

Caste Consciousness in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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ABSTRACT

In this study, an attempt will be made to scrutinize Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* to show how she is conscious of the caste system that has come up in the contemporary India. The study is based on the hypothesis that Arundhati Roy's novels effectively depict the caste consciousness of modern India. The researcher has attempted to analyse the caste consciousness in Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* in terms of its overlapping effect on social system. Researcher's concern remains to find out how the different structures have their bearing on the characters and their social responses. The present study attempts to focus on Arundhati Roy's novel "*The God of Small Things* in terms of its thematic and political concerns. In addition, the study investigates the relationship between the novel and the caste system. The purpose of the present study is to find out whether the caste system and human behaviour can be explained in terms of the primary membership of human beings to various communities which are defined by caste, status, income, profession, gender and education.

KEYWORDS

Caste system; Indian social structures; Caste and characters.

Arundhati Roy is one of the most outstanding Indian English novelists. She has astonished the literary world by winning the Booker Prize for her novel *The God of Small Things*. The novel depicts the life of Keralite society and its rites, customs, traditions and patriarchal domination, caste apartheid, caste hegemony and caste discrimination etc. Therefore, Kerala has been in the national and global limelight. The state witnessed significant social, political and cultural movements including struggles for eradication of untouchability and other social problems.

This paper tries to focus on the caste consciousness as reflected in the novel *The God of Small Things*. Is the novel

social? Does it present social issues of Dalit class? Were the issues raised by the novelist present during that time? Does the same situation exist even now? It is true that the question raised by Roy in the novel in relation to Kerala's socio-cultural, political and status of women were rarely highlighted in the period of 1960s. But these problems are still debated even at present in Kerala society. Perhaps the most significant aspect of the novel is the treatment of the Dalit in the novel. Velutha is the representative of the Dalit in the novel. Dalits were a class of people who were not allowed to walk on the public roads; they were not allowed to cover their upper bodies and not allowed to carry umbrellas.

The plot of the novel is complicated and it moves backward and forward. The whole novel centres around Ammu, her two children Raphael and Estha, her parents, brother Chacko and his wife, daughter Sophie Mol and Velutha, Ammu's lover. The novel opens when Ammu returns to Ayemenem after her divorce with her two twin children Estha and Raphael. The major character Ammu is writer's mother, a south Indian lady. Ammu has married a Bengali man but their married life is full of conflicts. Her husband gives her a divorce. This is the story of Ammu's struggle for the livelihood and education of her children. The novel projects the writer's own life through Ammu's character. Ammu falls in love with Velutha and loves him for the first time on the day when Sophie Mol, her niece returns from England.

This novel articulates certain issues that come up in any caste-based society. We know that caste plays an important role in Indian society. One of the central themes of the novel revolves around the love law. The love of Ammu and Velutha violates these laws because Velutha is a Dalit or Shudra in the Caste based society. Ammu becomes the victims of the male dominated society. She cannot continue her education. She lives like a prisoner at her own home. Her rebellious spirit made her more miserable. In her home, she became Untouchable. Baby Kochamma resented Ammu but Ammu did not surrender to her fate. In her divorced condition, she declared her open love for Velutha. The love affair between Velutha and Ammu was against the attitude of Dharmashatsra. In this critical situation nobody supports Velutha, when he was taken to the police custody and was severely beaten by the police. Ultimately, he dies in the police custody. The suffering of Velutha is very miserable:

Blood spilled from his skull like a secret. His face swollen and his head looked like a pumpkin, too large and

heavy for the slender stem it grew from.....Police boots stepped back from the rim of a pool of urine spreading from him, the bright bare electric bulb reflected in it. (319-320)

Thus, Velutha does not sweep off his footprints as his forefathers used to follow the command of their master. In this democratic country, his footprints are erased by the established system. Velutha challenges the authority of his master. Dalits were required to discharge their duties and occupations within the limitations of untouchability. Dalits knew that not only their touch but even their shadow would cause pollution to the upper caste. Therefore, they made efforts to earn their livelihood on the basis of their inherited occupations. The occupations and duties were assigned and prescribed for the Dalits from generation to generation and therefore there was no question of change of occupation as it would have resulted also in the change of caste. For centuries together, they were not allowed to enter into villages during day time and for them the use of roads, wells and such utilities of common use were entirely prohibited. It is evident that there was no mobility of labour under untouchability and the problem of misplaced labour was the outcome of this situation.

