



## Caste system and patriarchy in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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### Abstract

Arundhati Roy is the most important contemporary Indian novelist who wants to change the world by raising voice against the existing injustice, discrimination and convention of the society which try to marginalize human being into nothingness, repress and control individual's identity in a boundary. The injustice that the untouchables face, the insult and abuse women have to tolerate and the trials and tribulations the defenseless people have to undergo in a caste-ridden and patriarchal society like India, become the major concerns of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. The cruel treatment of untouchables in society is just an extension of inherent cruelty which is visible in its treatment of women and other defenseless persons. Roy portrays the miserable condition of the Paravans in Kerala who converted to Christianity. Roy brings out the atrocities against a woman in a patriarchal society. Women have been portrayed as objects of oppression, subjugation, domestic violence and discrimination in Indian society. In fact, the novel is a saga of sadness where love is concerned to loss, death, un-fulfillment and silence, in a caste ridden and patriarchal society. It is set in a traditional Keralite society, where God decides every individual's fate; gives punishment through death and silences if anyone tries to transcend its laws, customs, and conventions.

**Keywords:** caste system, patriarchy, tradition, society, humanity, social issues

### 1. Introduction

Arundhati Roy is one of the most significant novelists of contemporary India. She has established herself as a novelist exceptionally. Her masterpiece *The God of Small Things* is her prominent work and at the top of best seller list in many European and Asian countries. Even before she won the Booker Prize Award this novel had attracted wide attention of the readers and reviewers throughout the world. The theme was relevant in the Indian Social context as the basic issues related to the theme was one prevalent in the villages of all states. Though Hindi and other Indian language writers had taken up the Social issues in native languages, Arundhati's effort internationally created an awareness regarding the major problems in India. The plot was given a strong political undercurrent or a political satire at a certain level. She is always protesting, radical, and unconventional. She draws a large canvas of characters that belong to five generations. She has carved out a place of her own by presenting a social satire on contemporary society. As a novelist Arundhati Roy discusses issues like homelessness, starvation, alcoholism, violence, untouchability, cultural decadence, marginalization of women and sexuality but caste system and patriarchy are her canons.

The novel clearly delineates the condition of the untouchable in India, especially in Kerala. In Kerala, caste system is practiced more meticulously than elsewhere in India and it is not restricted to Hindus only but Christians, the established Syrian Christian, practice the rules and customs also. Technically, in Christianity, there is no stratum in human being on the basis of caste; but in India caste is a reality in Christianity. The plot of the novel revolves around a love affair between Ammu, an upper caste Syrian Christian and Velutha, an untouchable. Being an 'Old World Paravan' (76)

and knowing the dire consequences one has to face who wants to challenge the rigid social order, Vellya Paapen, father of Velutha, does not dare to raise any questions regarding the social hierarchy. Gramsci's concept of 'hegemony' is highly applicable here in case of Vellya Paapen, who is loyal to his oppressor. His gratitude to Mammachi and her family is 'as wide and deep as a river in spate' (76). Velutha, a highly intelligent and an excellent craftsman with "an engineer's mind" (277), does not compile with those age-old traditions, customs, rules and hierarchy. He does not want to follow any man-made border and margin.

The protagonist, Ammu, a divorcee with two children, Estha and Rahel, is the worst sufferer in the novel. She is an archetype of a woman marginalized in a patriarchal society. In all the roles that she assumes as a woman — the role of a daughter, wife, divorcee, and mother she becomes a victim of patriarchy, tradition, community, and religion. She falls in love with an untouchable laborer Velutha. Her transgression of the caste, class and religious boundaries mounts a rebellion of a kind against her marginalization as a woman. She is treated as an outcast, unwanted person in her family which clearly defines her position in the society. She becomes "a symbolic personification of all subalterns, especially women, who challenge power structures of the social order" (Rao 13). She is treated as an outcast, unwanted person in her family which clearly defines her position in the society. She becomes a symbolic personification of all subalterns, especially women, who challenge power structures of the social order.

As a divorcee, Ammu has to face ostracism by society and her family. In a male dominated society, the codes and moral standards by which human beings are judged are stricter for a woman than for a man. Society expects feminine qualities like caring, rearing and nurturing only from a woman. It seems

