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ARUNDHATI ROY'S "THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS": A STUDY OF UNHEARD VOICES

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ABSTRACT



The present research article is an attempt to show how the internationally acclaimed writer Arundhati Roy who is deeply rooted in her native national culture highlight and analyze the major issues of the contemporary society in her novel *The God Of Small Things*. It is a protest against all forms of exploitation based on class, marginalized, under-privileged ;poverty ,social discrimination, injustice, exploitation and the cruelty of man-to-man been the principal concerns . If we peep into the history of literature we can perceive the same, where literature of early period exposed the facade truth of the society, and many modern writers joined in the group and raised their voices throughout their writings to bring awareness among the masses and to bring a revolution in the society. Some worth mentioning authors of the contemporary period to be mentioned here like Salman Rushdie, Kamala Markandaya, Arundhati Roy, Mulk Raj Anand, Anita Desai, Manju Kapoor and many more of the contemporary literature who represents the age through their specific works. Their writing deals with the major issues of the society of every age. That is why the literature of earlier times cast a new picture of socio-political thought to the modern itself. Today our society faces tremendous problem under the influence of politics and power, which makes the innocent people its ladder to climb and to have the ripe fruit of development, and this issue directly or indirectly pepped out in the writings of the contemporary writers too. Arundhati Roy acclaimed to be one of them who reflected those issues without any hesitation . Roy deal with many social factors that damage society such as caste system in its worst form. She portray the social realities of her time in the novel.

Keywords: Cast system, Humiliation, Voiceless, Discrimination, Untouchable, Oppressed , Marginalized , Poverty ,Injustice.

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INTRODUCTION

Literature is an expression of life and society in which it grows and develops that is why authors have a direct associations with the society and its values . It has some purposes to fulfill, some thoughts to be contemplated and some plans to be acted upon for the welfare of humanity. When it broods upon such different things, it witnesses

changes taking place in life and society, and, therefore, these changes are reflected in literary works. In its corrective function literature projects the ills of the society with a view to making the society realize its mistake and make amends. Indian English literature is also doing the same thing. Today, when India is a democratic country, Indian English writers are now writing with a new zeal and

confidence, blending social aspects and phenomenal situations in their literary works. Indian English literature written during the pre-independence period and post –independence period is the representation of its period ,where more or less the writers penned down the social issues in their writings. Arundhati Roy portray her characters with the knowledge of her own understanding and personal experience in reality she faced in life .To some extent, she bring out her real-life experiences and the India she witnessed .

Arundhati Roy is a great novelist with a mission. Her aim is to evoke compassion in the minds of the upper class and privileged sections of the society for the poor. Of the writers of Indian writing in English Arundhati Roy stands out as the lone voice that lent voice to the sufferings of the socially and legally voiceless communities of India through her writings .Her novel expose the silent passions that burst in the hearts of the people who are forbidden to rise up and express themselves. Her purpose in writing fiction has been to focus attention on the suffering, misery and wretchedness of the poor and the down-trodden people of the society .Arundhati Roy, in one of her interview , rightly holds the view :

“Fiction for me has been a way of trying to make sense of the world as I know it .It is located very close to me _ this book . It is located in the village I grew up in .If I had to put it very simply. It is about trying to make the connection between the smallest of things and the biggest ones and to see how they fit together.”

A work that can undoubtedly be called the book of the decades is the much discussed *The God Of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy .The Booker citation describes the novel as one written with extra ordinary linguistic inventiveness. Roy reveals a child’s vision of the adults world in this novel in one sense, she herself being an “unprotected child in some ways” (as it was reported in an interview).

The novel can be said to be about several other things. Those interested in politics can claim that it is a satire on politics—communist establishment, to be more specific. One can call it a protest novel which is radical, subversive and taboo-

breaking. Still another way may be that it tells the story of a family .Those worried about religion can certainly give a religious tone to it. An anti-establishment dimension can also be given to the novel if one wishes to do so. The book has in it a strong position taken against the way the ‘untouchable’ are treated in the society.