We see in the novel, the attitude of Kochamma. Kochamma got Velutha dismissed from the factory and imprisoned him. He was charged and blamed in a rape case. When Ammu registers a complaint in police station, Police refused to lodge complaint. Ultimately, she takes the responsibility of the death of her lover Velutha. The caste system in India is so strong that Dalit's complaints are not registered in the police station. Mammachi recalls her days in the past. Mammachi says:

Parvans like other untouchables were not allowed to walk on public roads 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. They were expected to crawl backwards with broom sweeping away their footprints so that the Brahmins or Syrian Christian would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan foot-print (74)

Kochamma said that "How could she stand the smell? Haven't you noticed? They have a particular smell, these paravans". This statement shows the mentalities of upper caste people towards the Dalit. They are prejudiced against the Dalit. Even after 65 years of Independence, the social attitude or mentality of upper caste in India has not changed. Dalits are still humiliated by the upper caste. Roy depicted both the characters of Mammachi and Baby Kochamma who represents the high caste feudal mentality.

The upper caste characters in the novel bothered when Velutha's behaviour does not conform to their expectation. Baby Kochamma describes to Inspector Thomas Mathew 'How it was not just what Velutha had said that made her come to the police, but the way he said it. (260) Velutha represents the self-confident, aggressive, young, dynamic person who has courage to face the reality. Here Roy criticizes the social attitude of the society when she writes, "It was not entirely his fault that he lived in the society where man's death could be more profitable than his life had ever been." (281)

The conversion of Dalits into Christianity and problem of Untouchability is one of the major concerns of the writer. When Mammachi gives a job to Velutha, a Paravan for carpentry works in his factory, Mammachi pays fewer wages to Velutha as

compared to other workers. This act of help causes a great stir in the factory workers. The upper caste workers of the factory are so wild with casteism that they think that paravans are not meant to be carpenters. So, in order to keep the workers happy, Mammachi discriminates. Roy writes:

To keep the others happy, and since she knew that nobody else would hire him as a carpenter, Mammachi paid Velutha less than she would a touchable carpenter but more than she would a paravan. Mammachi did not encourage him to enter the house (except when she needed something mended or installed) She thought that he ought to be grateful that he was allowed on the factory premises at all, and allowed to touch things that Touchables touched.(p-77)

Velutha represents Dalit in the novel. He is resented by the other upper caste workers in the Pickle factory because of his caste of a Paravan. Velutha, son of Vellya paapen, a toddy tapper, acquires training in carpentry. The lower castes were bonded to particular high caste households for whom they were always on call as servants. They lived on the land owned by the master households. They were not allowed into temples, public markets or not allowed to wear shirts; blouses etc. Velutha knows the punishment for violating this taboo. Roy recognizes this fear in Velutha, who once asks himself, "What's the worst thing that can happen? I could lose everything, My job, My family, My livelihood, Everything" (334).

Ammu has divine love for Velutha. He is an excellent carpenter. He is the only carpenter who designs the first sliding folding door in Ayemenem. Mamachi also often said that, "if only he hadn't been a paravan, he might have become an engineer." (75). He reassembled and set up machines. He is a master craftsman with a

sensibility. As a carpenter he has no parallels. Despite all his abilities, he is looked down upon. His relations with Ammu and the circumstances which ultimately lead to his tragic end. Velutha is a victim of Caste system. Even a Dalit can become an engineer or a doctor if he is given an opportunity to take education and facilities

Velutha, a Dalit youth had the habit of going to the Ayemenem House with his father to deliver coconuts. Paravans were never allowed to enter the house. They were not allowed to touch anything. Mammachi, Rahel's grandmother remembered a period in her childhood.

When Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom sweeping away the foot prints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan's footprint. (73-74).

Velutha's grandfather had embraced Christianity. Though they were converted to Christianity to escape the curse of untouchability and from the victimization of a casteist society, they were still treated as Dalit or Shudra. It is remarkable that untouchability is one of the greatest evils in our country. The caste system was an outcome of some religious beliefs which had the sanction of the Manu Smiriti, the Hindu law of social code and domestic life. Caste system has given birth to the bonded labour in India. The Chaturvarna had bonded the nature of work to the four classes. Indian society consists of Varna, classes, castes, sub-castes, and sects etc. It is a mixed union of various faiths and beliefs, customs and traditions. Caste system encourages suppression of the Dalit and enslaves them from one generation to another.

Roy's socio-political criticism is reflected in the novel *The God of Small Things* Mr. Pillai is a local leader of the Marxist Communist Party. He is a highly

educated fellow who believes in Marxism as a political philosophy that aims at creating a classless society. He organizes party at the grassroot level; interact with the working classes for party workers of Ayemenem to make them conscious of their rights. He challenges:

People of the world ...be courageous, dare to fight, defy difficulties and advance wave upon wave, then the whole world will belong to the people. Monster of all kinds shall be destroyed. You must demand what is yours (120)

Though Pillai attempts to make an image for himself as a supporter of the Dalit and follower of working-class people but as the matter of fact he is too a caste conscious fellow who belongs to the upper-class community. Pillai represents the corrupt and hypocrisy of the caste based political system in India. Political parties are rarely democratic internally. The word of the leader is law. The Politicians and their parties are not keen to change hierarchical social structure. It seems Indian politicians have quietly accepted social and economic deprivations of masses. It is advantageous to them to obtain cheap forced labour.

