
CASTE ANTAGONISMS- A STUDY OF ARUNDATI ROY'S 'GOD OF SMALL THINGS'

Ritu Kumar*

ABSTRACT

The rapid race of development that human civilization has registered particularly in the sphere of medicine, and technology may have succeeded in eliminating dreaded epidemics or enhanced conform levels yet as we look back aghast at the two ghastly ware we have fought we seldom realize that instead of moving on and ahead we have as a deliberate political act kept the scourge of discrimination and violence alive nurtured by demon of oppressive social norms which deny justice and dignity to many down trodden, weak and marginalized.

Therefore it become imperative to locate tax and voices that have the commitment and courage to take this contemporary demon head on, to identify and subsequently critically analyse a discourse corpus, which has the rigour of an activist's zeal and creative complexity of a writer. Arundhati Roy, Booker Awardee, is one such writer who has fore grounded in abundance the concerns and sufferings of the oppressed, neglected. Side lined and marginalized.

The present paper is an attempt to study Arundhati Roy's God of Small Things as a text of an upper class woman Ammu and a lover caste man's (Velutha) struggle with powerful and dominating social political milieu which trample their individuality and silence their voice. The paper attempts to highlight hypocritical moral standards prevalent in society subjugate and reduce the woman and the untouchable to a peripheral and precarious existence.

*Associate Professor, P.G. Department of English, M. L. N. College, YNR

INTRODUCTION

The rapid race of development that human civilization has registered particularly in the sphere of medicine, and technology may have succeeded in eliminating dreaded epidemics or enhanced comfort levels yet as we look back aghast at the two ghastly wars we have fought we seldom realize that instead of moving on and ahead we have as a deliberate political act, kept the scourge of discrimination and violence alive nurtured by demon of oppressive social norms which deny justice and dignity to many down trodden, weak and marginalized.

Therefore it becomes imperative to locate texts and voices that have the commitment and courage to take this contemporary demon head on, to identify and subsequently critically analyse a discourse corpus, which has the rigour of an activist's zeal and creative complexity of a writer. Arundati Roy, Booker Awardee, is one such writer who has foregrounded in abundance the concerns and sufferings of the oppressed, neglected side lined and marginalized.

The present paper is a humble attempt to study Arundati Roy's *God of Small Things* as a text dealing with an upper caste woman and a lower caste man's struggle with powerful and dominating, social political milieu which trample their individuality and crush harshly their talent, urge and voice Adu Abraham make an observation

"Respectable Syrian Christians must feel that the book maligns the community and particularly its womanhood. The explicit reference to sex are bad enough, but that a Syrian christian woman would make love to an untouchable youth is clearly obscene"¹

The thrust area of paper is how the hypocritical moral standards prevalent in society subjugate and reduce the women and the untouchable to a peripheral and precarious existence, both in form and feeling book heralds a new conception and upheaval in the sphere of traditional thoughts, it tells a tale of decay and disintegration of a Christian family of Kerala who claim themselves the early Christians in India regarding themselves superior to Catholics and Protestants who are low caste people.

The storyline is complex, there are many chapters and they are inter- connected by a fine web of poetry woven around characters and incidents. The novel narrates the story of high ranking government official Pappachi a compulsion wife- beater of mammachi, the wife who cries at her husband's funeral because she was used to him, [not because] she loved him²" [p.5] it is also a chronicle of chacko's and Ammu's life the children of Pappachi- Mammachi. Adult Chaco,

