

Gender biases and marginalized depiction of characters in arundhati roy's *the god of small things*

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Abstract

The novel *The God of Small Things* is a heart-rending story about seven years old Estha and Rahel, twins. Estha and Rahel along with their mother live in their maternal grandparents' house in Ayemenem, Kerala following Ammu's divorce. Ammu works in the family's pickle factory in spite of which she and her kids are denied any rights, let alone love, by her Oxford returned brother Chacko who considers them nothing less than millstones around his neck. There are gender clashes in the novel. The story goes further when Chacko's ex-wife Margaret brings their daughter Sophie to Ayemenem on a visit from London. The ill-fated visit ends in the demise of Sophie for which Estha and Rahel have to pay a heavy price. The kids are the biggest victims as they are snatched of their childhood, their happiness sought in small things. The story reveals History's cruel way of taking revenge at people who break the Love Laws. 'The laws that lay down who should be loved, how and how much.' This paper describes the marginalized depiction of characters in *The God of Small Things*.

Keywords: domination, strength, relationship, silence, humiliation

Introduction

The God of Small Things truly brings about the position of the womenfolk in India. It presents before us the constant struggle of the woman against their incessant exploitation, torture and struggle which they undergo because to the male dominated conservative framework. The set up of the society is such that it has tittles or nothing to offer to the unfortunate forsaken women like Ammu, who are literally forsaken everywhere they go and the greatest pain of it all comes when they are inflicted by ones who are so called your 'own people'. Ammu's life is depicted by Roy from her childhood rather tormented nursery years where she had been subjected to all the cruelties inflicted by her father on her and her mother Mammachi whom her father hit with a brass vase. Her father in a sheer fit of schizophrenia tore her new pair of shoes. She was deprived of the decent education because she was a girl. Her father was such a frustrated man that he was not satisfied after beating up his wife and children, tore the curtains, kicked the furniture and broke the table lamp. To him marriage was not a pious relationship but a point of domination of a man over women.

Ammu's life took a new turn when he went to Calcutta to attend a marriage ceremony. There she met her future husband who was on a vacation from his job of an Assistant manager of a tea estate in Assam. Ammu decided to marry him as soon as possible because she knew that the people back in Ayemenem would not consent to her marriage so she rushed up her decision to marry him and wrote to her parents who didn't reply back. She wanted to do something better than nothing. As the author says "Ammu didn't pretend to be in love with him. She has weighed the odds and accepted. She thought that anything, anyone at all, would be better than returning to Ayemenem. She wrote to her parents informing them to her decision. They didn't reply."

Further the height of gender bias and discrimination and exploitation can be seen when Ammu receives a further shock after her marriage. She is seen being urged by her husband to satisfy the carnal desires of his boss Mr. Hollick so that his job

remains. Ammu could not take this extreme humiliation, she in tiff with her husband hit him with a heavy book and left the place with her twins Estha and Rahel and reached Ayemenem, but to her horror she found out that her parents had a very cold and indifferent attitude towards her and her children. She wept when she saw the sorry condition of her two innocent kids who huddled to each other.

Women as represented by several legends, mythology, history or traditions have several aspects to her. There are some who have termed her as temptress or enchantress. She is said to have that feline cunningness, a vile character of a serpent. By some she is the one who is not to be trusted upon for she is the most dud character of all while others say that through her charms she can cast a spell and disaster. She is termed as a vain glorious creature who seeks pleasure in coquetry. While in some mythologies she had been put to severe tests despite all her sincerity, truthfulness and honesty to prove her purity!

But obviously all these things point to one thing- 'Bias'. There are the biases for women, harbored by various ages and they present the rigid and very narrow outlook.

Women in turn if observed in their authority are the God's most beautiful creation. She is most emotional, sensitive and soft to core, perhaps which is why God chose her to create and procreate and nurture little kids. She is the one who generates life, she became the centrifugal force of the family whereby playing the role of a mother, wife, daughter and daughter in law, sister in law, she attracts each member towards herself, and she is the core of the family. Great writers of their times have written highly about the highly potential female characters. Like G.B. Shaw has placed Candida on a very high pedestal and has portrayed her in such a manner that she becomes the epitome of womanhood to be praised and followed.

