

Social Prejudice and Caste Politics in Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things

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Abstract

Arundhati Roy, a social activist has bequeathed the problem of untouchability pervading the Indian society in her booker winner novel, *The God of Small Things*. Her novel explores the caste system, gender difference and the police-politician relation that have existence in the country even after virtually six decades of independence. The novel discloses the cavernous gap between the touchables and the untouchables; the exploiters and the exploited, and the powerful and the powerless. It is all about how the human values of the children, youth, women and the untouchable have been impinged upon, and how they have been deceived. Here in this paper, I will discuss the maltreatment conveyed out to Velutha, one of the characters in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and how the idea of social prejudice is explored in the novel?

Paper

Literature is an expression of the most intimate consciousness of life and society in which it grows and develops. 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. It expresses thoughts, feelings and emotions in a rational and interesting manner, and

directly or indirectly throws light upon different changes in its own way.

The Indian English literature from its very beginning has witnessed socio-cultural,

economic and political changes in the life of the nation. Indian English novelists have been showing deep concern about these problems in the past also; in fact, a sustained level of involvement with social issues of caste and gender discrimination has marked the writings of such writers as Mulkraj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Bhawani Bhattacharya, Manohar Malgonkar, Nargis Dalal, Ruth Praver Jhabwalla, K.A. Abbas, Nyantara Sehgal and others. Even now in spite of getting independence, the social issues are still there to be taken care of.

Today, when India is a democratic country, Indian English writers are now writing with anew zeal and confidence, blending social aspects and phenomenal situations in their

literary works. To name a few, there are Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Shashi Deshpande, JayantMahapatra, and Namita, Ghokle, Amitav Ghosh, Jhupha Lahiri, Dina Mehta and Arundhati Roy.

Arundhati Roy is one of the most celebrated writers produced by India, whose book *The God of Small Things* won the Man Booker prize and put Indian literature on the map. Her books mostly revolved around social justice and the anguish that various social groups suffered. While her works can be pretty depressing, they also reflect the ground realities that most people often lose sight of.

Her must-read book is *The God of Small Things*, which brought her fame and popularity. As can be guessed from the title, the theme of the book is about how even small things affect people's lives.

Untouchability is a direct product of the cast system. It is not merely the inability to touch a human being of a

certain cast or sub cast. It is an attitude on the part of a whole group of people that relates to a deeper philological process of thought and belief, invisible to the naked eye, translated in to various physical acts and behaviors, norms and practices. Untouchability is prompted by the spirit of social aggression and the belief in the parity and pollution that characterizes Casteism. It is generally taken for granted that dalits are considered polluted people at the lowest end of the cast order.

Untouchability is a cancer that has been eating our society from ancient time towards this has been handed down from generation to generation. Cast system was at first a kind of division of labour. Then it became a tool in the hands of the upper cast people to exploit and marginalize the lower castes. Millions of Indians are still untouchables in the sacred land of Gandhi, Buddha and Ambedkar. They live the parallel universe of isolation. All Indians are violating the basic

rights and the human rights of other Indians.

Arundhati Roy's booker prize winning novel deals with the ravages of caste system in south Indian state, Kerala. Roy presents both the miserable plight of untouchables and also the struggle of a women trying to have fulfilment in life in a patriarchal society. Velutha, the god of small things, transgress the established norms of society by having a affair with a women of high caste. The ultimate outcome of this love is tragic death of an "untouchable" by "touchable boots" of state police, an event that makes a travesty of the idea of God. God is no more in control of "small things" rather the small things have an ultimate power over God turning him to "The God of loss"(265). The idea of untouchability is explored at two levels in the novel. Firstly we have socially untouchables, or Parvan, who are never allowed basic human rights. Secondly, we have metaphoric untouchables in high

castes. Here discrimination expresses itself in marginalizing the women in their personal and public life.

A complete appreciation of *The God Of Small Things* requires an awareness of three things, first the role of the Syrian Christian Community; second, communism and last, but not the least, the caste system of Kerala.

