

**POLITICAL OPPORTUNISM AND STATE VIOLENCE: PROBLEMS OF DALITS  
IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS**

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**Abstract**

This paper aims to bring out the problems of Dalits that are reflected in Arundhati Roy's 'The God of Small Things.' The protagonist an untouchable carpenter, and the members of his family are harassed by several agencies in society. He is deprived of constitutional rights and betrayed by a so-called progressive political party.

While the State, that has assured all its citizens of Liberty, Equality and Justice, fails to protect the underdog from oppression and State – violence, a local leader of the political party, a self proclaimed revolutionary party, fuels the violence on the dalit youth. Ms. Roy's treatment of the problems of the Fourth World people is both sympathetic and empathetic.

The aim of this paper is to observe and analyze how political opportunism betrays the lowest of the lowly while one of the wings State machinery indulges in fake - encounters killing the underdog with impunity, amidst boiling and boisterous political situation in 1969, in Kerala. The story of the novel springs out of several historical incidents of the day. When the historical truths fall under the scope of the research, the material conditions of society should inevitably be analyzed. Hence the objective of this paper is to analyze the problems of the outcastes, exploring production relations of the society in particular place in a particular period. In order to achieve the objectives mentioned above Dialectical and Historical Materialistic method is employed. It, being propounded by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, studies the laws of motion, change and development of nature, of society and of human thought. - ( words-280)

Mao says, the U.S.A and the U. S. S. R. constitute the First World, Centrist Japan, Europe, Australia and Canada are considered the Second World, and China - like countries are the Third World. While India represents the Third World, Ms. Roy's protagonist, Velutha, being deprived of liberty, equality and justice, represents the Fourth World, the oppressed among the oppressed. The hierarchy structure of feudal society does not accept Velutha's intense longing for equality. His liberty of making love is curbed. He is unjustifiably killed at the hands of the police in a fake encounter.

Private right over the means of production has been the basis for the emergence of classes and class - contradictions, in society. Such society is mainly split up into two classes – propertied class which is oppressive and the property less class, the oppressed. While the former is the ruling class, the latter, the ruled. In accordance with the social dynamics, if the latter is united, social and political revolutions will take place, if disintegrated into several classes and sections, based on castes, creed, religion etc., the society will become chaotic and the abode of inequalities and crimes. Hierarchy structure is the chief characteristic of Indian society which is notorious for its rigid social stratification. People live with superiors over their heads and inferiors below their feet. Most miserably, the dalits, are cursed and destined to live at the lowest rung of ladder of the hierarchy structure of feudal and capitalist - Indian society, being the victims of oppression by several agencies. It is a pathetic social reality that has been prevalent for the ages in our country.

Dalits are untouchables and they have been deprived of human rights in so – called civilized Indian society, ever since the dawn of civilization. And therefore, it is the duty of the Government in Democracy to protect the constitutional rights of the most oppressed. If the Government fails to do so, it is the basic responsibility of the contemporary politics. Ironically, the dalits in Roy's The God of small Things are harassed even by the police, one of the crucial wings of state – machinery and by the revisionist politics of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), a self - proclaimed revolutionary party during the late years of 1960's. These historical, social and political conditions are picturesquely reflected in this novel and the story of which is set up in Ayemenem, a provincial town of Kottayam district in Kerala, in 1969, while, Naxalbari revolutionary movement was spreading across the country, producing tremors in the hearts of the ruling class. Ms. Roy says,

“The Naxalite movement spread across the country and struck terror in every bourgeois heart. In Kerala they breathed a plume of excitement and fear into the already frightened air...” – (p 68)

### **Political Opportunism :**

Karl Marx and Frederick Engels say,

“They” (communists ) “have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole” - (Manifesto of the Communist Party , Visalaandra pub. p. 49.)

Contrary to the Marxist philosophy, as the authour depicts in the novel, the political agenda of the C P I (M), is so framed - keeping aside the people's agenda which can

eliminate exploitation from society - that the leaders of the same Party could become treacherous for the mere self interests and self promotion.

Comrade K N M Pillai, the local leader of Ayemenem makes Marxism a means which will fetch him bright political career. Every move, he makes, is for personal gains, not for the progress of revolution. He never laments upon his part in the killing of Velutha, a sincere party worker.

“Though his part in the whole thing had by no means been a small one, Comrade Pillai didn’t hold himself in any way personally responsible for what had happened. He dismissed the whole business as the Inevitable Consequence of Necessary Politics.” - (p 14).

