

HYBRID IDENTITY AND THE SUBORDINATE ‘CULTURAL OTHERS’ IN ARUNDHATI ROY’S *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*

Dr. Kamalesh Kumar Bhatt

T.G.T. English

JawaharNavodayaVidyalaya

B.I.T. Mesra, Ranchi, Jharkhand

Abstract

Carrying forward the main concerns of the postcolonial studies such as cultural plurality and heterogeneity, and exploring continuously rising their new ever dimension, Arundhati Roy’s debut novel *The God of Small Things* examines India’s cultural transformation from colonial, postcolonial times to the contemporary era of globalization. Cultural diversity, hybridity, identity, and marginalization on the basis of caste, region, religion and economic condition have always been the issues of concern in postcolonial studies. Arundhati Roy’s Booker Winning novel *The God of Small Things (1997)* raises very; sensitive and sensationalizing issues, though Indian but global in nature and analytically looks into India’s cultural transformation, identity crisis, hybrid identities, cultural clashes, gender oppression, social taboos, laws of love and so on and so forth. The issues raised in the novel may have occurred or might (may) still be occurring in integral parts of Indian subcontinent or its margins but because of their being global in nature, it is feared that they may affect global culture and human behaviour. Cultural transgression is yet another important issue, well portrayed in the novel as a revolutionary voice from the margins. Love transgression between the untouchable Velutha and touchable Ammu poses challenges to the traditional norms and social hierarchy of India. In other words, this love relationship triggers off the fury of the laws of love. In the light of such issues as examined in the fictional world of Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* and also as prevalent in the contemporary Indian subcontinent, it can well be understood that the marginalizing colonial tremors are still at work, affecting life, culture and love. Naturally the voices of those oppressed and marginalized, gaining strength from adversity, are felt translated into bitter, sweet or bitter-sweet (re)actions, i.e. response.

Keywords : Hybrid, identity, subordinate, culture, oppressed, marginalized, taboo, untouchable .

INTRODUCTION

The crisis of identity in India arose during the period of colonization and with the passage of time, gaining painful experiences and traumas of colonization, India, a Third World nation faced the challenge of identity crisis in its culmination. India with colonial experience, ever since, continued getting transformed into a hub of different identities, issued from the elements like place, religion, faith, caste and of course the act of conversion. This country, in contemporary times, is known the world over as the land of religion, the country of uncritical faiths and unquestioned practices. One is even at liberty to do or re-do in the matter of one's identity issuing from any source – religion, faith or practices whatever. Salman Rushdie has once asked, "Does India exist?" (Imaginary Homelands 26). Here, he is questioning whether India is existing, maintaining its identity as a nation. As a matter of fact, India has no single true identity in spite of the fact that it is there on the map of the world. For some people, India is a land of self-sufficient villages facilitating desirable stability, for some others it symbolizes backwardness and stagnation. Despite these various aspects and viewpoints on India, this can also well be seen and understood that India is not static or backward. Rather, the subcontinent as a whole is incredibly undergoing wonderful cultural transformation and elevating itself from a homogeneous culture into a hybrid one, because of its liberal, assimilating and inclusive approach towards life. Already cultures are hybrid by nature, ready to elevate themselves. According to John Thieme:

"The notion that cultures are inevitably hybrid has become one of the most significant and influential aspects of contemporary post-colonial theorizing. Theories of hybridity challenge notion of authentic or ESSENTIALIST self-hood, nationhood and language by demonstrating the porousness of supposed boundaries and foregrounding the extent of cultural interpenetration."¹

Roy in *'The God of Small Things'* portrays episodes and events occurring in Indian society with the genuine colours of multi-culturalism and hybridity, through the life pattern of Ayemenem, now part of Kottayam in Kerala state of India. Pressures of Indian caste system, cultural history, politics and the Keralite Syrian Christian way of life and the impact of such pressures and clashes on the practical life in Indian society have, well, been portrayed in the fictional world of *'The God of Small Things'* through the characters of the novel is general and Ammu and the untouchable Velutha in particular. Since Velutha represents the 'Subordinate Cultural others' in various ways, the caste-hit and love-laws-ruled Indian society at Ayemenem does not acknowledge Ammu-Velutha love relationship.

