

The Counter-Hegemonic Voice in Indian English Novel: Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

Grishma Manikrao Khobragade,

Assistant Professor of English, Birla College, Kalyan.

ABSTRACT

Dalit Women's humiliation, feeling of discrimination and protest appear in a vivid manner in Indian literature especially in the fictions which are social narratives of exclusion. Each and every day is a bane for the Dalit woman because of the social hierarchy and the notion of caste boundaries in her life for has to live in a submissive. For a Dalit women life is a struggle in the family and society because of gender and caste. Dalit women's lives in all ways appear to be counter-hegemonic in their attempts to fight for social justice and human rights.

In this study, an attempt will be made to scrutinize Arundhati Roy's novel to show how she is conscious of the caste system and that have come up in the contemporary India. The study is based on the hypothesis that Arundhati Roy's novel effectively depicts the caste consciousness of modern India.

The researcher has attempted to analyze the caste consciousness of Arundhati Roy's novel 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 in terms of their 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 behavior 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

Hegemony; Submissive; Caste System; Gender.

Even after 65 years of Independence, the Dalits in India have to face common discrimination and cruel treatment from upper caste. It is to be noted that the caste system and a social identity based on caste are prevalent only in India and not in any part of the globe. Indian society is full of caste discrimination, a fact which many studies point out. In spite of several anti-caste discrimination laws and provisions, violation of these norms is a regular

feature. Even the UN has been making efforts to combat discriminatory practices still faced by Dalits of India. It is estimated that India has even failed to uphold existing laws against caste discriminations and violations of human rights. Further, Dalits are also seen segregated in all walks of life and forced to live in deplorable conditions and there are many cases wherein they are abused on all counts by the people of upper castes. Violence against Dalits is manifested in all kinds of inhuman

atrocities, rapes and murders. Hence, caste discrimination is also considered as the root cause of violence against Dalits and it acts as hidden apartheid in India

Untouchability is a term closely linked with discrimination. It can be traced from ancient time in Indian society operating as a social institution. Untouchability also has its own socio-economic reasons behind it – causes which divide the society into different fragments having different social status. In the present time, the practice of untouchability is pervasive both in the rural and urban areas and this has affected all aspects of daily life. Dalits often reside in separate locations such as slums, with separate wells or water tanks in many villages in India. They are frequently not allowed to take out processions on public roads which pass through the settlements of higher caste. They are denied entry to temples, are made to find menial work under the most humiliating conditions and are abused by the upper classes. Although India has prohibited caste discrimination in its Constitution, in practice this is not seen enforced. The continuation of the practice of untouchability is thus contrary to constitutional provision of abolition of untouchability (Article 17) and different criminal laws are enacted to eradicate such a social evil as untouchability.

Discriminating a person on the basis of his caste is, on record, prohibited. Along with this law, the government allows positive discrimination of the depressed classes of India, to empower them

Equality, fraternity liberty and social justice are considered the foundations of the Indian Constitution – the Constitution which grants all citizens social justice, political visibility, equal status, equality before law, freedom of speech and thoughts, freedom of faiths, and the freedom to choose one's profession. However, it is proved in studies that though the nation has achieved political justice, it has not truly accomplished social

and economic justice. The inequality between caste and class in various fields is not yet addressed and this inequality has erected many barriers to Dalit's liberation and, by extension, to development in India.

Roy's writings generated common concerns among the new generation of Dalits and BCs. In fact, Roy has not written on any isolated matter, her purpose has not been writing history but to explain the impact of events and personalities upon society. Therefore, it is significant to study the services rendered by Roy for knowing and understanding Dalit cause. The word 'Dalit' in his writings is applied to all those sections of the society which socially and ethnically suffer under the caste hegemony. It is equally applied to describe OBCs, Christians and Muslims and this expansion of meaning of the term Dalit is the outstanding success of Roy

Hegemony is not only a form of economic imbalance, it also has cultural manifestations. According to The Blackwell Dictionary of Sociology, Hegemony as a term is interrelated with the culture and belief:

The political Elite represent and act in the best interests of the working class. Thus, criticism of the elite was defined or an attack or society itself and therefore was unlikely to be tolerated in similar ways, capitalist. Culture includes the belief that private property is sacrosanct, that what is good for corporations good for society as a whole and that hard work and talent are the main determinants of success. In this of belief system the ruling class can reply less heavily on force as a way to maintain dominance and protest their interests, although the police and other agencies of Coercion can never be done away with entirely.¹

The concept of hegemony has been vital and most studied in the work of Antonio Gramsci, the leading Italian

Marxist scholar. William A. Darity explains Gramsci's notion of the term:

He defined hegemony as a condition under which a group establishes its supremacy not only by physical force but also through a consensual Submission of the very people who are determined. However this notion of hegemony has a long history. 2.

