

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and the question of caste in narratives by non-dalit writers

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Abstract

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is a novel which can be interpreted at multiple levels; ranging from a satire on politics, dealing with the question of casteism, patriarchy, a family saga of four generations of a Syrian Christian family or a love story with a tragic end. The novel brings to the foreground the hierarchical structures of power, and oppression at various levels in patriarchal societies. Arundhati Roy explores how the differences of caste, class, gender and race function through social institutions and the manner in which they affect human interactions and relationships and impinge on individual desires. The novel succeeded in stirring the consciousness of its readers when it first appeared, where Roy treading the similar terrain as Mulk Raj Anand in his novel *Untouchable* (1935), displayed fresh perspectives on an age old tradition and the novel also went on to bag the prestigious Booker prize for literature.

Keywords: caste, untouchability, patriarchy, discriminatory practices, marxism, christianity

Introduction

"Most Indian writers of the modern period, like Bankim Chatterjee, Ratnanath Sarshar and Rabindranath Tagore had not accepted in their novels that even the so-called lowest drag of humanity, living in utmost poverty, could become heroes of fiction." (Mulk Raj Anand)

Untouchability finds endorsement from the canonical Brahmanical texts and the term was used to define those who were outside the folds of *varna* system, and quite literally, were also outside the folds of humanity, they were forced to live on the peripheries and since they were made to perform menial jobs, hence the untouchables were rendered "polluting" in the Brahmanical ritual notion of purity and pollution. And hence, their contact was considered ritually polluting. Consequently, these untouchables were compelled to live on the fringes of the village, far away from the upper castes and outside the folds of the Hindu religion. Ironically, the social and religious significance of the tasks performed by the untouchables made them an indispensable part of the social and cultural order.

The novel is set in Ayemenem, a small village in Kerala. In the novel, Roy examines how even after fifty years of Independence, in spite of social and political movement of B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956) and the political and social affirmative action taken by the Indian state for the uplift of the ex-untouchables (now known as Dalits) in the form of the Untouchability Offences Act passed in 1955 followed by the Protection of Civil Rights Act in 1976, the social evil of untouchability exists and persists in Indian society. The discriminatory nature of caste system is shown by Roy when she depicts the miserable conditions of untouchables and how they were treated as sub-human entities. There was a time when:

Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan's footprint...

They had to put their hands over their mouths when they spoke, to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed (73- 74).

When the British arrived in Malabar, a number of Paravans, Pelayas and Pulayas (among whom Kelan, Velutha's grandfather, was one) converted to Christianity and joined the Anglican Church to escape the menace of Untouchability. They came to be known as Rice-Christians because they were given some food and money by the British. But there too, they suffered humiliation and caste-distinction. They came to realize their predicament when they "were made to have separate churches, with separate services, and separate priests" (75). It is ironical that Church makes a distinction between higher caste and lower caste, suggesting the inherent gap between theory and practice. The dawn of Independence slightly improved their condition, but the novelist sees no such improvement because they were not entitled to "any Government benefits like job reservations or bank loans at low interest rates..." (74). As for Velutha, Mammachi takes pity on him and asks his father to send him to the Untouchables' School and later employs him as a skilled carpenter in her factory. By nature, he is bold and fearless whereas his father remains humble and servile, as he is "an Old World Paravan" (76). He does not conceal the secret bonds of love between his son and Ammu and even offers to kill his son with his own bare hands (78). This shows how the low caste people have gratitude for their benefactors and have internalized the caste system.

The transgressors of history's laws in this novel are Ammu and Velutha belonging to two diametrically opposite strata of the social hierarchy who also brings the question of the endogamy to the forefront. Velutha had joined the Communist Party assuming it to be a forum of protest and a benefactor of the poor and the downtrodden, without realizing that as a progressive/reformist movement, Communism in India has "never overtly questioned the traditional values of a caste-ridden, extremely traditional community" (66). The Marxists have always walked within the communal divides, never challenging the deep-seated caste issues and the bigotry of the higher caste people. Since the social forces that represented the Marxist and social groups belonged to the same brahmanical upper and middle class.