MAIN THRUST

To quote John Thieme:

"The God of Small Things (1997), won the 1997 Booker Prize. Set in Kerala it focuses on the intense relationship between two twins, whose lives are traumatized by the drowning of their Nine-year-old half-English cousin, and on an adult relationship between the twins' divorced mother and an UNTOUCHABLE"²

Here, John Thieme seems to be saying that even Ammu's own twins Estha and Rahel receive a traumatic impression of the mother's adult relationship with the untouchable Velutha, an affair that enjoys no recognition in India society. And because of this socially

unacknowledged adult relationship between the culturally hybrid woman and the untouchable or the subaltern Velutha in the family, Estha keeps “silent”, annoyed, pensive and unhappy, and Estha’s younger sister, younger by eighteen minutes, an intelligent girl, Rahel too feels socially uncomfortable and does not find this world an enchanting place, and that is why, perhaps, many times the narrator refers to her as the quality “Emptiness”.

This hybrid and subaltern relationship occurred as the cataclysmic event in the novel at the time when Ammu’s twins are seven. Whereas Ammu is a strict mother, the twins worry about losing her love just because they are awfully aware of her affair with Velutha, a Paravan (untouchable), a subaltern in Indian society of so-called hybrid ones, ruling the subordinate cultural others, this way or that way. And it is because of this hybrid-subordinate adult relationship that Estha, a boy of seven, in place of enjoying his childhood cheerfulness, turns “practical and responsible” in nature and who is also chosen by Baby Kochamma to go into Velutha’s cell and condemn him. This act of Baby Kochamma clearly indicates that she is highly identity-conscious and maintains an attitude of hate towards the people of low caste like Velutha who dares cross his limits. Baby Kochamma even goes to the police and accuses Velutha of being responsible for Sophie’s death. She claims that Velutha attempted to rape Ammu, threatened the family and kidnapped the children. It is difficult to say as to when the people, so conscious of their hybrid identity may define love as rape or rape as love. They so often become the God of Small things. They may present big things as small things and small things as big things. For their big, political or celebrated identity, they often become the god of small things or big things, sometimes.

In her fictional tale, *‘The God of Small Things’*, to highlight her portrayals of hybrid identity and the subordinate cultural others, Arundhati Roy, as a keen observer of social changes and transformation, employs India history and politics to shape the plot and meaning of *The God of Small Things* in variety of ways. To quote Thieme again.

The novel employs a complex time-structure, which cross-cuts between the late 1960s and the 1990s, suggesting the interpenetration of past and present events, and is notable for a lyrical style whose verbal inventiveness reflects its characters’ HYBRID identities.”³

Regarding the importance of history in postcolonial writing reflecting voices from the margins, certain opinions are worth-mentioning here:

“The past continues to speak to us”⁴

- Start Hall

“..... In Postcolonial writing, the historical record never gets wiped clean.”⁵

- Sage Wilson

“History does not just provide a background to the study of texts, but forms an essential part of textual meaning.”⁶

- Ania Loomba

On the role and importance of Indian history providing substantial material and creating in the authors an urge to write, Jaydeep Sarangi comments:

“Indian history is the stuff tragedies are made of. The History of colonialism in India needs to be told and retold.”⁷

In Connection with changing identities, hybridization or the marginalization of identities, India, ever since the colonial days to the present times even, has always been under the impression of the rulers with power to change. The shadow of colonialism still rules this subcontinent. The masses still stand prone to change to find some other (better) identity for some reason or the other. This may be understood as the inheritance of colonialism. In the temptation of coming to the mainstream from the margins, the subalterns or the cultural others keep flexible to do or re-do with their existing identities. People in power oftentake advantage of it. Sarangi presents the picture of Christian missionaries of the time of British rule in India, Australia and Canada:

“In India, British education and Christian Missionaries helped themarginals to come to the mainstream whereas the mainstream critics attack them severely. The context of aboriginals of Australia and Canada is different from Dalitsof India because they are settler identities (countries). The Dalitswere suppressed and denied the basic education in the pre-colonial caste-constructed India. On the contrary, aboriginal children of Australia and Canada were violently taken away from their families and given English education.”⁸

This, indeed, was a colonizing act in the name of civilizing or modernizing those in the margins, but it proved to be a blessing in disguise as it enabled the marginal raise their voices of reaction and response though with cultural discontinuity still yet with a silent consciousness. Sarangi finds:

“This indeed paved a way for cultural discontinuity and masking collective consciousness.”⁹