owner of the pickle factory established by Mammachi is also ineffectual divorced husband of Margaret Kochamma, an English woman and father of Sophie Mol Ammu, the daughter when returns from her husbands place to stay with her parents for rest of her life, along with two twins Rahul and Estha is plainly told by Chacko 'What is your is mine and what is mine is mine' (p.57) Chacko has boundles love for sophie Mol but his love of for two-egg twins Rahul and Estha is disciplined and formal. He feels that these have-nots should be grateful for the small mercies. The novel focuses on the tragic angle of Ammu, the divorcee. She is barely tolerated, because "a divorcee daughters ... has no position anywhere at all"(p.45.) At Ayemenon she develops illicit relations with Velutha an untouchable but her solace and bliss is shortlived because Velutha is wrongly charged for murdering Sophie Mol, who actually dies by drowning on her own. Ammu too later on, dies a lonely death in a dilapidated hotel room abandoned and cursed as a Veshya by her aunt and her brother for ruining the name of family. The history of this Syrian family takes into account the tale of the children. Rahul and Estha, the twins think alike, feel alike and yet disturbing and distrupture elements of their childhood experiences wreck Estha's life completely Rahul, the sister manages to live some how but Estha, who has been sexually abused by the Lemon drink man (101) in Abhilash Talkies become dumb and immobile. Silence enfolds him and becomes "accustomed to the uneasy octopus that lived inside him and squirted its inky tranquilizer on his past"(p.12). This story line is punctuated by details from Baby Kochamma's life, her one-sided love for Father Mulligan and her act of revenge against Ammu and Velutha. The world of real politics Marxism, Administration, Police is also taken into account. Politics is represented by Comrade K.M.N. Pillai, the communist leader, the perpetual winner and Administration is projected through Thomas Mathew the inspector.

Thus the novel portrays confrontation and combating between the lanteen and the mombati (ther terms coined by author to denote the big and the low in society). Cold and indifferent society norms dominated by petrarchy cruel and corrupt police, administration, selfish and cynical politicians. Exploitation of dalits, desertion of devastation of down- trodden, failure and frustration of untouchables like Vellya Paapen and his sons Velutha and Kuttape or the ostracized like Ammu. The God of small things projects all those people who are victimized by the forces of history dead convention, false pride, the tyranny of the slate and politics of opportunism. God of Small Things is also the simple natural life of children and innocent creatures.

“They all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tempered with the laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much” [p.31]

The above observation points out A. Roy’s great concern and painful realization of deep rooted caste system and unjust prevalent in India, also absolute patriarchal structure and its committant devaluing of weak, marginalized and low.

Absolute patriarchal structure is a global phenomenon but in India a further dimension was added to it with the origination of caste-system about 2000 years ago. This caste system divides population into 4 major groups. The Brahmins at the top, followed by Kshtriya, Vaishya and at the bottom rung of society stand sudra, also called untouchable. All over social structure is governed by this caste-distinction. Even present days honour-killings in various parts of country are shameful manifestation of ‘demon’ called ‘laws’ laid by self styled leaders of various castes and creeds. They don’t permit marriage within same quotas or marriage below one’s caste, believing marriage or alliance is not made in heaven but decided by a few powerful people. Arundati Roy’s mother a fellow sufferer like Ammu says.

“She [Arundati Roy] is talking about a situation where a touchable woman-syrian Christian, Nair or any other falls in love with a man of lower caste would it not create a struggle even now?” [Front line 8 August 1997, 111]

In the novel relationship between Ammu and Velutha is condemned by all because Velutha is a Paravan, an untouchable and she is daughter of an upper caste Christian. To a westernized urban sensibility, this may be a routine matter but not to Indians still lost in the maze of obsolete social ethos and futile dying dogmas. Equality remains a distant dream to most of low caste. Same is true for Christians also who living in India have internalized the idea of caste rank even though they live and operate in a largely Christian universe.

Velutha, which means white in Malayalam was christened so because he was black. His piteous plight reminds us of Bakha is ‘untouchable’, Gangu in ‘Two leaves and a bud’ and Munoo in ‘coolie’. He wasn’t meant to be a carpenter as his forefathers were paravans who had “converted to Christianity and joined the Anglican church to escape the courage of untouchability” [p. 74]. As added incentive, they were given a little food and money. They were known as Rice-Christians. “It didn’t take them long to realize that they had jumped from the frying pan into the fire. They were made to have separate churches, with separate services, and separate priest... After independence they found that they were not entitled to any Government benefits like job

reservations or bank loans at low interest rates, because officially on paper they were Christians and therefore casteless”[p.74]

Velutha is an expert mechanic and craftsman at the age of 14, he learnt carpentry from Johan Klain and became accomplished carpenter, developed ‘a German design sensibility [p.73]’, built Mamachi a Bauhans dining table..... for baby Kochamma’s annually nativity plays he made a stock of wire framed angle wings that fitted on to children’s back like knapsacks Mammachi often said about him “it only he had not been a paravan he might have become an engineer.” [p.75]

