

POST-COLONIAL SOCIAL AND METAPHORIC UNTOUCHABILITY IN THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

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Arundhati Roy's Booker Prize winner *The God of Small Things* is a bildungsroman novel that gives an account of the childhood experiences of the fraternal twins and the people around them. The novel unfolds a series of small things that change the lives of people. Though much of the story is told from the viewpoint of the seven-year old children, the titular protagonist of the novel, Velutha, is an "untouchable" or "the god of small things". Through the novel, Roy depicts the social disillusionment of the lower caste people in the South Indian State, Kerala. Despite being legitimate members of a secular democracy built upon the values of freedom, equality, and justice, the plight of the "untouchables" remain the same in a hostile post-colonial society.

The complete appreciation of *The God of Small Things* is possible only when consider the socio-economic conditions in Kerala with some significant factors such as the caste system, communism, and the Syrian Christian Community. Due to its socio-political references, the novel has been subject to fierce criticism from different corners of the society. Though Roy doesn't apply the Dickensian direct realistic portrayal of the oppressed classes, much of the approach is humanistic. This does not imply that *The God of Small Things* is completely didactic in nature, as we find abundant experiments in the novel in terms of style and diction. So the novel is significant both as piece of art as well as a humanistic criticism of life.

Roy employs her portrayal of the downtrodden through the hardships that Velutha encounter as the novel progresses. He is a *Paravanor* an "untouchable" in a society where the status of human beings are determined by the caste they belong to. Class relations, social discrimination, forbidden love, and betrayal are the recurring themes that lead to the tragic end of Velutha by the "touchable boots" of the state police. Velutha works at the Paradise Pickles and Preserves Factory that belonged to the family of Ammu, with whom he has an affair. He is intelligent, and an excellent carpenter and mechanic at the factory. Despite his expertise, he is resented by other workers, and is comparatively low-paid because of his lower social status. This condition still prevails in many parts of India where people are paid according to their social status. Large scales of exploitation at work place are prevalent even after six decades of Independent India. We may find abundant examples of such themes in the novels of writers like Mulk Raj Anand. The mechanisms of power politics often work in favour of the powerful in the society and the basic rights of the downtrodden are always denied. Roy's true of life approach and socially conscious references come from her commitment to the causes of the oppressed classes as she states:

The theme of much of what I write, fiction as well as non-fiction, is the relationship between power and powerlessness and the endless, circular conflict they're engaged in. John Berger, that most wonderful writer, once

wrote: 'Never again will a single story be told as though it's the only one'. There can never be a single story. There are only ways of seeing. So when I tell a story, I tell it not as an ideologue who wants to pit one absolutist ideology against another, but as a story-teller who wants to share her way of seeing. Though it might appear otherwise, my writing is not really about nations and histories, it's about power. About the paranoia and ruthlessness of power. About the physics of power. I believe that the accumulation of vast unfettered power by a State or a country, a corporation or an institution -- or even an individual, a spouse, friend or sibling -- regardless of ideology, results in excesses such as the ones I will recount here (Roy, 13-14).

Roy presents the true story of a "forbidden love" through Velutha's affair with Ammu. Here, he breaks the rigid rules of the society where a lower caste man cannot dream of an affair with a woman like Ammu. The concept of untouchability is basically rooted in the traditional Hindu system, but the attitude towards the untouchables doesn't change in the upper class Syrian Christians of Kerala. Even after conversion to Christianity, the lower caste people continue to be untouchable as we find separate churches for them. When the truth about Velutha's love is discovered, he must be punished by the social norms. He has to suffer under the boots of the state police. His affair makes him accept the punishments for the crimes that he has not committed. He is accused of murder, rape attempt, kidnapping and so on. This is a realistic picture of a democratic society where the innocent people have to conform to the demands of the authorities that work for the benefits of the vested interests. It happens in a society where we find "civilization's fear of nature, men's fear of women, power's fear of powerlessness" (292).

The novel has been widely discussed for its political overtones also. It portrays how the communist system in Kerala fails to address the caste related issues. Kerala is the first Indian state to form a democratically elected communist government. In *The God of Small Things* Roy engages with the political legacy of communism in Kerala. His satirical portrayal of E.M.S. Namboodiripad, the first Chief Minister and his party followers created many controversies. Apart from the political criticism, a humanistic reading of the text reveals the sad plight of the lower caste, even in the political system supported by the proletarian values. What Roy implies is that the Marxist party in Kerala worked from within the communal divides, never challenging them. Velutha, despite being a member of the party, does not get help from the party leader Comrade Pillia. Pillia's double standard distances himself from Velutha in order to get support from the factory owner and other workers who hate a Paravan. At the end, Velutha is betrayed by his party men, and is mercilessly beaten to death. Here, Pillia and the police inspector Thomas Mathew are the "mechanics who serviced different parts of the same machine" (Chapter 13-p.262). In this manner, despite being an intelligent and an excellent carpenter, Velutha becomes "the God of loss" or "the God of small things". His lack of complacency causes him many hardships throughout the novel. "It was not entirely his fault that he lived in a society where a man's death could be more profitable than his life had ever been" (267). When he succumbs to death, "he left no footprints in sand, no ripples in water, no images in mirror" (p.265).

Along with the socially untouchables, Roy describes the condition of the metaphoric untouchables in higher castes. Ammu, the most important female character in *The God of Small Things*, serves the best example. A middle class bourgeois woman, she is a divorcee with two children, Eshta and Rahel. Educated and articulate, Ammu is not welcome on her return to her father's house. Roy depicts Ammu as the marginalized daughter in a patriarchal society.

Ammu finished her schooling the same year that her father retired from his job in Delhi and moved to Ayemenem. Pappachi insisted that a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl, so Ammu had no choice but to leave Delhi and move with them. There was very little for a young girl to do in Ayemenem other than wait for marriage proposals while she helped her mother with the housework. Since her father did not have enough money to raise a suitable dowry, no proposals came Ammu's way. Two years went by. Her eighteenth birthday came and went. Unnoticed, or at least unremarked upon by her parents. Ammu grew desperate. All day she dreamed of escaping from Ayemenem and the clutches of her ill-tempered father and bitter, long-suffering mother (38).

Ammu, another "untouchable" within the "touchable", suffer because of the circumstances surrounding her. Her marginalization is successfully implemented by her elite leftist brother Chacko. She is also cornered by the family structure and inheritance laws customarily prevalent among the Syrian Christian community in Kerala. Ammu's rebellion against maternal and marital conventionality, and finally, her "love by night the man her children love by day" constitutes a violation against a determinate social order. Her love for Velutha, in fact, is the only relief in the hostile society, and she has to pay the price for her choice. Rahel and Estha, being born to a suffering mother, also suffer and keep separated by the hostile system.

Throughout the novel, Roy portrays an ongoing struggle of the powerless and "reminds us that godlike authority, when it manifests itself on a large 'monolithic' scale in religious, governmental or social forms, rarely allows power to be shared evenly among everyone and often maintains control by marginalizing particular groups" (Tickell, p.11). Arundhati Roy indeed needs appraisal for exposing this foul play of postcolonial India to the entire world. "Of course, there has been numerous works on this theme before this novel, but the fact that this novel went on to win the Booker Prize has definitely brought Roy and her novel much more appraisal than the other writers" (Shukla, p.967). Roy's humanistic appeal is further reiterated in her prose writings and social activism. She is now best known as a social worker, raising voice for the various oppressed classes in India. She is unequivocal when she articulates for the downtrodden, even if it does not satisfy the interests of the authorities.

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