The novel also foregrounds the gender discrimination in the Ayemenem house as on one hand, Ammu's education is put to an abrupt end whereas Chacko is sent to Oxford to complete his studies. Both Ammu and Chacko choose their partners and get divorced but there is difference in treatment meted out to them when they return to their ancestral home; Ammu is considered a liability but Chacko is welcomed. Ammu divorces her husband when he, suspended from his job for alcoholism, sought to regain it by procuring his wife to his boss, Mr. Hollick, the English Manager of the tea estate. When she returns to her ancestral home, her father refuses to believe that "an Englishman... would covet another man's wife" (42), suggesting the legacies of British imperialism and the racist logic it produces have a deep impact on the family relationships. In the beginning, Ammu tells her children not to visit his place as she is scared it might cause some trouble. But it seemed all three of them cared and loved the same person, a paravan. Velutha is loved and endeared by Ammu's children who, neglected and relegated to the periphery of the social play and greedy for affection, find in him a surrogate father. It created a bonding amongst them for she loved the same person at night, whom her children loved by day. And it is unfortunate to know when "all three of them bonded by the certain separate knowledge that they had loved a man to death" (324). The high caste Mammachi and Baby Kochamma are furious at this affair between a lower caste and upper caste as "Ammu's affair with Velutha takes on a disproportionate size in the minds of a religious community which has incorporated ancient Hindu laws and practices into an imported Christianity." The irony also lies in the fact that upper caste men don't get polluted when they have physical intimacy with low caste women as Chacko continues to exploit women at the factory where Mammachi and Baby Kochamma see nothing wrong with "Chacko's Marxist mind and feudal libido" (168), but Mammachi, Ammu's mother, who has been ill-treated by her husband in the past, shows her indignation at Ammu being able to love Velutha, she remarks:

How could she stand the smell?...They have a particular smell, these Paravans. (257)

We can see how the patriarchal world view operates within the caste ideology.

While an elaborate conspiracy is enacted by the combine of Syrian Christians, caste Hindu Marxists and touchable policemen to terrorize the beleaguered Paravan in which the children—Rahel and Estha—are tricked into being accomplices. Velutha who is dismissed from job, insufferably insulted by his employer and betrayed by the Party leader, Pillai, who always delivers high-pitched speeches about the Rights of Untouchables ("Caste is class, Comrades" [281]), takes shelter in the deserted house, known as History House, looming in the heart of darkness on the other side of the river. The children, too, take refuge in the same house consequent upon the accidental death of their English cousin, Sophie Mol, by drowning in the river and the unintentional avowal of their shocked, enraged mother that they are millstones around her neck. Subsequently, Roy conjures up the scene of steady, pre-meditated brutality of a posse of touchable policemen sent to hound the transgressor, 'abandoned by God and History, by Marx' (310) and crush him. The scene "The History House" becomes all the more disturbing because it is enacted before the

awe-struck, mesmerized eyes of the innocent children so far unacquainted with "the boundless, infinitely inventive art of human hatred" (236).

As soon as Ammu came to know about it, she rushed to the police station to tell the truth, but the treatment that she received at the hands of the Station House Officer shows how pitiable is the condition of women in the society, particularly when a woman is a divorcee and has loved an untouchable. The author drops a large hint that the police officer knows that he can freely insult this woman without any fear or compunction: he has the sanction of the society. The officer represents the society's attitude to a woman who has loved outside the rules of "Love Laws." And, Chacko, Ammu's brother had already threatened her with all the authority of a patriarch in his own house: "Get out of my house before I break every bone in your body" (255). So, having no means anywhere, she had to leave and die helpless, sick, alone in a hotel. She died at the age of thirty – one, "Not old, not young, but a viable, die-able age" (161).

Ammu calls Chacko, "an Oxford avatar of the old zamindar mentality- a landlord forcing his attentions on women who depended on him for their livelihood" (65). And it is with regard to Velutha, the Paravan that Chacko's Marxist-Christian leanings are tested and found hollow. Velutha's only fault is that he has a couple of years of schooling unlike his elders. He has also trained himself to become a skilful carpenter. He had a way with machines which made him indispensable at the factory. He was hired as the factory carpenter and allowed to enter the factory premises and touch things that touchables touch and had acquired an 'unwarranted assurance' which became a cause for resentment for the workers at the factory. Chacko wants Velutha to "remain only an excellent carpenter with an engineer's mind."