Thus Velutha had a strong sense of uplifting from bottom to top. In spite of his unmatched skill from bottom to top. In spite of his unmatched skill and talent to create beautiful. Wooden articles he wasn’t allowed to go beyond the back entrance of the Ayemenon house as “Pappachi wouldn’t allow Paravans into the house. Nobody would they were not” allowed to touch anything that touchable touched”. [p.73]

Thus Velutha in his insults and hurt has close resemblance to Bakha in ‘untouchable’. But the primary difference between two is Velutha is submissive, less aggressive and silent sufferer. He takes the pain in, bites it inside and put a lid on it but keeps on sizzling inside with wrath and helplessness, never tries to hammer the age old norms of society and tradition, is a man of innocence and this innocence is badly caught in the web of casteist mentality and corrupt police administration. His skill as a carpenter doesn’t command respect in society. Moreover gradually, in a futile attempt, to come out of eddy of injustice and insult, he degenerates into a recluse and leaves Ayemenon without telling anyone. For four years nobody knows about his whereabouts, it is when his brother falls sick, he returns and immediately Mammachi rehires him as the factory carpenter but this causes a stir in the factory workers. Why? Because the touchable workers of the factory can’t accept a Paravan working as their equal. “It caused a great deal of resentment among the other touchable factory workers because according to them Paravans were not meant to be carpenters and certainly prodigal paravans were not meant to be hired” [p.76] So Velutha was paid less than other upper class carpenter but more than his own class and Mammachi thought.

“he ought to be grateful that he was allowed on the factory premises at all and allowed to touch the things that touchable touched. She said that it was a big step for a paravan”[p.77]

The treatment meted out to the untouchables is a major concern of the novel. The social conditions of the untouchables are very well presented with Vellya Paapen’s worry regarding

Velutha's conduct. Vellya paapen an old world Paravan naturally knows that any attempt at social equality on the part of an untouchable will be met with most severe punishment. In those old days untouchables weren't allowed to walk on public roads, required to cover their mouths with hands while speaking. Velutha, on the other hand, was a young man of new age. His manner of talking to and dealing with high caste people had an unmistakable smack of independence, self respect and social equality. This is what alarmed his father and it is shown by the consequences that hatred towards paravans and their oppression was still very potent in Kerala. Velutha, symbolically associated with God of Small Things is embodiment of extreme social discrimination, humiliation and poverty. To quote Pramod K. Nayar³.

“Velutha, the untouchable is liminal due to his caste. Yet the house can't function without him: to repair a pump, entertain the children, and eventually as Ammu's lover Velutha also floats between the two world: rich and poor, “untouchable” and “touchable” (as the wins term it). Velutha spatio- geographically and “metaphysically” circles around baby Kochamma's house”

This is irony of Velutha's situation People in society can't do without him yet he is kept at distance because he is untouchable. His being a paravan falls like a curse upon him. His any attempt to overcome this birth deficiency is marred by so called big guns of society, who want him to be available when needed otherwise remain in oblivion. In this regard Madhumati Adhikari pertinently remarks.

“In Velutha's case, it is class and caste discrimination that makes him powerless and not his gender. His greatest crime is that while being a Karna he has dreamt of Draupadi”⁴

His lack of hesitation, his quiet way to disregard suggestion without appearing a rebel were the traits which could be constructed as insolence in a paravan boy. He has a vision, a soul and a human heart of his own which goes to suffering minorities. The rarest moments of happiness that twins experiences in the unit “The River in the Boat” are his gift to them.

Velutha, however becomes a transgressor when he indulges in illicit love affair with Ammu. Even in the state ruled by communist this is not tolerated because the Ayemenon leader, Comrade Pillai, in his heart of hearts, doesn't approve of the relationship between woman of a respectable family and the untouchable. Ammu and Velutha spend their pleasurable nights on the bank of river, just beside the history house.

“clouded eyes held clouded eyes in a steady gaze and a luminous woman opened herself to a luminous man. She was wide and deep as a river in spate. He sailed on her waters. She could feel

him moving deeper and deeper in her.. he lay over her, careful not to put his weight on her. He kissed her eyes, her ears, her beely”[p. 336-337].

