
Velutha the God of Sins: Study of a Dalit in Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract:

The God of Small Things, a Booker Prize winning novel by Arundhati Roy, is preeminently a powerful novel of protest. It is, as the novelist herself says, about transgressions. The Children Rahel and Estha, do not accept adult boundaries while Ammu and Velutha transgress the code of society. The novel covers in its canvas other issues such as suppression of women, casteism, untouchability, cross-cultural relationship and social prejudices.

Keywords: novel of protest; transgression; adult boundaries; casteism; untouchability and social prejudices.

Among so many things that *The God of Small Things* does so brilliantly, it also captures the double standards followed by a caste ridden society. Arundhati Roy's portrayal of Velutha shows her sensitiveness towards untouchability. Roy's *The God of Small Things* is a polysemic novel about several things. It is about illegitimate love, family discontent, conjugal discord, irrelevant male chauvinism, and at the core it is about the treatment of dalits in our society. It is a love story as well as a political saga. It can be interpreted at several levels. The novel actually focuses on the four generations of the Ipes, stressing upon the second and the third. The story of Ammu and Velutha belongs to the second generation.

This paper seeks to expose the rot and the dual standards of a cast bound Indian society towards a dalit. Velutha who perhaps can be called the hero of the novel is at the centre of the novel. The novel shows the bigness of small things in life. It is actually concerned with life's "small things that give it macro picture"¹.

Though no society defines love as a sin yet Velutha is a sinner, a recidivist who commits sins again and again almost continuously till thirteen nights. Velutha's first sin was that he was an untouchable and being a Paravan he could never think of loving a Brahmin lady. But he did it. He violated the love laws that lay down "... who should be loved. And how. And how much" (*The God of Small Things* 328). Velutha the untouchable not only touched but also dared to taste the forbidden fruit – Ammu, a Brahmin lady and found himself in hell as the Satan of big things. He had to wash his hands from his life only for transgressing the hackneyed codes of society.

Velutha which actually means "white" in Malayalam, had a pitch-black complexion. He being an untouchable bears the brunt of social persecution. Velutha is a Paravan by caste which is at the bottom of the social hierarchy. But he is an expert mechanic with German sensibility. Like God he creates all the little thing only to be consumed and enjoyed by the

upper-caste rich people. This God of small things could make intricate toys, tiny wind-mills, rattles, minute jewel boxes out of dried palm reeds; he could curve perfect boats out of tapioca stems and figurines on cashew nut and what not. He was a quasi-engineer with the stigma of being an untouchable. The hierarchical society could not tolerate a Paravan becoming an engineer. Besides being an accomplished carpenter, he had a way with machines and Mammachi often said that “if he hadn't been a Paravan, he might have become an engineer” (*The God of Small Things* 75). And it is this professional expertise that Baby Kochamma goes to the extent of calling him “Dr Velutha”. The hypocrisy and double standards of the upper class touchables are well exposed through the members of the family in Ayemenem where the mere touch untouchables is avoided, members of family make use of things made by Velutha the Paravan.

Velutha's condition is not better than that of Mulk Raj Anand's Bakha. Both have some similarity in one sense or the other. In the novel we find that untouchability is connected with money. Mammachi hired Velutha as the factory carpenter and put him in charge of the general maintenance. Other high cast factory workers did not like the idea as according to them:

Paravans were not meant to be carpenters. And certainly prodigal Paravans were not meant to be rehired (*The God of Small Things* 77).

Similarly after eleven years Aravind Adiga in his Booker winning novel *The White Tiger* raises the same issue when the protagonist Balram Halwai is scoffed at by the old Sikh driver:

“Sweet-makers”, the old driver said, shaking his head. “That is what you people do. You make sweets. How can you learn to drive?” “Muslims Rajputs, Sikhs-they are fighters, they can become drivers” (*The White Tiger* 56).

Like Balram Halwai Velutha's caste is his destiny. Mammachi paid Velutha less than she would a touchable carpenter but more than she would a Paravan. She thought that he ought to be grateful for he was allowed on the factory premises. She thought what she was paying Velutha was a gratuity and not the quittance for his labour and she wished that he would always realize her gratefulness. She could remember a time, in her girlhood, 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 footprints (*The God of Small Things* 74).