Colonial suppression is at times, responded to by the act of transgression, an eruption of culminated reaction. Ammu-Velutha adult relationship is an act of transgression against social colonialism and that is why transgression happens to be so special and worth discussing in *The God of Small Things*: Velutha, a representative figure of the untouchables in the novel, signifies the unchangeable social taboo which is ingrained in the minds of most Indian people. As for the love laws, they have been made on the basis of caste, religion, touchability, untouchability etc. Therefore to liberate love and strengthen hybrid cultures, transgression emerges as the only powerful tool to demolish the boundaries erected by caste, religion and the stigma of untouchability. As the voice from the margin, transgression carries a global importance. For instance, transgression between a man and a woman in context of ancient China may imply sexual liberation from patriarchy or gender oppression. Transgression between a whiteman and ablack woman or vice versa may reveal and heal the racial conflicts between East and West.

Ammu and Velutha belong to different castes and thus they represent the hybrid cultures is India. Their act of transgression subverts the fixed norms of love laws and produces a heterogeneous culture which is counterhegemonic, resistant and interruptive to Indian culture as well as to foreign cultures of colonialism. Due to his socially oppressed position, Velutha turns to Ammu for love and comfort. Here is a picturesque portrayal of a sweet symbolic transgression by and between the two:

“He folded his fear into a perfect rose. He held it out in the palm of his hand. She took it from him and put it in her hair. She moved closer, wanting to be within him, to touch more of him. He gathered her into the cave of his body. A breeze lifted off the river and cooled their warm bodies. It was a little cold. A little wet. A little quiet. Theair.”¹⁰

Through the fictional world of ‘*The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy has highlighted the messy IDENTITY crisis in India. Apart from individual identities of quite a few on the basis of their talents and of the people of political and bureaucratic background, agrarian identities, on the basis of caste, creed, faith, region, religion etc. are the only and very sensitive protective umbrellas for the common masses in India. For the official or formal identities of the Indian people, the Government of India or the ‘State Governments issue many cards and certificates in various ways. At times, just to appease the people or better say to gain some political mileage, the Indian Government launches some big game of national or individual identity for the citizens of India. It is perhaps just the game of (political) cards through which the postcolonial or the neo-colonial leadership plays nasty and selfish tricks with the sentiments of the masses.

Here is a relevant and recent report by Ambika Pandit and Surojit Gupta from Delhi, in The Times of India, Ranchi, dated February 18, 2013 Monday, titled ‘The Great Indian Crisis’:

“Chaotic Roll-out of UID & NPR, Half-Baked Awareness Drives and Procedural Glitches Have Left People Running and Circles.”¹¹

Driving Licence, L.P.G. Gas Connection, PAN Card, Voter Card, Ration Card, Bank Accounts Number, There are at least a dozen cards, issued to the people of India to give them some kind of IDENTITY but the irony of the situation is that their IDENTITY, nevertheless, remains mistaken or confused in the labyrinth of these cards. The UID or Aadhaar Card is the latest and the hottest and the most talked of and sought after card of identity of being an Indian. Let us see and hope this is the last and final CARD issued by the Government of India to its citizens to give them an unbiased, uncontroversial and indiscriminatory IDENTITY of an Indian citizen.

Even after more than sixty years of Independence, Indian citizens still grope for their true or genuine or a suitable IDENTITY. Identity of the common masses has been a complex puzzle. But, perhaps, people keep anxious for identity cards and the Government plays the game of identity cards.

CONCLUSION

Roy, in the novel, takes a good advantage of the language of the colonizers –English – to dismantle western codes and draws the attention of the world to those who are marginalized and devalued in the postcolonial subcontinent. She, at the same time, conveys an important message that colonialism may be dead but the concept of “Empire” will never vanish both at the present time and in the times to come. One more important issue of the postcolonial era that Arundhati Roy takes care of in “*The God of Small Things* is the role of women in society. Since historiography itself is always male-centred, Roy, in the novel, creates an honoured space for her female characters to narrate their own stories. The contrasting voices of different female characters in the novel (Mammachi, Ammu, Rahel, Baby Kochamma, Margaret Kochamma) indicate that woman should be involved in the process of historical writing. Centering around caste, there, is a chain of issues. The problem of untouchability in this country of Gandhi, is still existing as a taboo. And the people like Velutha a paravan, have still to struggle for their desired identity. In spite of a numbers of policies and projects for the untouchables, a majority of them can still be seen thrown marginalized as subordinate cultural others. Under the dominance and influence of colonialism, both India and Indian people still face some kind of identity crisis. A matter of respite is that it is diminishing fast.

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