

**CASTEISM : A HELLISH CRIME PREVAILED IN INDIAN SOCIETY
WITH REFERENCE TO ARUNDHATI ROY'S
THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS**

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Abstract

This paper proposes to analyse the caste problem which is deeply rooted in social, economical, political and religious life of India through the work of one of the great contemporary Indian writer-Arundhati Roy whose debut novel *The God of Small Things* won the Booker Prize tries to bring out the portrait of the miserable conditions of the lower caste people and has heralded a revolutionary attitude against the mal-treatment of the untouchable prevailed in Christian community in India. Practicing untouchability or discriminating a person based on his caste is legally forbidden in India but, no fruitful result is seen till today and the discrimination based on castes is visible in most of the parts of the country more or less. Roy has tried to reflect this truth before the World through *The God of Small Things*.

Keywords: Casteism, Untouchability, Hypocrisy, Cruelty, Identity Crisis etc.

Casteism is a hellish crime which upholds discrimination in Indian society. It is one kind of stratification, based on birth among human beings, in matters of social interaction which damages social cohesion by giving certain sections of society an unfair advantage over others permanently. Traditional scholars identify caste system with Hinduism in the Indian subcontinent, but the system is prevailed in other religions also like Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism in the Indian subcontinent.

Indian English literature has always been responsive to the changes in material reality and theoretical perspectives that have impacted and governed its study since the time of its inception .Of all the genres of Indian English literature, fiction is the most developed and well received at home and abroad. The most significant event in the History of Indian English Novels in the 1930s was the appearance on the scene of the major trio- Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan

and Raja Rao who were mainly concerned with the downtrodden of the society, the Indian middle and lower class life and the expression of traditional cultural ethos of India.

Arundhati Roy, known as a Third World woman writer, an outspoken political figure, social activist, polemicist, cultural critic and feminist conveys radical viewpoints on issues related to globalization, imperialism, neo-liberal capitalism, transnational politics, environmental movements and the current state of India. In her debut novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997) she tries to bring out the portrait of the miserable conditions of the lower caste people and has heralded a revolutionary attitude against the mal-treatment of the untouchable, who are vulnerable and the down-trodden in Indian society. It is a semi-autobiographical novel. The major part of it captures Roy's childhood experiences at Ayemenem, a few kilometres from Kottayam town in central Kerala. The story of the novel revolves around this village--the natural ambience, the dialects, the mannerism of the village people and all.

Anthropologists have noted that the caste hierarchy among Christians in Kerala is much more polarized than the Hindu practices in the surrounding areas. References to the ancient history of this community are presented throughout *The God of Small things*, and the complex intermixture of their faith with local Hindu social structures (especially the Hindu caste system) is become an integral part to the plot of Roy's work. So, the novel shows that untouchables are not only suffering and torturing from Hindus but also from other religious communities in this democratic India. Thus they are sandwiched between the Hindu majority and other religious minorities. The most ironic situation is to escape from the scourge of untouchability, some of them are converted to Christianity but dominant Christian group does not accept the newly converted people. So, separate churches, priests, bishops are provided for the newly Christians. The moment they are converted to Christianity, they have lost all their benefits which the Government has granted to them as lower caste Hindus after the Independence of the country. It is really a very pathetic and ironic plight that caste taboo is prevailed in Christianity and even in church also. Untouchables (paravans) are treated in a most disgusting and humiliating way. Various types of restriction are forcefully implemented against them. Still today, they are not allowed to enter into the Churches which are thought to make for the upper caste Christians. Mammachi(mother of Ammu) recollects her childhood experiences, a gruesome picture of inhuman treatment done by the upper-caste Christian to the Paravans as—"the paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom sweeping away the footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan's footprint" (Roy 73-74). In Mammachi's time Paravans like other untouchables, they were not allowed to walk on public roads, or allowed to cover their upper bodies, not allowed to carry umbrellas. They had to put their hands over their mouths when they spoke, to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed. (Roy 73-74) To escape the scourge of untouchability, Velutha's grandfather embraces to Christianity but finds his problems multiplied. He becomes casteless and therefore devoid of the benefits guaranteed by the Indian Constitution.

Velutha, the hero of the novel, bears the burnt of social persecution as an untouchable. He is black in complexion and there is an irony within the name Velutha, as it suggests 'something white'. As a boy, he used to go to the school made for the outcastes and usually visited with his father to the Ayemenem's house to deliver coconuts. But he did not have access to anything that the touchable touches. When he grows into a Youngman some changes are seen in his nature. So, Vellya Paapen, his conservative father, expresses fears about his rebellious nature. Velutha's manner of saying, his style of walking, his tendency not to pay heed to the suggestions of Vellya, etc. are just audacity for any paravan. Velutha misreads his father's caveat as his grudge against

him. This misunderstanding leads him often not to come home and one day he disappears. Coming back a year after, he finds many appalling incidents have taken place in the meantime. As he associates himself with trade union activities, and an expert mechanic, craftsman and carpenter, Mammachi gives him the charge of the general maintenance of the factory which caused some resentment among the other those who belong to upper caste. So, his exceptional talents and skills, his keen understanding and deep sensibility do not get the respect from any one of those who are far less talented. It shows, in spite of long strides made in the field of technology and scientific knowledge, which caused major changes in the society, the caste hatred in Indian communities and the caste mindset has remained as rigid as ever. The cruel irrational orthodoxy doesn't respect even a highly talented person. Mammachi is quite clear about this and knows how to draw lines. So, to keep the others happy, and since she knew that nobody else would hire him as a carpenter, Mammachi paid Velutha less than she would pay a Touchable carpenter. In this way, the untouchable Velutha is exploited by the social hegemony