Despite so many good qualities Velutha was destined to be a victim of a caste ridden society. The society did not like the sense of freedom and self respect that he had for himself. The snake of casteism bit him and when he found no antidote available, he decided to bite the bullet in vain. He was trying to fight with his destiny and ultimately destiny overcame him in this battle. Unlike his father Velutha was not a yes-man. He was a rebel by nature but he was never a criminal. In the eye of society he committed an anti-social act. He disrupted the hierarchy of society. He committed the “sin” which no high

caste man could imagine. Though Velutha was innocent in the whole affair and it was Ammu who took the initiative yet he was ready to pay the price. He started thinking:

What is the worst thing that can happen? I could lose everything. My job. My family. My livelihood. Everything (*The God of Small Things* 334).

And ultimately he had to pay the price. When the illicit love-affair between Velutha and Ammu is discovered, everything goes topsy-turvy. Baby Kochamma who earlier referred to him as Dr Velutha reacted as:

She said (among other things)-- 'how could she stand the smell? Haven't you noticed? They have a particular smell, these Paravans?' ... She preferred an Irish-jesuit smell to a particular Paravan's smell (*The God of Small Things* 257).

And Mammachi who used to refer him almost as an engineer was writhing with anger. She thought:

... of her naked, coupling in the mud with a man who was nothing but a filthy coolie. She imagined it in vivid details; a Paravan's coarse black hand on her daughter's breast. His mouth on hers. His black hips jerking between her parted legs. The sound of their breathing. His particular Paravan smell. Like animals, Mammachi thought and nearly vomited. Like a dog with a bitch on heat. Her tolerance of Men's needs as far as her son

was concerned, became the fuel for her unmanageable fury at her daughter (*The God of Small Things* 257-8).

Mammachi lost control and spat on Velutha. Socialism and Marxism, which talk of a classless society was also against such relations. It exposes the phony claims of Marxism. When Velutha a card holding member of the communist party goes to comrade Pillai for help, he answers:

But comrade, you should know that party was not constituted to support workers' indiscipline in their private life (*The God of Small Things* 287).

Even the police who are the servants of the state were biased and acted as agents of the high caste people. The police who stand for Politeness, Obedience, Loyalty, Intelligence, Courtesy and Efficiency were cruel by nature and dual in their treatment. The police took interest in the whole affair as the supporters of the upper class. They were not doing their duty and were busy defending their own social order as they belonged to the upper class society. Even inspector Thomas Matthew was biased and far from being impartial. He himself belonged to the upper class society and could not reconcile with the fact. His behaviour was partial and biased and he did not do his duty well:

Later, when the real story reached inspector Thomas Matthew, the fact that what the Paravan had taken from the touchable kingdom, had not been snatched but given, concerned him deeply. So after Sophie Mors

funeral, when Ammu went to him with the twins to tell him that a mistake had been made and he tapped her breasts with his baton, it was not a policeman's spontaneous brutishness on his part. He knew exactly what he was doing. It was a premeditated gesture, calculated to humiliate and terrorize her. An attempt to instill order into a world gone wrong (*The God of Small Things* 260).

Thus we come to see through the novel that the condition of dalits in our society is not good. Velutha, a despised Paravan, with whom Ammu had a doomed sexual relation, is relegated to the margins and is sidelined everywhere. The novel also reminds us another incident of untouchability. Velutha's grandfather Kelan along with a number of Paravans, Pelayas and Pulayas had embraced Christianity to escape from the stigma of untouchability. But this rather worsened their condition. After embracing Christianity, they were known as "Rice-Christians". They had separate churches with separate priests. They were rendered casteless and deprived of government benefits like jobs and reservations. As officially they were Christians, therefore they were casteless .

The novelist seems to have a keen eye for the depiction of the double standards of society towards the dalits. A dalit is marginalized and discarded as untouchable. A dalit is referred to as a "drunken dog" and is deprived of all the prerogatives that the upper class people enjoy. The novel depicts the dual standards and hypocrisy of an Indian caste bound society to a tee.

Works Cited:

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