

DALIT OUTCRY AND ANGST IN ‘THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

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ABSTRACT

An objective evaluation of each and every literature or Nationalistic traditions would definitely leave good impressions in terms of virtues and few unfair, objectionable vices that corrupt the society and ultimately lead mankind to perversion. Apart from Asian countries, in Western tradition people do believe in racism. On the other hand, we being entitled as multi-lingual and multi-cultural, fail to remove the oppressive narrowness of caste bias prevalent very much in the 21st century. Especially, in India still we have continued the age old stereotype tradition of categorising people in different caste and sect. Even today like the prevalent vice of superstition, we have cast segregation which deliberately generates the sense of superiority or inferiority. We are obliged to accept the hierarchy i.e. Bramhins- Kshtriya-Vaishya and Shudra.

This paper is an attempt to expose the prevalent vice of ‘untouchability’ through the most celebrated novel ‘The God of Small Things.’ In this, Roy has explicitly presented incidents and illustrations, which make us think about the injustice and humiliation of human being, who are oppressed and marginalised. We have been the part of such a country, which was liberated from British rule in 1947, yet we are in the clutches of few intolerable vices and one of them is ‘untouchability’. Today, on the ideal plane we are talking so called social equality, but if we minutely observe, we find ample examples who are bitter victims of such taboos. And this is one of the much more sensitive issues, which raise doubt about the inherent morality of intellectuals and of course those who are entitled as policy makers and authoritative personnel.

Each and every human being can accept life, which is worth living if he/she gets the desired self-respect, fame, dignity and identity. And it is desirable even for all to have egalitarian social framework. We aim to establish the society, which must be free from rigidity and narrowness which spreads awareness through literary farsightedness. Through education, we can of course make the people realise how insignificant it is to advocate casteism. If we observe the inspiring and glorified Indian history, unanimously we can say that in spite of living in the democratic world certain mass of people is still not getting the basic human prerogative pertaining to their identity and self-esteem.

Kautilya in his “Arthashastra” says;

स्वधर्मो ब्राह्मणस्याध्ययनमध्यापनं यजनं न दानं प्रतिग्रहच्चेति।
क्षत्रियस्याध्ययनं यजनं दानं शास्त्राजीवो भूतरक्षणं च।
वैश्यस्याध्ययनं यजनं दानं कृषिपाशुपाल्ये वारीज्या च।
शूद्रस्य द्विजातिशुश्रुषा वार्ता कारुकुशीलवकर्म च।¹⁰

(1)

The above lines clearly state that, the religion of Brahmin is to learn and teach, give and take donation. The religion of Kshatriyas is to take and give donation, use arms for livelihood and provide safety to the people. The religion of Vaishya is to take part in rituals, give and take donation, engage in agriculture and business. In this way, the religion of untouchables is to serve all and conduct business, practice music and rear animals. Moreover, one of the mythological beliefs conveys that if the untouchable deliberately or inadvertently pays his/her attention to the recitation of the Shlokas by Brahmin, the melted iron must be poured in his/ her ears as a punishment. Further, if the untouchable touches the high-caste prim, it is considered as if they have defiled the elites. Every year we celebrate the birth anniversary of Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar, a great exponent of the marginalised, on 14th March. But do we really want to bring reform through revolutionary ideas in this direction? If so, then we have to think that why every time there is a kind of unlawful ordeal through which only the untouchable are supposed to pass through? As a matter of fact, the untouchables are victimized by the forces of history, conventions of respectability, social taboos and politics of opportunism. Mahatma Gandhi had painfully said about the social evil as ‘a disgrace on Hinduism.’

Arundhati Roy in her most stunning literary masterpiece ‘The God of Small Things’ has represented the same injustice done to the untouchables especially Velutha- the protagonist. Velutha means white in Malayalam, is presented in the novel as one with black complexion. Roy further remarks,

When Paravans were expected to crawl backward with a broom, sweeping away their foot –prints so that Brahmins and Christians wouldn’t defile themselves accidentally stepping into Parvan’s foot print. As, untouchables are a class of people who were not allowed to walk on the public roads, not allowed to cover their upper bodies and not allowed to carry umbrellas. To add to the humiliation they had to put their hands over their

mouths when they spoke, to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed. (2)

We find the same outburst in Mulk Raj Anand's 'Untouchable', where Bakha- the protagonist of the novel has to suffer insult and abuse without any rhyme or reason. He suffers only because he is an untouchable. In a fit of anger, he bursts out:

Why are we always abused? The sanitary Inspector that day abused my father. They always abuse us. Because we are sweepers, because we touch dung. They hate dung. I hate it too. I was tired of working on the latrines every day. That is why they don't touch us-the high castes. (3)

Arundhati Roy has presented a similar injustice and unfair social tendencies prevalent in the current scenario. It is equally noteworthy here that "The God of Small Things" presents a confrontation between 'The Big Man-the Laltain and Small Man-the Mombatti'. In other words, the book shows maladjustment between The God of Big Things (Pappachhi, Baby Kochamma, Mammachi, Chako, Comrade Pillai and Inspector Thomas Matthew) and The God of Small Things (Ammu, Velutha, Rahel, Estha, and Sophie Mol). Through these fine connotations, Roy has successfully tried her best to arouse our sense of pity and catharsis for the Mombattis-the downtrodden, dalit and the deserted, the marginalised and the defenceless. The prime victim who is enmeshed in the web of political complexities is Velutha, an untouchable. Velutha, the skilled paravan embodies the state of untouchable in free India. His plight is not much different than that of Anand's Bakha. In spite of his inborn noble qualities and physique he is not yet empowered to strike back. Though the days of crawling 'backwards with a broom' sweeping away the foot-prints have become a tale of past, the paravan's fate has not witnessed the change. Velutha, a God of Small Things "left no foot-prints in sand, no ripples in water, no image in mirrors". (4)