Arundhati Roy is appalled at the barbarous treatment meted out to the lower section of the society, even in this postcolonial age. In this regard, she says that:

"Fifty years after independence, India is still struggling with the legacy of colonialism, still flinching from the cultural insult (and) we are still caught up in the business of "disproving" the white world's definition of us"¹.

The God of Small Things is a saga of unheard voices from several point of view .Almost all the characters in the novel have something to say about their loss .Even the minor characters are not an exception to this rule .Roy draws a large canvas and the novel unfolds the story it is not the characters alone who ‘suffers’ in the novel. For Roy it is Ayemenem which has a story to tell of its old glory .Even the opening sentences of the novel are about Ayemenem where we get a description of the summer in Ayemenem,

“May in Ayemenem is a hot, brooding month. The days are long and humid. The river shrinks and black crows gorge on bright mangoes in still, dustgreen trees. Red bananas ripen. Jack-fruits bursts . Dissolute bluebottles hum vacuously in the fruity air .Then they stun themselves against clear windowpanes and die, fatly baffled in the sun”(Roy¹).

There was a time when Ayemenem was known for its freshness ,an unpolluted river and matchless greenery which made life pleasant for the people there .But when the characters in the novel started losing their dreams .Ayemenem did not stand a mute witness .It also started changing ,changing for the worse to match perhaps the unscrupulousness of some of the characters in the novel The discrimination is perpetrated by a group of the

characters who are themselves the sufferers of injustice.

Roy lashes out at the hypocritical moral code of society. It exposes the double standards of morality in society regarding men and woman. Ammu's tragedy began even when she was very young. It followed her like a shadow right up to the last moment in her life. Chacko was sent to Britain to study further but Ammu was not allowed to do so. The reason is that she is a woman and so she has no right to go to college, because the college corrupts a woman, "Pappachi insisted that a college education was a unnecessary expense for a girl; She should wait for marriage proposals while she helped her mother with the housework. Since her father not have enough money to raise a suitable dowry" (Roy 38).

The people who were dear to her in one way or other made her lead a miserable life. While taking a break at an Aunt's place in Calcutta, she chanced upon a sober-looking Hindu Bengali from the tea estates in Assam, and without looking back stepped into matrimony. She never pretended to be in love with him. Who she found was unfit to be called a husband. Instead, she weighed the odds and accepted the proposal. She thought that

"thing, anyone at all, would be better than returning to Ayemenem" (Roy 39).

Even though she wrote to her parents about her decision they never cared to respond to the letter. slowly married life began to become unbearable to her. Drunken violence continued and she had no option but to return to her parents house:

"To everything that she had fled from only a few years ago. Except that now she had two young children. And no more dreams" (Roy 42).

Meanwhile, Baby Kochamma was never at peace with Ammu. She subscribed whole-heartedly to the commonly held view that a married daughter had no position in her parent's home. As for a *divorced* daughter....she had no position anywhere at all. And as for a *divorced* daughter from a love marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochamma's outrage. As for a *divorced* daughter from a *intercommunity love* marriage –Baby Kochamma

chose to remain quiveringly silent on the subject (Roy 45-46).

Roy also throws light on the condition of the upbringing of children, especially of the divorced mother. The maltreatment of Rahel by men in Abhilash Talkies had great impact on her future life. The breakup of Ammu's marriage has its repercussion in the lives of her children. Baby Kochamma hates Estha and Rahel, "She was always keen for them to realize that they lived on sufferance in the Ayemenem House, their maternal grandmother's house where they really had no right to be (Roy 45). Their willingness to love and to be loved raised manifold questions, whenever they came across glimpses of the boundless affection of Chacko hugging and kissing his stepdaughter Sophie Mol. But they did not get love from any family member. It's Velutha who provided them love, care and company they needed so badly. But his subsequent brutal death in custody left one more everlasting scar on their memory.