The caste structure fulfils their ego, pride of the blood, feeling of superiority and caste consciousness thereby fulfils the psychological needs of the higher caste individuals. The caste structure facilitates to higher caste unequal access to rights, privileges, resources, opportunities and power. Comrade Pillai, whose attitude is caste prejudice, prevents him from treating Velutha as his comrade and equal. Roy criticizes the reality of the caste-based politics. One night Pillai is taking his supper when Velutha approaches him for some help regarding the allegation of rape and abduction. It was time of sexual enjoyment for Pillai therefore he like corrupt politician remarks that you should know that Party was not constituted to support

worker's indiscipline in their private life (287). Pillai, a communist leader, has no good character in private and political life. He has no right to abuse a loyal party worker Velutha. Pillai misconducts and ill-treats Velutha because he is a leading Dalit leader in his political party. Almost all characters in the novel except Velutha are guilty of caste prejudice. Despite being a convert from Hinduism to another religion which does not divide people on the basis of caste, Pillai, the communist who is a supporter of the rights of the working class and teaches them Caste is Class (281) has not been able to free himself from untouchability. His attachment to party is only a show but in real sense he is selfish and a follower of caste system. Once he says to his wife Kalyani, he would not allow Paravans and all that into her house. Never (278). Thus, the major characters in the novel attempt to project themselves in ways which are quite different from their real self.

The novel shows a patriarchal domination of a caste ridden structure where powerful dominates over weak and upper caste over the Dalit. Ranga Rao in his article "The Booker of the Year" observes:

Roy's book is the only one I can think of among Indian novels in English which can be comprehensively described as a protest novel. It is all about atrocities against minorities, Small Thing: children and youth, women and untouchable. (1)

Arundhati Roy has portrayed ordinary things in a different way. She has heralded a revolutionary attitude against the ill-treatment of the Dalit in her artistic courage and frankness in projecting the reality of the Indian society. The novel is a reflection of the prevailing caste system in India. The characters in the novel suffer from humiliation and exploitation by social members of the society. Roy appears sensitive to the various social evils such as

untouchability, abuse of officials by politicians and police. Her characters are aware of political hypocrisy of communist leaders of Kerala. Arundhati Roy has projected the Indian Dalit as a whole class in her novel. The presentation of caste consciousness in her novel is authentic, credible and realistic. Arundhati Roy presents Dalits especially the ones who belong to south India. Her contribution to world literature is the convincing presentation of the reality of the lower class. This study is an attempt to read closely Roy's point of view regarding class and caste as they are stated and implied in her works.

Arundhati Roy has succeeded in presenting a realistic picture of the Dalit in their primary membership in various classes and communities. She analyses in her novel the lives of Dalit, in particular, along the axes of class and gender. She also has criticized the urban higher middle class for its hypocrisy and selfishness. However, she remains an insider. She does not consider herself a feminist in the conventional sense. She is also interested in the exploration of social structures i.e., class and caste. Arundhati Roy herself has strong convictions about caste consciousness. She believes that in a society, as traditionally male dominated as the Indian society is, women have difficulties to find their identities. However, the modern Indian woman, as represented by the characters of Arundhati Roy's novel is definitely working towards the goal of defining their identities.

Arundhati Roy maintains a unique position among the contemporary, upcoming Indian writers in English. She deals with the lower class that represents the majority and covers a wider area in the modern Indian society. Her novels deal with the Indian Dalit's turmoil, predicaments, and frustrations and their pregnant silence. Arundhati Roy, in fact, is interested in the whole society; but somehow, being a woman herself; she

confines to the limited range of experience the gender affords to her. Hence, she tries to identify with the mundane realities and complex structure of society as perceived by women. She explores the class struggle of Indian society and social order that triggers the class struggle. Her characters represent a group of declassed women. Her novels deal with social strata and depict conflicts of women with family, with the male world and society in general.

Roy has also highlighted the class struggle and sufferings of the emerging class of Indian women. Her characters

raise many questions regarding the conventional definition of class and caste. Roy reflects a convincing picture of the contemporary Dalit class and their community. She implies that in spite of education and opportunities; Dalits are victims of domestic injustice and customs of our society. She also feels that the writers of the contemporary world have to move away from the historical romance and mythical stories and they need to present the different class structure and of their immediate circumstances.

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