The main plot of *The God of Small Things* pivots around a fated, forbidden relationship between a Syrian-Christian divorcee, Ammu, and a low-caste 'untouchable' carpenter, Velutha. Ammu selects a Bengali Hindu man as her groom who is working as an Assistant Manager of a tea estate in Assam. It is her first attempt to break the social barrier and to protest the strict family rule--- an intercommunity love marriage which is quite dead against in her society. In rural India, even today, inter community love marriage is not accepted. It is considered as a disgrace on family and lineage, so, after her marriage she does not get any positive responds from her own family. Soon, after coming to her husband's house, Ammu discovers that she has made a wrong decision in a hurry. She jumps out of the frying pan into the fire and has to return to her village Ayemenem with her twins, Eshtha-a boy and Rahel- a daughter where she finds her parents cold and indifferent to her and to her children. In her family and in the society, she becomes virtually "untouchable." When nobody from her family takes care for her and her twins, naturally she is fascinated towards that who still loves her and her kids that is Velutha, an untouchable who appears to her children as God .He treats them with deep affection and sympathy and plays with them and tries to make them happy in every way possible. The psychological barrier of caste does not pollute the children. He is 'the God of Small Things' who rises from the pitch-black waves of a dark sea in Ammu's dream. She develops relationship with him, partly because of her biological needs and partly because she wants to register her strong protest against the social taboos regarding love she thinks that after all it is her body, so, the decision to offer it also must be her. Why society should object it? Here, Ammu's outbursts and her thoughts make her a feminist and the sprouting of love in her bosom is very natural. Velutha also has the same passion. Both of them have forgotten the ban, 'who should be loved, and how. And how much.' But this happy moment does not last long. When Mammachi comes to know about the illicit relation of them, Ammu is locked up in a room. Mammachi thinks "She (Ammu) had defile generations of breeding and brought the family to its knees. For generation to come, forever now, people would point at them at weeding and funerals at baptism and birthday parties. They would nudge and whisper."(Roy 258)

When Velutha is accused for a false crime, the touchables are united to remove him forever. The police turns a deaf ear to his plea. He approaches Comrade Pillai, who has vowed to bring about a Marxist revolution to banish all exploitative systems and establish a society based on equality and respect for man as man, pushes his devilish brain into plotting to trap poor Velutha and finally joining hands with state police in smashing him. So, Velutha is one character that belongs to the category of socially discarded, politically neglected and physically tormented

who has sought to rise above his stature but is mercilessly pulled down. He is a man of loss, 'God of Loss', who is not helped by any even by his party for which he worked day and night. When policeman finds Velutha, they treat him inhumanly. The dying moment of Velutha in the police station has been describe by Roy in a very pathetic way as "Boot on bone on teeth. The muffled grunt when a stomach is kicked in..... his skull was fractured in three places. His nose and both his cheek bones were smashed, leaving his face puppy undefined. The blow to his mouth had split his upper lip and broken six teeth. Four of his ribs were splintered, one had pierced his left lung, which was what made him bleed from his mouth." (Roy 308) Roy ridicules the blatantly discriminatory attitude of the police whose basic duties of protecting the innocent and checking the criminals, but here, Velutha is blithely trampled upon by none other than the Inspector himself who bullies the common citizens, leers at women, and connives with local politicians to trap and liquidate the untouchables like Velutha This however, could be an occurrence, taking place every day in any corner in the country. Roy at several places uses the expression touchable police, in order to remind the readers of its role in oppressing the untouchable as also the fact that its role in sustaining the caste based division of society They wake Velutha with their boots that shows they don't touch Velutha directly but by their boots because they are touchable. It is the irony that the public servants of democratic India have that kind of mentality. When th3e touchable polices' operation is going on, at that time the twins- Estha and Rahel, witness the barbaric incident thus:

"They realised that man was beaten, was Velutha. They heard the thud on wood on flash, boot on bone. On teeth the muffled grunt when stomach is kicked in the muted crunch of skull on cement. The gurgle of blood on a man's breathing when his lung is turned by the jagged end of a broken rib". (Roy 308) Still the crime is not proved, it is only the charged, but the touchable police have brutally treated the accused untouchable as a murderer. The policeman is not given this sort of liberty to treat the accused in such a way that, "half an hour past midnight death comes for him." (Roy 308)

Velutha, becomes a victim to the police cruelty and dies in the night. Roy describes his death, "The God of Loss, The God of Small Things". His dead body is discarded in a pauper's pit where the police dump the dead-bodies of the criminals.