When the secret sensual liaison between Ammu and Velutha is leaked out, Ammu is locked up and Velutha is banished from Ayemenem house and threatened with dire consequences. Velutha straight away goes to K N M Pillai, seeking justice and protection in vain. Pillai unveils his oppressive upper caste nature and blames Velutha saying,

“But comrade, you should know that Party was not constituted to support workers’ indiscipline in their private life. ... It is not in the Party’s interests to take up such matters. Individuals’ interest is subordinate to the organization’s interests. Violating Party Discipline means violating Party Unity.” – (p 287)

In fact, no Communist Party is constituted to support workers’ indiscipline in their private life. Velutha’s sincere love of Ammu should not be considered a deed of indiscipline. On the contrary, it signifies his rebellious mind and courage to face any consequences from the narrow – minded stream of society. Velutha doesn’t care caste barriers. He looks, sits, stands and works as other touchable persons do, to the horror of his father, who obeys the socially drawn lines. It would have been Velutha’s individual interest, had his love been accepted by the members of Ayemenem house. But, in the casteist society, that could never be dreamt of. Moreover, several sections of the oppressed class would join the oppressive class and play very active role in attacking the lowest of the lowly, in this regard. And so Velutha’s love affair can no longer be an individual interest. It is a public issue. Therefore, standing in support of the most suppressed and depressed and uniting all workers (the oppressed classes and sections) should be the prime duty of the Communist Party and while the CPI (M) deserted this line, the Naxalites embraced it, having been expelled from the CPI (M). That is why the oppressors are always panicky about the presence and rise of the Naxalites.

“They only worried about the Naxalites, who had been known to force men from Good families to marry servant girls whom they had made pregnant.” - (p 168)

The CPI (M) aims at mere political power without disturbing the exploitative social order. It is this aspect makes the Party become an abode of petty bourgeois, ego-centric intellectuals who could just quote the jargon of revolution, putting feudalistic life style in practice. Comrade K N M Pillai in the novel quotes Maoist rhetoric, attempting to turn the masses into a reliable vote - bank for his candidature in the by- elections of State Legislative Assembly. He also knows that Velutha is resented as a carpenter by the

other workers in the factory and, turning against him endears him to the touchable envious workers. Moreover, Velutha is also a card - holding member in the Party, to the apprehension of Comrade K N M Pillai.

That is why, he intentionally hides the identity of Velutha when Thomas Mathew, the Station House Officer, enquired about Velutha (when Baby Kochamma had filed a kidnap and attempt to rape case – a false feudal allegation - against Velutha.) The C P I (M) with its political agenda is held responsible for all the cunning moves of Comrade Pillai who has selfish ends and who does not hesitate to backstab his own devoted cadre and the needy.

### **State Violence :**

The State, that has granted fundamental rights to its citizens, also cannot prevent the Forth World from being harassed by its machinery. The legitimate power is misused by the unfair government officials. Thomas Mathew is one such official. He has a very low opinion about Paravans. While Baby Kochamma lodges complaint against Velutha, Thomas chides her saying,

“You people, first you spoil these people, carry them about on your head like trophies, then when they misbehave you come running to us for help.” – (p 261)

He calls Comrade Pillai and enquires whether Velutha is a member of the C P I (M), the then ruling party in Kerala. In this context, the author depicts how the other sections of society, including state – machinery get united to suppress dalits especially, when dalits cross the drawn lines.

“The two men had a conversation. Brief, cryptic, to the point. As they had exchanged numbers and not words. No explanation seemed necessary. They were not friends, Comrade Pillai and Inspector Thomas Mathew, and they didn't trust each other. But they understood each other perfectly. ... They looked out at the world and never wondered how it worked, because they knew. They worked it. They were mechanics who serviced different parts of the same machine.” – (p 262)

Having been satisfied with the information supplied by K N M Pillai and Baby Kochamma, Inspector Thomas Mathew instructs his men to hunt down Velutha. Thomas Mathew's satisfaction is resulted out of his caste – chauvinistic outlook, and aversion of outcastes. The Police who ought to be unprejudiced, become prejudiced and kill Velutha who is falsely alleged to have molested an un upper caste widow. They are infuriated at the thought of an untouchable touching an upper -caste woman. The novelist describes scornfully, the way the unjustifiably infuriated policemen move close to the man who they already unduly considered a convict.

“They positioned themselves strategically. Crouching by ... Like Film-policemen. Softly, softly through the grass Batons in their hands. Machine - guns in their minds. Responsibility for the Touchable future on their thin but able shoulders.” - ( p 307 )

They find their target in the back verandah. Velutha, being asleep is not aware of the game played by the Policemen. ‘... nonsense of all that touchable cunning’ - (p 308). They wake up Velutha with their boots. They beat Velutha and break his rib instead of presenting him before the magistrate. Those who are supposed to be the defenders of law, break them with impunity.