Mammachi on the other hand is remembered for the inept handling of the "Velutha-Ammu episode". For a moment she completely forgot the fact that Ammu was none other than her daughter. She saw to it that every arrangements were made for Chacko to meet the "man's needs". Chacko got separated from his wife and she didn't want him to lead a "bachelor's life". Ammu also had been married but unlike Chacko it was her decision to get separated from her drunken husband. Chacko had a daughter who was in the custody of his wife. Ammu also had issues and they remained with her. If Chacko who was single would have "man's needs", by the same logic Ammu also would have "woman's needs".

But in a patriarchal society that was something beyond the comprehension of Mammachi, Baby Kochamma and others. Mammachi was the one who never destined to lead a peaceful life and to "compensate she made life miserable for her daughter and grandchildren". Although Ammu works in the factory as Chacko does, legally she has no claim on property as outdated and outmoded inheritance rights were weighted against her. So, Chacko always said,

“what’s yours is mine and what’s mine is also mine”
(Roy 57).

The caste taboos were still prevalent and not a part of India’s past story:

Mammachi told... Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sway their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan’s footprint. In Mammachi’s time Paravans’s like other untouchables, 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)

Arundhati Roy, a great champion of the cause of the Dalits and the deserted women, points out those unnoticed shades of a social problem, which generally escape the eyes of social scientists. Velutha’s grandfather, along with a number of other untouchables embraced Christianity. Even religious conversion fails to give the dispossessed an esteemed able status. Irrespective of religious affiliation the underdogs remains as fallen as ever in the dog-eat-dog- society:

“When the British came to Malabar, a number of Paravans... converted to Christianity and joined the Anglican church to escape the scourge of untouchability...it did not take them long to realize that they had jumped from the frying pain into fire they were made to have separate churches, with separate services, and separate priests. After independence they found that they were not titled to any Government benefits like job reservation or bank loans at low interest rates, because officially, on paper, they were Christians, and therefore Castless”. (74)

Roy pictures the house of Velutha, the Paravan as it’
... was dark and clean. It smelled of fish curry and woodsmoke.
Heat cleaved to things like a low fever...
Velutha and Vellya Paapen’s

bedding was rolled up and propped against the wall. ... A grown man

could stand up straight in the centre of

The room, but not along its sides’ (Roy208).

Velutha, we find, was unparalleled as a carpenter , as a machine and also as an “engineer”. He was even referred to as “Dr Velutha “by Baby Kochamma when her garden cherub’s silver were dried up inextricably and Velutha fixed its bladder for her. He never had the feeling that he was an untouchable especially when it came to his profession .With full confidence he easily surpassed his fellow workers which made a peaceful co-existence impossible .But he did not attached much importance to what others said or thought about him.

Velutha’s background was that of a untouchable grandson of a grandfather who was converted to Christianity . The legacy he received from his father Vellya Paapen and Chella was one of humiliation by the caste Hindus and Christians .His brother Kuttappan was the worst sufferer as he was leading a life which was in every sense equivalent to death . But Velutha was one who somehow tried to come out of the shell that was made ready for him by his ancestors . But as would be seen later , it all turned out to be a shattered shell where the inmate never had a choice other than getting destroyed .As an untouchable boy he had been in the habit of going to the Ayemenem house with his father to deliver coconuts plucked from the trees in the compound .These Paravans were never allowed to enter the house .They were not allowed to touch anything that the touchables touched .But Velutha at a later stage dared to touch the forbidden ..