Woman is the one who steers a man, as it is said behind every successful man there is a woman. She as a better half of a man gives him the much needed love, strength and support. She is the one who shapes the destiny of her home and children. A contribution of a woman can be gauged from well brought up

children to continue to become the worthy citizens of the country. As it is implicit in *The God of Small Things* that Ammu's life is ruined because of her tormented childhood and the negligence of her parents, same fate befalls her own twins Estha and Rahel who turn to be sorry figures because all their lives they have hankered for love, affection, care and attention. And this is what Roy wants to express in her novel. She ironically remarks at man of their double standards where by first they claim to love her, upload her on the flip side of it they want to dominate her, and indulge into relentless exploitation of her. They manipulate her as a mere toy.

Chacko, a typical, hypocritical male of the story presents this epitome of the double standards in man. He was sent to the Oxford to study, on the other hand his own real sister Ammu was not sent because she was a daughter and it was believed that a female would be corrupted if she goes to the college as it can be seen in the following lines:

"A married daughter had no position in her parents' home. As for a divorced daughter, she had no position anywhere at all. And as for a divorced daughter, she had no position anywhere at all. And as for a divorced daughter from a love marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochamma's outrage. As for a divorced daughter from an intercommunity love marriage Baby Kochamma chose to remain quiveringly silent on the subject."

This shows Baby Kochamma's highly hypocritical and a truly biased attitude towards the daughter of the family:

Chacko is shown to have not been successful with the woman in his life, be it his wife or his sister. His wife left him because of untidy, unkempt behavior and as regards his sister, his was most unscrupulous pitiful and exploitative in nature. He after being estranged from his wife returns to the Ipe household where he asserts his positions beyond compare. He ruthlessly tells his sister Ammu, "what's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine." For the simple reason that Ammu being a daughter could not put her claim to any damn thing in the house, as it is said; "Ammu as a daughter had no claim to the property and she had no locusts stand."

It is indeed ironically placed that a daughter faces all sort of torture and torment in her parents' house, suffer their difference and negligence. All a cause of 'gender bias' purely! Chacko is seen the other hand being received by open arms by his parents after being estranged from his wife. His flirting with a low woman is encouraged by Mammachi as "Man's Needs". Whereas Ammu's relationship is termed as illicit, untraditional and contemptuous. She is physically tormented for the sin she commits.

Roy has attacked severely this biased attitude of the society which has set up double standards for the same set of activities. It has its different interpretations for the same problem. It fails to realize the importance of a man and woman in a society. They both have to go hand in hand to build up a fruitful society. They neglect and exploitation will bring sheer decadence and unrest and result in damage beyond compare because both men and women complement each other; one is not complete without the other.

The marginalized or the untouchables have been the most pathetic figures of our country. Untouchability has been the greatest hampering process which has always been a blood sucking leech to the Indian society. Untouchability, a great impediment to the marginalized or the dalit sections of the

society has shown how much deprivations these societies undergo.

The untouchables of Kerala during the period that Arundhati Roy delineates in her novel were victims of social ostracism. They were forced into 'silence'. Anyone who dared to break the silence did to break the silence did so at his/her peril Velutha, who is projected as an untouchable, Christian Paravan, living at the mercy of forces of social hegemony, hierarchically superior to him caste wise, ventures to break his imposed silence, and pays the price. In contrast to his better experiential realities, what is inherent in his natural disposition fits in with his name, 'Velutha', and its symbolic significance of 'whiteness' that stands for purity. Unfortunately his black complexion and his 'low birth' suggest his social inferiority and the resultant segregation and subjugation that he is subjected to.

Velutha, an emblem of the adage Black is Beautiful, is adapt at carpentry, and is exploited by the owners of the Paradise Pickle factory. Yet, Velutha is not allowed into their Syrin Christian family house because of their high caste profile. Velutha's personality is portrayed through a series of words and phrases that signify 'quietness'. His gait, deportment, and language are characterized by a 'quiet' firmness and conviction, however, beneath this thin layer of quietness, there lurks a primitive force that brooks no barriers- a fact borne out by his intense, and impassioned amour with Ammu, the narrator Rahel's mother. The invidious nature of traditional power relationship is latent not only in the delineation of his character but also in his interaction with others. Illustrative of this point is the author's description.

"In Mammachi's time. Paravans like other untouchables were not allowed to walk on public roads, not allowed to cover their upper bodies, not allowed to carry umbrellas. They had to put their hands over their mouth when they spoke to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed".

Velutha stands apart from others of his class-those crawling untouchables Paravans. His father Vellaya Pappen fears this younger son and mysteriously enough is at a loss to name his fear. The way Velutha walks and holds his head high arouses his suspicious and fearful glance, as the words, "Perhaps it was just a lack of hesitation. An unwarranted assurance. In the way he walked. The way he held his head. The quite way he offered suggestions without being asked. Or the quiet way in which he disregarded suggestions without appearing to rebel".

