning in the pickle factory, he also crosses the barrier of as old society and develops the courage to have biological or sexual relation with a a Touchable, upper-caste woman Ammu. So being a Paravan, Velutha transgresses numerous lines that the society expects him to stay confined in. He is not like his father, who wants to remain in the marginalized state, never wish to change, who in his drunken state reveals the love relation of Velutha and Ammu knowing the fact that his son's life was in danger, who was the only source of income of the family. Ammu and Velutha's relationship can be recognized as the attempt of both of them to revolt against "the smug, ordered world" (Roy 167). Roy description of their love relation in the following passage reveals how both of them have the same motives. "Standing in the shade of the rubber tree with coins of sunshine dancing on his body, holding her daughter in his arms, glanced up and caught Ammu's gaze. Centuries telescoped into one evanescent moment. History was off-footed, caught off-guard. This knowing slid into him cleanly, like the sharp edge of a knife, cold and hot at once. It only took a moment. Ammu saw that he saw. She looked away. He did too. History's fiends returned to claim them. To rewrap them in its old, scarred pelt and drag them back to where they really lived, where the love laws lay down who should be loved and how, and how much" (Roy 214). here, Roy gives the idea how Ammu and Velutha realize their desire for each other, which before them had been "obscured by history's blinkers" (Roy 176). When Ammu sees her daughter playing with Velutha intimately and in that innocent act breaking a social taboo of touching a Paravan, she realizes that she was envious of both of them and it is that realization that leads to history being caught "off-footed, off-guard" (Roy 214). But when Velutha and Ammu look at each other and Velutha realizes Ammu's desire for him "history's fiends' return to claim them." (Roy 214). It is the irony of history that it designates as its "deputy", Vellya Paapen, Velutha's own father, whose "Terror" at what his son had touched, "Entered", "Loved" led him to disclose Ammu and Velutha's secret love to Mammachi and even offer to "kill his son with his own bare hands." (Roy 199).

However, he struggles to come up; he is suppressed by the authority and dominance of the upper caste, and becomes the victim of race and subjugation. Through this character the author, I hope wish to represent the growing consciousness among the untouchables about the age old suppression and dominance, yet he remains one of the most oppressed

characters in the novel- despite of his slow rebel and protest against the existed system.

The Author represents the undertones of the "small lives" being governed by the Big God- the British colonizer. The destiny of human beings was manipulated by the Big God. "That Big God howled like a whirl wind, and demanded obeisance. Then Small God (cozy and contained, private and limited) came away cauterized, laughing numbly at his own temerity." (Roy-20) The Paravans and Pulayas joined the Anglican Church to escape the "scourge of untouchability" (Roy-74). They received a little money and food as an incentive. But later they discovered that they were still discriminated against. After independence they found they were not entitled to any Government benefits as they were Christians and therefore casteless. They were torn between two worlds- one rejected by them and the other not ready to accept them.

The colonizer, in the guise of Inspector Thomas Matthew, taps Ammu's breasts twice with his baton, to humiliate and terrorize her, showing the hegemony of the imperial rule. He is portrayed as the one who knows, "whom he could pick on and whom he couldn't (Roy 10). He is proud of his status- "He had a Touchable wife, two Touchable daughters- whole touchable generations waiting in their Touchable wombs." (Roy 245) But Velutha, despite being a Communist, does not get any protection from the Communist party when he is accused of raping Ammu. Though he is a member of communist party, the party so called leader K.N.M Pillai takes the money from Mammachi and bribes the inspector and secretly makes an agreement to finish him in the jail. The police even pronounce a death penalty without even investigating the whole truth in the power politics. According to Friedman, "identity is constructed relationally through difference from the other." Velutha's identity is obliterated because of his inability to resist the colonial hegemony. This sounds the death knell of the smaller beings. India is betrayed by the colonizer just as Velutha is cheated by the Communist party. They become the scapegoats of the prejudiced, bigoted society that crushes them mercilessly.

The Colonizing the minds of lower caste is a common phenomenon in India which is truly represented in the novel. Baby Kochamma and Chacko have been under the protective umbrella of the colonizer as they have been educated in the Occident, yet they are insecure and supercilious about their self-positioning as Indians. Chacko's wife, Margaret Kochamma-the 'outsider' keeps a distance from the local Indian culture, even Sophie mole is given a special treatment by Mummachi and Baby Kochamma as she belongs to superior race, knows English and very often humiliates Rahel and Isthia not speaking English and even Ammu is also treated as a marginalized class woman, who has not brought any respect to the household because of her love marriage and divorce. On their way to Kottayam to receive Sophie Mole and Margarate Kochamma, Baby Kochamman imposes on Rahel and Isthia to speak with her in English. This shows the snobbish behavior that deep rooted among few Indians from Colonizers, which has become the part of their life. For example, Chacko, quotes from 'The Great Gatsby', the story of an "Oxford man". He gives priority to the English language and parents

ensured that their children learnt to converse fluently in it. So Chacko's daughter, Sophie Mol, is half English and half Indian, who is highly respected in the family as belong to the British clan not purely Indian, she is constantly compares with her cousins, making Estha and Rahel feel inferior and embittered. "Sophie Mol is loved from the beginning even before she arrives and when she died the loss of Sophie Mol became more important than her memory." (Roy186). She is not at all seen as a hybrid in Ayemenem, but only as an English girl, when the body of Sophie Mol floating in the Minanchala river at the point where it approaches the backwater of the sea, she is referred as being 'white' and 'English', her Indian heritage and origin is not at all mentioned. The novel is set in Kerala which is centre for mixed culture during the reign of the British in terms of religion, culture and language. Roy has introduced hybrid culture in her narration so there are many Malayalam terms in the novel which seem difficult to understand without the knowledge of Malayalam.

The Meenachal River signifies the dangers of the politics and of transgression. Most of the important incidents that support the politics of the upper caste and the transgression of the lower class, it is where Velutha meets Ammu and breaks away the age old barrier of caste mingling one with her in sex, and it is where Shopie Mol lost her life and becomes the media of the revenge towards the pervans like Velutha, it is where Velutha breaks the barrier of his caste and proves himself the best craftsman and wins the favour of Mammachi. Thus Roy brings the river symbolically to spate away all the old orders and to establish the new orders in the society. However it is river, it swells dries up but the nature of men cannot change with the time. Thus Arundhati Roy tries to restructure Indian society where it is free from subjugation and suppression of caste, creed or race, she wishes to treat every individual just as human being and provide them space to come up on the main stream of the society, because, biologically all human beings are one and having common desires of life such as lust, passions, sex, hunger, power, honour, apart from it there is nothing more significant, death levels every one, it is only in life we do fight for gender, race, nationality, which is not fair in the eyes of God. Life can grow beyond these barriers and establish a new order in the society of mankind.

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