After returning to Ayemenem ,Ammu slowly got drawn to Velutha .Velutha positively responded to her advances completely oblivious of the fact that she was a ‘forbidden-fruit ’for a person like him who was a untouchable .But the daring Velutha saw Ammu only as a woman and their affair marked the turning point in the novel .When his life was in danger the Marxist Party never stood by him. The spokesman of the party even told the police that he was not an active member . The Ayemenem family also was in the forefront to destroy him completely .Baby Kochamma, the guardian of the system, would go to any limit to hoard the so-called

family honour. The novel demonstrates the course of creating and cataloging Parvans within the high class families --the people who go ahead of the unwritten laws of society in pursuit of happiness .Mammachi and Baby Kochamma plotted against him and the latter misinterpreted the facts to the kottayam police.The drowning of Sophie Mol added fuel to the fire .

Vellya Paapen's report to Mammachi about the Velutha --Ammu affair. Marked the beginning of Velutha's end. He was asked to appear before Mammachi and the rest of the incidents expose the rich and the privileged. The daring Velutha straight away went to the Ayemenem house to listen with utmost patience Mammachi's tirade. His only worry was that he would never see Ammu again . He had also apprehensions about Ammu being hurt by her people .Though Velutha was almost innocent in the affair that he had with Ammu ,everybody _ the touchables _made that he was a true villain who should be stoned to death.

Roy ridicules the blatantly discriminatory attitude of the police whose basic duties of protecting the innocent and checking the criminal are blithely trampled upon by none other than the Inspector himself. Inspector Mathew's behavior with Ammu is totally uncivil. After Sophie mole's burial, when Ammu came to the police to tell the truth Mathew whose, "eyes were sly and greedy... stared at Ammu...He said the police knew all they needed to know and that Kottayam police did not take statements from Vashyas or their illegitimate children"(Roy 8). Any government official can behave as Mathew does only when he is devoid of any sense of decency, and respect for women.

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. Here the lower classes are denied forcefully their basic rights to equality. In their chasing of Velutha, they show much alertness as if they were catching a terrorist:

Responsibility for the Touchable future on their thin but able shoulders...They were not arresting a man; they were exorcising fear...Touchable police men acted with economy,

not frenzy. Efficiency, not anarchy. Responsibility, not hysteria. They didn't tear out his hair or burn him alive... After epidemic they were merely inoculating a community against an outbreak. (Roy 307-309)

The police got hold him and tortured him in all possible ways .The way he was tortured to death would perhaps be one of the breathtaking in any fiction . It would also certainly remind one of the concentration camps where most innocent people were tortured to death.. Velutha was viciously tormented in the police station:

He (Velutha) was semi-conscious, but was not moving. His skull was fractured in three places. His nose and both his cheek bones were smashed, leaving his face pulpy, undefined. The blow to his mouth had split open his upper lip and broken sixteeth, three of which were embedded in his lower lip, hideously inverting his beautiful smile. Four of his ribs were splintered; one had pierced his left lung which was what made him bleed from his mouth. The blood on his breathes brightred, fresh and fresh and frothy. His lower intestine was ruptured and haemorrhaged, the blood collected in his abdominal cavity. His spine was damaged in two places; the concussion had paralysed his right arm and resulted in a loss of control over his bladder and return. Both his knee caps were hattered (Roy, 310).

Roy describes his death, "The God of Loss. The God of Small Things. He left no foot prints in sand, no ripples in water, No image in mirrors" (Roy. 265). In spite of India's industrialization and globalization, Indian society is heavily dependent on the maintenance of caste duties. It is this caste that impedes the growth of the characters in the novel and as a result, they suffer.

Conclusion

It is an irony of civilization that people who work hardest to produce riches suffer the most and fare the worst. They are looked down upon and treated shabbily by the powerful. We know them as 'working class' a term used all over the world. They are included in the "small things" Arundhati Roy

speaks for . Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* can be seen as one of the most powerful novels that project the Indian Society in an artistic manner in which she X-rayed certain hard realities of Indian Society that has been the main obstacle on the path of peace prosperity and progress of Indian Society . The author hope that many sensitive readers of her novel must listen to her sincere voice and would join their hands with her rebelling soul as social activist and revolutionary spirit as a progressive writer would be satisfied seeing a new social order free from all discrimination ,exploitations and inequalities.

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