Racial discrimination is an example of a social hegemony. Racial discrimination is a stratified system of graded inequality that considers colors as fixed categories and status. The Blacks are believed to be at the base of the racial system and hence the lowest in the whole system of class relationship and distribution of rights and duties. Thus, it is a hegemonic structure where the power gets concentrated in a progressive manner in the classes that are above with the highest concentration of rights in the hands of the White class.

This paper focuses counter hegemonic voice in the novel written by Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. The most significant aspect of the novel is the treatment of Dalits in the novel. Velutha is the representative of Dalits in the novel. The argument of plot and character are the main narrative elements to organize analyzing the novel. We can refer to time, space and setting as the co-ordinates to define a history, politics or the cultural references which the novel appeals and symbolical meanings are to be anticipated. From a postcolonial point of view, the novel *The God of Small Things* is relevant for its resistance to caste system, its rejection of Western influences as a solution for the problems of India and its satirical analysis of Indian representation of collective identity, totally embedded in caste discrimination.

The plot of the novel is complicated and it moves backward and forward. The whole novel centers around Ammu, her two children Raphael and Estha, her parents, brother, Chacko and his wife, daughter Sophie Mol and Vellutha, Ammu's

lover. The novel opens with Ammu returns to Ayemenem after her divorce with her two twin children. Estha and Rahel. The major character Ammu is writer's mother, a south Indian lady. Ammu has married a Bengali man but their marriage 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. This 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 that Sophie Mol, her niece return from England. Ammu belongs to Syrian Christians community. She falls in love with Velutha who is Dalit. But their love does not get the social sanction because the Syrian Christians are originally Brahmins and follow the Brahmin tradition in many respects. Novelist traces the origin of the Syrian Christians in the Brahmin community.

The novel revolves around Rahel, Estha, their divorced mother Ammu and the rest of their family. The central character of the novel is Ammu, daughter of Pappachi and Mammachi. He behaves decently sometimes but becomes a tyrant at other times. He represents a member of male dominated society He denies proper education to Ammu thinking that it is unnecessary for girls. Ammu is exiled from her family. She is denied proper higher education because Pappachi though it was unnecessary for girls. Pappachi's suffering from schizophrenia behaves decently at times. Ammu meets her future husband at Calcutta when she goes to attend a marriage ceremony there. In a big rush, she marries him for she thought that people in Ayemenem not approve of her wishes. He love for the children is kindhearted because she knows that these children are not liked by any of her relatives, but the children in their innocence love everybody. Roy comments:

Ammu loved her children but their wide-eyed Vulnerability and their willingness to love people who didn't

really love them, exasperated her and sometimes made her to want to hurt them-just and education, a protection. (43)

Roy describes the pain and misery of a lonely mother in an indifferent world as perceived through the eyes of her seven-year-old children—a world where the age-old subjugation of women and the humiliation of the lower class still persist. This novel is so to say seen from feminist perspectives. Arundhati Roy offers a real set of directions to change the position of women in Indian society but Roy puts a lot of energy in encouraging a critical, rebellious perspective to consider current patterns of feminine identity in India. By contrast to the traditionally promoted accepting and devoted figures, Roy constructs rebellious and dissenting women characters.

Arundhati Roy makes her main female character (Ammu) fall in love with a Dalit Velutha. Falling for a Dalit lover like Velutha means willingness to break with social codes, which determine who can be loved and how much (untouchables are not supposed to be desired or loved by high caste women). As Brinda Bose rightly remarks:

The ways in which sexuality has been perceived through generations in a society that coded Love Laws with a total disregard for possible anomalies.
3

Arundhati Roy's selection for the representation of a Dalit lover as a person allowed to respect, affection and career opportunities interferes with sensitive areas in the Indian society. From a feminist perspective, the allegation of Ammu's female desire and agency, materialized in the attitude of choosing a lover for herself, are equally disturbing for the patriarchal system. Since none of the sufferers of the social order deserves the hostility showered upon them it is social

discrimination and the caste system. The ethical predicament of the novel is the sacrifice of children's purity, compassion and love for the maintenance of hegemonic ideologies. In order to reverse the logic that makes the caste system and untouchability look acceptable, Roy represents two forbidden loves i.e. Ammu and Dalit Velutha, and the twins' while the social order around them is exposed in such a way that it looks twisted and abnormal. As a result, the positive alternative to these destructive and unfair social codes is dependent on human sensitivity and feelings, as motivating forces (or drives) for subversion. Ammu, Velutha and Rahel are the inspirational, transgressive characters of novel, suggesting for social change according to their liberating points of view.