“Impelled by feelings that were primal yet paradoxically wholly impersonal. Feelings of contempt born of inchoate, unacknowledged fear – civilizations fear of nature, men’s fear of women, power’s fear of powerlessness. - (p 308 )

Instead of arresting and interrogating Velutha within the law, the policemen, the ‘New - Age princes’ take law into their hands and smash him. They harm Velutha more than ‘they intend to’. The reason for this merciless attack is simple -- Velutha is an untouchable and ‘had been severed as a fellow creature long ago.’ - (p 309 )

Their harassment of the helpless underdog is not stopped at physical violence and so they begin to afflict him mentally, though Velutha is not conscious enough to be aware of all such ugliness of the six policemen. The policemen notice Velutha’s painted nails. One of them holds them up and waves the fingers flirtatiously at his counterparts. They laugh. Their atrocious behavior further reaches its extremity when one of them, doing nonsense, says,

“Come on, show us your special secret ...” Then he lifts his boot and brings it ‘down with a soft thud.’ - (p 311 )

Later, they lock his arms across his back, take him under their custody and move to the Kottayem Police Station where in Velutha - the god of small things - who left ‘no ripples in the water and no foot prints in the sand,’ dies.

## CONCLUSION

Literature should make the people face the repression and fight it. Karl Marx says,

‘The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is, however to change it.’

- (Thesis on Feuerbach from Robin Clapp’s article)

Therefore the writers, who are also the philosophers, cannot confine themselves to the mere description of the social life. They ought to write to motivate and mobilize people to fight the repression. Varavara Rao, the eminent Telugu revolutionary poet and critic says that when we read either history or fiction, it should, in return, propel us to create a new history. It should also instill confidence in us that we shall have our own history and culture in near future. But, Arundhati Roy, has not made any such attempt in the novel,

Ms. Roy heartrendingly depicts the problems of dalits and the injustices they are put to even by political opportunism and by the propertied - classes - favoured - State machinery. It is the exploitative production system that has been basis for cruel social discrimination and brutal oppression on dalits and liberation of dalits is only possible with removal of the exploitative production relations from society. But she doesn’t suggest any way out for the Fourth World to emancipate themselves from the pangs of oppression. She does not discuss the contemporary Production system which had been existing in the back drop of the failure of Gandhian Political Thought and Nehruvian



Socialism in India during the 1960's. All the social evils, she condemns in the novel, are the inevitable consequences of the contemporary production system. But, She has seen and shown that the problems of the oppressed are created by the aspects of the superstructure and she leaves the production system untouched. She has not shown the cause and effect between the semi - feudal, bourgeois productive forces and the production relations in the contemporary society.

However, unless, it is too reactionary, there would be something good in every writing. Marx says that he understood a great deal about the contemporary social milieu of France from the writings of Balzac (1799 – 1850) who supported bourgeois social structure. So, Ms. Roy's *The God of Small Things* also helps us understand the social matrix of India during 1960s.

## GLOSSARY

Kochamma	-	A standard female honorific title in Kerala.
Paravan	-	Untouchable
Production relations	-	Property relations or material conditions of social life.
Productive forces	-	Land, Labour, tools which are required in Production.
Production system	-	Both Productive forces, and Production relations are together called the production system of a country.
State	-	A country considered as an organized political community controlled by one government. The institutions such as police, courts, jails etc., which help the Government to rule the people.
State machinery	-	The institutions such as police, courts, jails etc., which help the Government to rule the people
State Violence	-	Violence by the State - run institutions i.e. State - machinery.
Classes	-	Groups of people in a society that are thought of as being at the same social or economic level.
Class struggle	-	Struggle between the two main classes - exploiters and the exploited. In Slavery - masters and slaves.

- In Feudalism - feudal lords and peasants.  
In Capitalism - capitalists and workers.
- Bourgeois (adj) - Supporting the interests of Capitalism.
- Petty Bourgeois (adj) - Belonging to Petty Bourgeoisie.
- Naxalism - A Revolutionary Communist Political thought.
- Naxalite - A person who believes in Naxalism.
- Class enemies - The oppressors and their supporters.
- Karl Marx - Proponent of Dialectical and Historical Materialism and founder of scientific socialism.
- Frederick Engels - Close associate of Karl Marx. Proponent of Dialectical and Historical Materialism and founder of scientific socialism.
- Mao - The Chairman of The Communist Party of China. And the founder of Peoples Republic of China.

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