The row over Ammu- Velutha relation is the key factor in the novel, that brings about catastrophe and misfortune on all. Their sexual attraction and relation on personal level represents a union that openly defies all socially constructed restriction thought it leads to a sense of fulfillment and content in both of them.

“Then for what served like an eternity, but was really no more than five minutes. She slept learning against him, her back against his chest. Seven years of oblivion lifted her off her and flew into the shadows on weighty, quaking winds..”[p.337]

Amid the murderous terror of being captured and destroyed for ever. Both Ammu and Velutha find nomentary release from the life- destroying relatives, the deathly inevitabilities into a soul elevating feeling of mutual support and protection in the dark night on the banks of the Meenachal. Ammu loved Velutha as her childhood companion not so much for his exceptional talents as for his fiery spirit of protest. One day when she saw Velutha marching with a red flag., In white shirt and mundu with angry veins in his neck’[[p.77] She perspired. Now Rahul wondered ‘what had it all meant’? [p.72]. perhaps love. Now the metaphor of “clouded eyes” referred to above supports the writers intention of revealing Ammu’s emotions Ammu while going oneness with Velutha knew consequence yet she wanted it because both Ammu and Velutha understand the meaninglessness of life. They wish through their psychic depth a life of obilviow “there was nowhere to go. They had nothing no future. So they stick to small things”[p.338] throwing away all scruples of caste, creed and community. Their physical union challenges social order and “challenging the keepers of social order and gardeons of its taboos we tremble at the punishment fitting the crime, emasculation or more generally a pervasive unsexing”⁵. It is ironic that the love-affair between Velutha and Ammu is disclosed by Velutha’s own father who is horrified to see “what his untouchable son had touched. More than touched ”[p.78] He rushes to Ayemenon to inform Mammachi, who heaving her daughter’s adventure with an untouchable visualizes vividly detailed fantasized picture of their love-act 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 of her daughter. She had defied generation of breeding....and brought the family to it’s knees.... Mammachi lost control”[p.258]

This disclosure makes powerful act and react, form a group to reform the untouchable by seeking revenge to teach lesson to others. Baby Kochamma calls Velutha and dismisses him from service. He knows not what is in for him, remains restraint as Mammachi abuses him she says she'll have castrated him like a pariah dog. He quietly leaver. So the one-armed cheerful man of Ammu's dreams who 'left no footprint's in sands no ripples in water no image in mirror"[p.216] evokes the plight of untouchable history. Velutha rushes to comrade Pillai's house and being a party cardholder expects help but Pillai gives him a lecture of the principles and moral of political parties "it's not in the party's interest to take up such matters" Individual's interest is subordinate to the organization's interest. Violating party Discipline means violating party unit [p.287] Pillai knows that his refusal to help velutha would result in the latter's death, yet he wants this to happen because of his thinking on the caste line. Thus communism which was supposed to be substitute of religion explodes. Any political leader will help an untouchable in this situation was a myth, and it remains same even today. Preaching cosmopolitanism, practicing casteism. "And there it was again. Another religion tuned against itself. Another edifice constructed by the human mind, decimated by human nature"[p.287].

Sophie Mol, Ammu niece, dies of drowning the same night and Velutha is falsely implicated in her murder case. The police standing for politeness, obedience, loyalty, intelligence, courtesy and efficiency is given sufficient assistance and help by Ayemenon house and Comrade Pillai to arrest Velutha. He is caught hiding in History House where policemen beat him. mercilessly breaking his skull, knee caps, ribs reducing him to pulp. He is not given chance to explain and defend. Thus basic human rights are violated by high ups. His very existence is erased. The absence of footprints symbolically is a rejection from human history of human status altogether. The sweeping is done by authority "history Henchen sent to square the books and collect the dues"[p.310] Two pages later Ammu while coming back from police station mutters "He's dead" and whisper "I've killed him"[p.8].

All powerful inspector Thomas Mathew dares to humiliate Ammu in the Kottayan Police station by tapping her breasts with his baton "as though he was choosing mangoes from a basket"[p.] The baton on the breast exposes the falseness of all these professions. She exposes another hypocrisy- that of the Christians who practices untouchability like the Hindus. In this way, Arundati Roy wisely has marvelously handled the theme of 'untouchability' in her novel.