The love of Ammu and Velutha violates these laws because Velutha is a Dalit in the Caste based society. Ammu becomes the victims of the male dominated society. She cannot continue her education. She lives like a prison at her own home. Her rebellious nature 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 Vellutha. The love affair between Velutha and Ammu was against the attitude of Dharmashatsra. In this critical situation nobody does not support Velutha, The novel presents a pathetic ill-treatment to Dalit and victimization that exists in South India. Velutha is not just a character, but the expression of a real India Roy expresses:

They were not arresting a man; they were exorcising fear... that morning in the Heart of Darkness the posse of Touchable Policemen acted with economy, not frenzy. Efficiency. Not anarchy. Responsibility, not hysteria. They didn't tear out his hair or burn him alive. They didn't rape him. Or behead him. After all they were not

battling an epidemic. They were merely inoculating a community against an outbreak. (293)

Roy shows how Dalits are victimized by the police, the public servants, efficiently handle Velutha. Inhuman treatment was accompanied by various memories which haunted their lives and were traumatic. When Velutha was taken to the police custody, and he was severely beaten by the police ultimately he has to die in the police custody. The suffering of Velutha is very miserable. In this democratic country his footprints are erased by the established system. Velutha challenges the authority and his master. We see in the novel the attitude of Kochamma. Velutha was dismissed from the factory and imprisoned. He was charged and blamed in rape case. When Ammu registers a complaint in police station. Police refused take a complaint. Ultimately she takes a 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)

Roy depicted both the characters of Mammachi and Baby Kochamma who represents the high caste feudal mentality. In the novel, there is reference to the sexual privilege of upper caste men over Dalit girls and Chacko's behavior towards the Dalit girls working in his factory. In a rape

case, high caste men abusing low caste Dalit women is tolerated by the legal system. Anupama Rao claims:

The bodies of dalit women are seen collectively as mute, and capable of bearing penetration and other modes of marking upper-caste hegemony.⁴

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 of her factory. Mammachi pays low wages to Velutha as compared to other worker. 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 worker happy. Velutha represents Dalits in the novel. He is resented by the other upper caste workers in the Pickle factory because of his caste, a Paravan. Vellutha, son of Vellya paapen, a toddy tapper, acquires training in carpentry. The lowest castes were bonded to particular high caste households for whom they were always on call as servants. 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. Vellutha is a victim of Caste system. Even a Dalits can become an engineer or doctor if he is given an opportunity to take education and facilities.

Roy's socio-political criticism as reflected in the novel. Mr. Pillai is a local leader of the Marxist Communist Party. Pillai is highly educated fellow, he believes in Marxism as a political philosophy aims at creating a classless society. He organizes party at the grassroots 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 matter of the fact he is a caste conscious belong to an upper-class community. Pillai represents the corrupt and hypocrisy of the caste based political system in India.

Arundhati Roy's denial of caste discrimination and status of Dalit amounts to a strong argument in favors of aspiration, love and deference between social groups. This change of attitude and behaviors does not depend on party politics, but rather on political consciousness and more individual liberty. Instead of writing the nation through an established political project, Arundhati Roy writes the nation by provoking freedom of individual identities, which will cause, indirectly, a shift in the approaches that organize such type of discrimination across castes in the Indian society. Pillai, the communist who supporter of the rights of the working class and teaches them Caste is Class (281) has not been able to free himself from the untouchability. His attachment to party is only show but in real sense he is selfish and follower of caste system. Once he says to his wife Kalyani,

would not allow Paravans and all that into her house. Never (278).

Thus, the major characters in the novel attempt to project themselves in a way which are quite different from their real self. The novel shows a patriarchal domination of a caste ridden structure where powerful over weak and upper caste over Dalits. Though. Roy explains directly the efforts of casteism and the plight of Dalits in India, the known facts for Indian she also wants to bring the attention of international agencies such as U.N.O and International Human Rights Commission on the issues of Dalits. Rajshekar seems to bring discussion and debate on the atrocities committed against Dalits at an international level, trying to bring the issues of Dalits to the level of issues of the Blacks all over the world. Her project also seems to be the one of bringing forth an international awareness and consciousness for the issues such as culture, religion and languages of Dalits.

Roy's focus on this work discussed seems to be primarily on the social consciousness. She tries to show, in clear expressions, how Casteism with its philosophy of individual redemption and Marxism which overlooks caste system cannot bring viable upliftment programmed for Dalits. Roy's novel is incisive and it tears off all the hypocrisies and double standards of religion, media, politics and the dominant culture which perpetuate Apartheid and caste-based cultural hegemony.

WORKS CITED

- Johnson, Allan G. *The Blackwell Dictionary of Sociology*, (Second edition) New York; Blackwell Publishing, 2005pp-141-142.Print.
- Darity Jr., William A., Thompson Gale (Editor in chief), *International Encyclopedia of the Social Science*, Second edition Vol.3 USA: Macmillan References, 2005, P-455. Print.
- Brinda Bose, "In Desire and in Death: Eroticism as Politics in Arundhati Roy's 'The God of Small Things'", *Ariel*, University of Calgary, Alberta, 29: 2, 1998: 59-72. Print.
- Anupama Rao, "Understanding Sirasgaon" in *Thamyris*, vol.4, no 1, 1997. Anupama Rao, 1997: 127. Print.
- Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*. New Delhi: India Link.1997. Print.