Roy spares no literary device to hit hard at the utter hypocrisy, cruelty and of an administrative agency whose work is to protect the citizens from the violence of law breakers. She satirises Indian police department and says 'POLICE' stands for politeness, obedience, loyalty, intelligence ,courtesy and efficiency .But ironically none of this qualities are to be seen in the policemen as projected in the novel, specially inspector Thomas Mathew, who does not even possess a quarter of any one of this qualities. Inspector Mathew's behaviour with Ammu is totally uncivilised. When Ammu reached the Kottayam police station to inform the truth about Sophie's death and save Velutha, nobody notices her .but the police inspector Mathew by tapping on her breasts with his baton and said that the Kottayam police station does not take statement from Vaishayas or illegitimate children. What is her crime? Love? Actually, she is thrown away by the imposed social code of Hindus. She has not done any wrong but loves an untouchable, and consequently has become an untouchable by some upper caste persons. Her breast is touched by baton. What an irony! It shows that the Christian minority in India tries to maintain the untouchable issue which is carried by the upper caste Hindus. The officer represents the society's attitude to a woman who has loved outside the rules of "Love Laws." And, Chacko,

Ammu's brother has already threatened her with all the authority of a patriarch in his own house. Getting no support, no sympathy from anywhere, Ammu left her big Ayemenam House and she has to live alone in a hotel "in the strange bed in the strange room in the strange town" (Roy 161) where she has gone for a job interview, her last frantic effort to make a living in her struggle for survival mainly for the sake of her children but she died. The author observes: "She died alone with a noisy ceiling fan for company and no Estha to lie at the back of her. She was thirty one, Not old, not young, but a viable, die-able age" (Roy 161) Ammu is such a tragic character that even her last rite is not done properly with traditional rituals. The church refuses to bury her. So, Chacko has hired a van to transport the body to electric crematorium where "nobody except beggars, derelicts and police custody dead were cremated there"(Roy 162). Chacko holds Rahel's hand tightly. No one from the family is present there. "The door of the furnace clanged shut. There was no tears" (Roy 163).

In this way Ammu becomes a true tragic character who is tortured and a bussed by everyone around her own family and in the outside world. It is a warning to the transgressors of the laws laid down by traditional, caste-ridden conservative and oppressive patriarchal society. Both of Ammu and Velutha suffer tragically for ignoring the love laws and die at its altar. After the death of Ammu, Rachel and Estha's struggle for existence in the society has become miserable. They are unsure of their identity.

Roy attacks the society, ridden with untouchability, orthodoxy and outworn taboos that frustrate us. She throws light on the exploitation of the labour, oppressed people and their pitiable, social and economic conditions. The novel ends with a 'tomorrow'. It signals that there is no end for the passions of the human heart. It also truly brings about the plight of the women folk in the male dominated framework in Indian society which is totally hallow and lacklustre.

Conclusion

The God of Small Things shows the male dominated patriarchal society where there are social biases, where there is discrimination on the basis of gender, caste and class. It presents the rift between the rich and the poor, the high and low, the weak and the powerful, and the touchable and the untouchable. In this novel, Roy confronts boldly about the victims of the brutality of the upper caste people against the lower caste. After sixty seven years of independence of our country, on one hand, the human rights and values are globally and seriously considered as an important topic, on the other hand, in many parts, atrocity against the untouchables are going on. The novel clearly shows the untold miseries and undeserved sufferings of the untouchables who have to bear the brunt of upper caste domination silently and meekly. It shows a confrontation between the haves and have not, the Laltain and the Mombatti, the Big man and the Small man. Through this symbolic representation, the author has effectively been able to arouse the pity of the readers for this helpless mombattis who represent the marginalised defenceless, the deserted, downtrodden, have not and have no glass of protection and can easily be blown away by the gushes of wind. Ayemenem incident of killing Velutha is the microscopic vision of the orthodoxy's brutality against untouchables. In India, plenty of legal protection is provided to remove the atrocity against lower-caste but they are only on the papers. It would not change until the social attitude or vision is changed. If our society would accept them, they would not remain untouchable socially and culturally. They would merge in the main stream of the society and persons like Velutha and Ammu would not die. Arundhati Roy has heralded a revolutionary attitude against the maltreatment, vulnerable and down-trodden who are bound to suffer much

insult and abuse, hurdles and obstacles, tyranny and injustice sometimes with cause and sometimes without any cause.

. In *The God of Small Things*, Roy skilfully fulfils both the duties of the writer and the social activist. By narrating the story of an Indian family which represents the broader Indian macrocosm, she manages to weave a literary piece together with a critique of the various inequalities suffered by the Indian people with a special focus on gender and caste inequality. The most significant of all is that Roy draws parallel in making the reader's turn inwards and ask themselves, what went wrong with our unity in diversity. Through it, Roy triggers off the great process of self examination and imprints upon the mind of the readers about the notion that things need to be changed and that they can be changed and must be changed.

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