The community represented in “*The God of Small Things*” is Syrian Christian. The Christians of Kerala are divided into five characteristics: Roman Catholic, Orthodox Syrian, Nestorian, Marthoma, and Anglican

In the novel religious differences appear. In the disagreements between Mulligan (who belongs to the Roman Catholic church) and Pappaiyude (who belongs to the Marthoma church) as well as in Baby Kochamma’s conversation to Catholicism and her consequent lack of suitors. The socio – political changes brought about by colonial

rule led to upper caste Hindus shunning the Syrian Christians. Between 1888 – 1892 every one of Syrian Christian denomination founded so called evangelical societies that rough out low caste converts and built school and chapels and publicized mass baptisms (Bayly 314 – 320). *The God of Small Things* thus refers to the school for “Untouchable” built by the great – grandfather of the twins, Estha and Rahel. However, as Roy points out, even though a number of paravas and member of other low castes converted to Christianity, they were made to have separate churches and thus continued to be treated as “Untouchables”. After the Independence, they were denied government benefits created for “Untouchable” because officially, on paper, they were Christians and there for casteless.

Gender inequality is another recurring social issue in the novel. In *The God of Small Things*, characters like

Mammachi, Ammu and Baby Kochamma are discriminated against because they are female. In the book, male characters predominantly have more power. For example, Pappachi is a high ranking individual who is part of the government, while Mammachi is in charge of the household duties. When Mammachi starts a pickle factory and becomes more powerful, Pappachi becomes jealous and abusive towards her. In the novel, the female characters appear resourceful and smart, yet they never fully develop to become strong matriarchs because of the strict social structure.

Although higher class female characters like Rahel, Ammu and Mammachi are physically healthy, they are not the decision makers in the family or society. An example of this would be when Ammu's first failed marriage to the man she had met a wedding. She was described as a typical Indian bride who did not dare to stare her fiancée in her face until they got married.

Additionally, people speak lowly of women who do not marry in society. This is evident when Roy talks about Baby Kochamma, who accepted her unfortunate fate of not having any husband, resenting Ammu because she saw her fighting against that same fate. When Baby Kochamma truly could not find a spouse, her father sent her off to college. This shows that families view marriages as more important than education for women.

In addition to her commentary on Indian history and politics, Roy evaluates the Indian post-colonial complex, or the cultural attitudes of many Indians toward their former British rulers. After Ammu calls her father a "[shit]-wiper" in Hindi for his blind devotion to the British, Chacko explains to the twins that they come from a family of Anglophiles, or lovers of British culture, "trapped outside their own history and unable to retrace their steps." He goes on to say that they despise themselves because of this.

A related inferiority complex is evident in the interactions between Untouchables and Touchables in Ayemenem. Vellya Paapen is an example of an Untouchable so grateful to

the Touchable class that he is willing to kill his son, Velutha, when he discovers that Velutha has broken the most important rule of class segregation—that there be no inter-caste sexual relations. In part, this reflects how many Untouchables have internalized caste segregation. Nearly all of the relationships in the novel are somehow colored by cultural and class tension, including the twins' relationship with Sophie, Chacko's relationship with Margaret, Pappachi's relationship with his family, and Ammu's relationship with Velutha. Characters such as Baby Kochamma and Pappachi are the most rigid and vicious in their attempts to uphold that social code, while Ammu and Velutha are the most unconventional and daring in unraveling it. Roy implies that this is why they are punished so severely for their transgression.

To sum up, Arundhati Roy has presented a slice of Indian life, its ups and downs, tears and turmoil. *The God of Small Things* is, indeed, a fine study of individual and social psychology. The characters of the novel themselves are affected by the two psychological factors- denial of basic psychological and social needs, and traumatic experiences. There are unmistakable clues in the text itself which suggest the reader pay

some attention to psychological aspect of the narrative.

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