The factory is mainly preoccupied with keeping everyone in their communal position, that is, as mentioned earlier, women are paid less for their work and allowed to earn more through forced sexual relations pointing towards the exploitation of women in the factory, quite ironically, called Paradise, which is a place of exploitation of women and Untouchables as Velutha, in spite of being a skilled carpenter is paid less than a touchable carpenter only because he is an untouchable. Pillai sees the danger of Velutha receiving the special treatment he receives in Chacko's factory which he fears might antagonize the other laborers. He therefore asks Chacko to send Velutha away and get him a job elsewhere. Events after Sophie Mol's death take such a turn that Velutha does not have to be thrown out by Chacko and his family for the viciousness of Baby Kochamma, the heartless disowning of Velutha by Pillai and the savage brutality of the Police together conspire to have him dead.

Through these events, Arundhati Roy contemplates over certain political developments in India, such as the dawn of Independence, the formation of the Congress Government at the Centre, and the spread of Communism in Kerala and West Bengal. In her view, the Indian society ridden by caste considerations and religious prejudices has not improved even after Independence. Roy has remarkably portrayed the nature of functioning of Communism in her State with a veiled reference to Comrade E.M.S. Namboodiripad, through the character of Comrade K.N.M. Pillai. After winning the State Assembly elections in 1957, the government was headed by E.M.S Nambooridipad as the chief minister. But within the next two years, Kerala is on the brink of a civil war, and Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru dismisses the communist government,

announcing fresh elections. E.M.S Nambudiripad, later returned to power in Kerala after ten years.

“He walked through the world like a chameleon. Never revealing himself, never appearing not to. Emerging through chaos unscathed” (14), Pillai is not repentant, for what had happened to Velutha and Ammu, though he vividly recalls their tragic end. But Comrade Pillai leaves no opportunity to benefit from Velutha’s death too. It is ironical that though Velutha had been denied any support, Pillai sees to it that he gives such a statement to the press, which would benefit his profile of an upcoming politician. Comrade Pillai Claimed that the Management had implicated the Paravan in a false case because he was an active member of the communist Party. That they wanted to eliminate him for indulging in ‘Lawful Union activities’. Comrade Pillai had used his power and the police would use its power. In short, Pillai is portrayed as a suspicious and scheming man, who always looks to his personal gains and advances in life.

The novelist tries to explain why Communism is so successful in Kerala, perhaps in Bengal too. The main reasons suggested by her are: it has something to do with the large population of Christians in Kerala, and Marxism is a simple substitute for Christianity: “Replace God with Marx, Satan with the bourgeoisie, Heaven with a classless society, the Church with the Party, and the form and purpose of the journey remained similar” (66), and it has to do something with the comparatively high level of literacy in the State. The reasons why Pillai did this are many and they help the reader to understand how ideology makes room for adjustment once the ideologues are in power. The political critique points to the personal impact of state violence and structural inequality.

Consequently, *The God of Small Things* follows a nonlinear narrative structure, alternating between an account of the events that unfold for the twins Estha and Rahel in 1969 and their consequences more than Twenty years later when brother and sister are reunited as adults. They go against the rules and make Velutha, who is a *paravan*, an untouchable, their God. The world seen and experienced through Rahel and Estha brings about a recognition of the difference between the world of children and that of the adults. The twins witness the brutal killing of their beloved friend Velutha. Baby Kochamma bribes Estha into giving a false word against Velutha in exchange for ‘saving Ammu’. He lives with the guilt of this action for a lifetime. Rahel grows up without any love or concern, shifting from school to school. Her marriage cannot fill the emptiness within her. She ultimately divorces her husband and returns to Ayemenem for Estha. Saving Ammu at the cost of Velutha, according to Baby Kochamma was a small price to pay. The price is: “Two lives. Two children’s childhoods. And a history lesson for future offenders” (336).

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