It is again, quite ironic that Thomas Mathew who dared drag Velutha from the History House and beat him inhumanly to death' bends down to sweep the Paravans footprints by collecting false evidence of his crime for violating 'Love Laws' "Patriarchy dominating society must punish the paravan who has dared to defile the tradition and the woman who has defiled generation of breeding"[p.258] Both these mombatis must be reprimanded for unspooling unacknowledged fears- civilization, fears of nature, men's fear of woman, powers fear of powerlessness'[p.308]. They must punish the paravan because his crime is bigger and greater because his caste is low and untouchable. "inoculate a community against an outbreak" 'love laws' sustained by 4 pillars of society –religion caste, God and scriptures operate in society with its double standard and is a very potent weapon for coercion. Laxmi parasuram observes "Velutha's place in history was pre-determined he was not expected to see many things that were out of bounds for him, obscured by history's blinkers. He was the God of Loss, God of small things, of Goose Bumps and sudden smiles, who had to go about furtively denying his own presence, but one day changed the whole cause of his life; he was caught in the noose of history with a suddenness which the big brought upon the small"⁶

Velutha's tragic end caught in the coils of a rigid system coined/by history becomes unbearably sad since he was also a lover. In short, Velutha, the silent sufferer takes no cognizance of social convention and restrictions and thus comes in conflict with history, administration and social code of conduct. What novel projects is that an untouchable is deserted by upper class, is deceived by political parties for their benefit and destroyed by established order. Forces of history, politics and state make a combined effort, prepare a devilish drifted broth to rob him of his life. Pitted against the God of Small Things by his private passion for Ammu, this small man in small act has no chances of survival . Ammu's safety proves to be too illusionary. It was the most dangerous place she could be"[p. 338]. After his death she finally leaves Ayemenon, as she must be punished for self-assertion for seeking love outside the institution sanctified by the community, suffers from a fatal illness that eats her little by little finally she takes matter into her own hands and kills herself. The after math of Velutha and Ammu's death is pathetic. Estha becomes dumb and immobile due to false witness extracted from him in the police station to implicate and accusal innocent Velutha' Rahel escapes this catastrophe and returns to Aymenen to take her mentally deranged brother into her arms and heal his psychic wounds through the "bereaved solace of incest".

Having seen “History in live performance (309), collecting its dues from those who broke its laws for maintaining” structure order complete monopoly” (309), Estha and Rahul realize that it was “human history, masquerading as God’s purpose revealing herself to an under age audience”[309]

This “History in performance” Marx, Man, God, Touchable policeman women rubbing shoulders together – remain for Estha, Rahel and Ammu too “like a rogue piece in a puzzle. Like a question mark that drifted through the pages of a book and never settled at the end of sentence(72)”

Thus the tragic sufferings of Velutha are a protest against existing laws of society and raise raging social problems of our time. A true writer- activist, Arundati attacks the institution of family, society, religion, politics, established order, administration, law but in doing so she doesn’t indulge in preaching but merely holds the mirror up to nature and reality to evoke powerfully and successfully the personal tragedy of men like Velutha and public inhumanity of men like Thomas Mathew and comrade pillai which put the novel in the rank of literature that lasts.

REFERENCES

1. Abu Abraham, “Breaking the Love Laws”, the Hindustan Times, Sunday Magazine (November 23, 1997) p3.
2. Arundati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, Delhi (India) Inc. 1987 (All reference to page number are from this edition)
3. Pramod K. Nayar, ‘Troping Silence : Over significance and Liminality in *The God of Small Things* in *Arundati Roy : The Novelist Ordinary* edited by R.K. Dhawan, Prestige Publication, New Delhi, 1999 p. 237.
4. Madhumalati Adhikari ‘Power Politics in *The God of Small Things*’ in *Arundati Roy: The Novelist Extraordinary* edited by R.K. Dhawan, Prestige Publicatio, New Delhi, 1999, p.46.
5. Sudhes Kakkar and John M. Ross *Tales of Love, sex and danger* p.5
6. Laxmi Parasuram ‘The World of Small and Big Things’ *Transgressions of Rules and Roles in *The God of Small Things* in Arundati Roy, *The Novelist Extraordinary* edited by R.K. Dhawan, Prestige Publication, New Delhi, 1997, p. 102-103.*