This quietness in Velutha, which, in fact, is like the quietness of an animal on the prowl? Grows powerful when he joins the communist movement. It intensifies further during his four years of stay in Trivandrum. On returning to his village, he involves himself in the activities of the communist party. However, his 'touchable' fellow workers in the factory and the party workers themselves envy him his quiet but efficient ways and they plan to erase his importance through using his untouchability as a weapon against him. Comrade Pillai, the party activist even persuades Chacko, the owner of Paradise Pickles, to oust Velutha on the same ground. His conversation with Chacko indicates how Velutha is viewed by his fellow party members.

'Oru karyam parayattey?' Comrade Pillai switched to Malayalam and a confiding conspiratorial voice. Speaking as a friend, kero. Off the record'..... 'That Paravan (Velutha) is going to cause trouble for you", he said. 'Take it from me..... get him a job somewhere else. Send him off.

Here, Arundhati Roy seems to suggest that a party supposedly wedded to the cause of the disemboweled does in fact. Serve the interests of the powerful. Ammu, The narrator Rahel's mother, a divorcee, harbors an intense passion for Velutha. In her day-dreams, she sees herself in the company of a one armed man, symbolically none other than Velutha who is socially handicapped, and who at the same time has been striving to possess her in vain. The absence of an arm is also metaphor for his difference from the 'touchable' persons.

Further, the bewilderment this dream causes in Ammu, is verily suggestive of the darkly symbolic nature of her forbidden desire. To quote: Who was he, the one-armed man? Who could he have been? The God of Loss? The God of Small Things? Of sour metal smells-like steel bus-rails and the smell of the bus conductor's hand from holding them.

Incidentally, the one-armed man is a fine example of Freudian displacement whereby Velutha is represented in the dream by a defective human being who is associated with the former by being handicapped. Velutha is socially handicapped whereas Ammu's dream figure is physically handicapped.

At another level the fantasy love-making scene throws light on the pitiable position of Velutha who lacks freedom to parade his love openly and own it like a 'touchable' person. Both Velutha and Ammu spend the nights in the deserted house of Kari Saipu on the other side of the river. As they fulfil their quest for love, they laugh at small things, like the devout praying mantis, the pair of 'small fish which bites Velutha in the stream, the clumsy caterpillars and the helpless beetles. Velutha's smallness in the hierarchical set-up is suggested by employing such natural and neat witnesses to his love making. His repetition of the word 'Naalye' in his laconic conversations with his 'Ammukutty' during their nocturnal meetings is symbolic of his life that is punctuated with silence and marked by a yearning for independence and assimilation with the hierarchically superior 'touchable', so that he may emerge as a 'mixable mix' breaking all barriers in the not-too-distant future.

Chance also joins the conspiracy of the socio-political situations to accelerate the fate of Velutha in the form of the accidental death of Sophie and the absence of Rahel and Estha. The incident comes handy to baby Kochamma who seizes the opportunity to take revenge on Velutha for her earlier humiliation at his hands. She reports the matter to Inspector Thomas Mathew who helps her to fabricate a case implicating Velutha in the alleged abduction of the two children, and the death of Sophie. Velutha's forward march to move to the centre thus gets completely blocked for no fault of his. He is rendered a victim to the brutality of 'touchable' policemen. The innocent Velutha is beaten to the verge of death by the merciless police force that bears a grudge against him for keeping illicit relationship with Ammu. The brutality of the police, the cruel indifference of Ammu, and the communist party, and the desertion by the children are neatly summed up thus, "Their work, abandoned by God and History, by Marx, by Man, by Woman and by children, lay folded on the floor. He was semiconscious, but wasn't moving". What is significant to note is that Velutha is never given a chance to break his silence regarding the crime in which he is implicated. Another tragic factor is that the children Rahel and Estha are coaxed into established Velutha's crime.

Worth mentioning here is Upkide's remark that Roy raps the long socio-cosmic ball. Velutha's gruesome death is resented by neither the communist party nor the church. He suffers death

because of his conviction that society can be revolutionized through liberal socialization aimed at obliterating traditional caste differences. But he does not succeed in his revolt, as he instinctively responds to the demands of his heart. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, thus, is a fictional account of the perils lying in wait for those who venture in their attempt to break the imposed silence, to leap towards the centre.

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