that it is only woman's sacred duty to make a marriage successful. In case of divorce, society blames only woman and makes her guilty considering her responsible for this. Ammu, who has walked out of her marriage, is perceived by the society as aggressive and rebellious. In her paternal house also, she is physically and emotionally tortured by her parents and her brother, Chacko. Ammu and her children are considered as an unwanted botheration and unnecessary burden. This is the condition of any divorcee who comes back to her parental house in society. Roy is very critical of the apathetic and biased attitude of the society towards a divorcee. Describing Baby Kochamma's, reaction to Ammu's break up from her husband, Roy says: "Kochamma subscribed whole heartedly to the commonly held view that a married daughter had no position in her parent's home. As for a divorced daughter from a love marriage, words could not describe Kochamma's outrage" (45). Her female relatives sympathize with her in a way, making her conscious of the gravity of her crime she has committed in living separated from her husband. "Within first few months of her return to her parent's home; Ammu quickly learned to recognize and despise the ugly face of sympathy. Old female relations with incipient beads and several wobbling chins made overnight trips to Ayemenem to commiserate with her about her divorce...she fought off the urge to slap them" (43). Khurshid Alam describes the situation of a divorcee, "A divorcee has no right to pursue for happiness in life. The only course open to her is to spend a static life, waiting for death. Any attempt on her part to see life independently threatens the existing order" (Anand 79). In this society, widow is considered more respectable than a divorcee. A divorcee is considered as a criminal or sinner who has done a grave sin. Still today, in sub-continent divorcees are treated as step daughters by society. She, along with her children, is considered as burden in her own family. It is visible at Sophie Mol's funeral "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" (5). The novel shows the process of creating and labeling Paravans within the high class families — the people who go beyond the unwritten laws of society in pursuit of happiness.

It is Velutha who not only loves and cares Ammu but offers to her everything what is denied by others. Probably that's why, Ammu discovers a companion in Velutha. She feels safe with him, finds comfort in his presence, gets passion, and warm in his arm and knows the real love. Her longing for real love and freedom couple with her resentment against the patriarchal society urged her to transgress the norms and standards laid down by the social institutions like family and marriage, caste and community. Dwivedi accuses our patriarchal society, "Indian social fabric is a curse for those advocating or practicing the rituals of modernity, since time immemorial, it has restricted the romantic movements of lovers despite the fact Krishna violated this traditional practice, and so did Vishwamitra and many others. Still we have profound regards for them, but when the same love affair is rehearsed between Ammu and Velutha it becomes hostile towards them. This exposes the dual character of our patriarchal society. Why it is that only man has got the right to disown a woman, to define a protocol for female, and to exploit her femininity? These are

vexed issues, which need to be looked at with open minds" (Myles 54).

The novel depicts the problem that happened in India. One of the problems is social stratification in the society. The depiction of the events in society described complexity and its relation with others, so it forms a series of inoculations between one event and others. Issues about social stratification and the mixture of exotics, mysticism, and India local history, which is nationally discussed, are not very often found in a book, which effectively takes off all the clothes of nationality, castes, and religion to eventually show what humanity is all about. On the other word, this novel represents Roy's protest against the system that put the value of humanity away. Stratification can be defined in various ways, but most commonly refers to institutionalized inequalities in power, wealth, and status between categories of persons within a single social system. For better and for worse, history is relevant, and one cannot ignore that involvement in a centuries long process of colonial history makes the relatively recent process of independence an important reference to understand the transitional and provisional contradictions of a society that is living through fundamental changes, consolidating and self-defining itself between what has been and what may become. This means that, for me, one of the things a postcolonial novel does is to deal with a current postcolonial society, reflecting on, among other things, its search for post-independence patterns of collective identity, the exorcism of traumatic memories from a colonial past, and the self-assertive remembering of local cultural references. All of these issues are articulated within the frame of local, material circumstances. They are solidly connected to their postcolonial geography and time, and there is no ambiguity about these coordinates seen from within a located text, where they are the references to everyday life. At its most optimistic tone, postcolonial literatures still exude a willingness to change, mend, and "move on", licking one's wounds. From a postcolonial angle, the novel *The God of Small Things* is relevant for its resistance to Anglophile, its rejection of Western influences as a "solution" for the problems of India and its caustic analysis of Indian patterns of collective identity, totally embedded in caste segregation, sexism and patriarchy.

*The God of Small Things* deals with the victimization of the marginalized in a unique way. Not all the victims are parts of the same social class, caste or group. Ammu is a woman but not an untouchable or economically weak. The same is true of Mammachi, Velutha is male in the patriarchal system and hence above the female but he is an untouchable and belongs to the economically weaker section of the society. Chacko is an upper caste, upper class male a self declared Marxist but in fact only an ineffective romantic. All these levels of oppression and victimization operated simultaneously and continually. The treatment of the untouchable in this novel is altogether different from the fleeting glimpses of them in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* and Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*. Raja Rao's basic concern was the portrayal of Gandhian movement transforming a village. So the amelioration of untouchable's problem formed only a part of it. Mulk Raj Anand's novel gave a detailed account of a day in the life of an untouchable Bakha who conscientiously performs the duties of a sweeper.