Velutha is an expert mechanic and craftsman. Perhaps this is why Mammachi employs him in her factory to do a carpenter's work. But, the workers employed in the factory are not happy to see Velutha as a leading artisan. He converts himself into Christian religion only to immune from the victimization of a casteist society. But his conversion and technical expertise, apart from many other good things, never bring any fruitful result in this cruel and callous society.

As a matter of fact, Arundhati Roy a great champion of the cause of the dalit and the deserted points out those unnoticed shades of a social problem which generally escape the eyes of social scientists. Velutha's grandfather Kelan, alongwith a number of other untouchables embraced Christianity to escape the scourge of untouchability. But they later on found that they had done a blunder. Though, they were give separate churches and separate priests and in a special favour they were given their own separate Pariah Bishop, but after 1947, they found they were not entitled to any government's benefits like job reservation nor bank loans at low interest. Why? Because they were Christians and so castless. Even while reading the novel minutely, we find that the Mombatti- the employer who deliberately exploits the Laltain-the employee. When Punuachen, the account of the factory brings news that there has been talk among the workers of demanding a rise of salary, Mammachi becomes furious and murmurs,

"Tell them to read the papers. There's a famine on. There are no jobs. People are starving to death. They should be grateful; they have any work at all." (5)

It is to be noted here that Mammachi outwardly takes the grab of Marxism, but inwardly she has nothing to do with the principles of Marxism which propounds;

“Wages are therefore not the worker’s share in the commodity produced by him. Wages are the part of already existing commodities with which the capitalist buys for himself a definite amount of productive labour power.” (6)

In spite of all these great virtues, Velutha fails to attain the desired fame and identity. Vellya Pappan, the father of Velutha is strongly dead against any type of education or advance knowledge in a Paravan. He always grudges the craftsmanship and natural skills of Velutha. Further, Vellya quickly degenerated into nagging and bickering and consequently there is a sense of unpleasantness between the father and son. The tragedy begins to take in the life of Velutha when he comes in contact with Ammu- a woman belongs to high caste or rather say, when Ammu’s troubled eyes and dimpled cheeks turns Velutha a transgressor as well as a victim into the secret heart of a touchable woman and a miserable victim of its punishment in the police custody. Velutha develops his weakness for Ammu or vice versa, as a result they spend their vulgar nights on the bank of the river. In spite of all these, Velutha stands out as a very tall figure in the novel. It was his desire to ‘relieve’ as a touchable that triggered the tragedy. But he could never be a coward when he knew that his life was in danger. When he knew that his end was imminent, he continued to remain a Gandhian, an apostle of non-violence.

But as we know that in this modern world, people are hardly able to acknowledge the significance and power of Truth, Simplicity. We have few examples like Christ, Socrates, Gandhi, Martin Luther, who were brutally killed as they were interested in spreading the light of Truth. Thus, we see that Velutha- the untouchable doesn’t sweep off his footprints as his forefathers used to do. In this independent democratic country, his footprints are erased by the establishments- the police, state and tradition. Both these Mombattis got punishment or unacknowledged fear “civilizations fear of nature, men’s fear of women, power’s fear of powerlessness.” (7)

We must think that even a dalit of an untouchable can become a doctor, engineer, lawyer or a professor if he/she is given proper education and atmosphere. God never makes any difference between a touchable and an untouchable; between the poor and the rich; between the rough and the sublime. The thing which is needed is to appreciate the discarded and the abandoned and to dive deep into the bosom of the sea to dig out pearls and gems which are always hidden. So, the obscure living cannot be condemned. They are the significant competent of the nation. The economy of the country cannot remain in its key without the co-operation of the dalit and the downtrodden. They thus cannot be consigned to oblivion.

Further, Roy has very explicitly presented the truth that Political leaders do play their cunning role in order to make the entire society imbalanced. In ‘The God of Small Things’ Roy has depicted an incident when one night Comrade Pillai was eating his supper and Velutha approached him for some help regarding the allegation of rape and abduction. Velutha entered and earnestly asked for help on the ground that he has been a loyal and devoted worker as well as follower of the party throughout his life. Comrade Pillai in a very straight forward way, just like a corrupt and callous politician, remarks:

“You should know that party was not constituted to support worker’s indiscipline in their private life.”(8)

Thus, the entire novel is all about how the intellectual people can contribute to remove vices like ‘untouchability’ from social structure. Even today untouchables are considered themselves as unfortunate being born in the community which has been perennially oppressed. In spite of having special rules and relaxations for untouchables, there is a thin demarcation line between them and the untouchable. And, as a matter of fact, by this segregation there can never be any social prosperity. So, it is better to have a society that is consisted of having equal opportunity for all and which genuinely believe in egalitarian perspective.

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