His yearning for education, including the desire to speak English, remains unfulfilled even when he consents to pay his hard-earned money for it. Velutha, on the contrary, is an educated untouchable. He passed the High School Examination from a school meant for untouchables. He learned the craft of carpentry and put his skill to a good use by making intricate toys. But he remained a Paravan. It was in 1967 that the untouchables in Kerala were demanding that they no longer be addressed by their caste names Parayan, Paravan or Pulayan- but by their first names. In the novel, Velutha is sighted in a procession with a flag signals a warning to the established order and the tremors felt in the age old architecture of oppression. If Velutha had not been a Paravan, he might have become an engineer. While doing a carpenters work, he designed a sliding door which became quite popular. Realizing Velutha's capability, Mammachi gave him the charge of general maintenance of her factory which caused resentment among the other touchable factory workers, who thought that an untouchable was promoted above them unjustifiably. Hence, caste remains a factor even after acquiring education and skills.

Bakha and Velutha both have reasons to fear the high caste people. Whereas, Bakha remains unadvanced at his station, confining his dreams and ambitions in his head, Velutha is far ahead of him. This is because Mulk Raj Anand was portraying the untouchables of 1930's whereas Arundhati depicts them in 1960's. For just having touched a high caste man, Bakha gets a slap and in the process his packet of sweets is scattered in the dust. Velutha on the contrary, is much more aware of his position and naturally assertive. His father, Vellya Paapen has been completely tamed by the system. He begins to cry once he comes to know what his son has done. Torn between his love for his son and his gratitude to his masters, he chooses to betray his son. A situation of somewhat different kind does arise in Mulk Raj Anand's novel when Bakha's sister Sohini is molested by Pandit Kalinath. Even when Bakha wishes to take revenge, his father Lakha advises him against it. Because of his sense of fear Lakha could never think of retaliating against the high caste people. He discourages Bakha from hitting the high caste people back because he believes that "one word of theirs is sufficient against all that we might say before the police. They are our Masters. We must respect them and do as they tell us." (13) Lakha's cautious attitude and his impotent reaction even when he happens to be the molested girl's father are because he is a sweeper, while the molester is a high-caste man. In *The God of Small Things* the action takes a different line altogether. Mammachi's daughter and Vellya's son had made the unthinkable thinkable and the impossible really did happen. In *Untouchable*, Mulk Raj Anand gives three solutions for the eradication of untouchability of which the first one is conversion to Christianity. Having been disgusted by the humiliating treatment at the hands of the touchable, Bakha is momentarily drawn towards Christianity. He listens to Hutchinson's statement that Christ sacrificed his life to help us all. His sacrifice was for all- for the rich, the poor, the Brahmin and the Untouchable. But Bakha is not convinced. Those who converted to Christianity in Kerala were promised equality in society but got a worse deal. It was like jumping from frying pan to fire. The persistence of caste after conversion to

Christianity is a social fact in Kerala and also elsewhere in India. Arundhati Roy shows the deep-rootedness of caste in describing the situation of Paravans even after their having been converted to Christianity. Arundhati Roy's novel deals with the disruptive impulses of human beings, and the façade of normalcy which people try to keep in their lives from day today. Man has two faces, one which he shows to others, and the other, his real one. There is a great deal of violence hidden behind the public face of people. The Kathakali men in the novel invoke and play out in their mimic dance the same violence. Once their play is over they become ordinary men. The Kathakali dance portion in the novel shows us the inflammatory quality of passions that lie hidden in human heart. It is through myths and kinetic arts that one can visualize them. These passions like passion in the heart of Ammu are destructive and fierce. The novel in its own way is an enactment of those elemental passions which seek to express themselves in our passionate wild natural moments.

### Conclusion

Thus it can be concluded that *The God of Small Things* is an excellent presentation of Indian society that is characterized with caste system and patriarchy. The desire for reforming human minds and the need for inculcating broader views is interwoven in each and every plot, setting and depicting of characters. It also discusses the western influence on Indian Society bringing out the differences in the status due to colour and literacy as a category of social stratification. The political influence as that of British Government also defines the Social category. The ever existing caste segregation in India is another string which binds along all these stratifications. It also portrays the indelible problem of Untouchability. The ugly realities of life as portrayed in the existing inhuman caste segregations and class stratifications are highlighted with reference to this novel *The God of Small Things*. The approaches of the novelists with an aim to protest against the social evils and a focus to create an awareness regarding the tragic consequences due to such unwanted segregations are brought to the forefront. If not for that period in which the novel was written, the author was sure that her writings would touch the readers' hearts and try to achieve success in reaching her goals. No doubt that Arundhati Roy was given the Booker Prize for her novel. The analysis in this paper will enable the readers to understand the intentions of the author in eradicating the social evil of casteism and patriarchy and promoting the respect to mutual human values necessary to enhance the living standards in an economy.

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