



**SOCIAL INJUSTICE WITH WOMEN:  
A STUDY OF ARUNDHATI ROY'S  
*THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS***

**DR. SANDEEP KUMAR SHARMA**

Assistant Professor  
Department of English  
P. U. Constituent College,  
Dharmkot, Moga. (Punjab) INDIA

**ABSTRACT**

*Arundhati Roy's masterpiece The God of Small Things pivots around a fated, forbidden relationship between a Syrian-Christian divorcee, Ammu and a low-caste untouchable carpenter, Velutha. The novel presents social injustice with women in a conventional patriarchal domination where women have a marginalised status and were seldom allowed to take any education as men always dominate women socially, morally, emotionally and psychologically. The novel depicts a graphic picture of the miserable plight of the Indian women, their sufferings and anxieties, and especially their humble submission in a conservative male social set up. Casteism and patriarchy are the major discursive practices which form the backdrop of the tragic drama unfolded in The God of Small Things. Ammu was such a character that she was deprived of any sympathy and compassion in her days of adversity and misfortune, her kith and kin who came to see her on the pretext of showing sympathy, shed crocodile tears on her miseries and she gradually learnt to study their hypocrisy and hate them.*

**Key Words:** Marginalised, Oppressed, Untouchability, Caste System, Domination.

**INTRODUCTION**

Set in the southern Indian state of Kerala and divided chronologically between the late 1960s and the early 1990s, Arundhati Roy's masterpiece *The God of Small Things* pivots around a fated, forbidden relationship between a Syrian-Christian divorcee, Ammu and a low-caste untouchable carpenter, Velutha. Much of the narrative of *The God of Small Things* is presented from the perspective of Roy's twinned child-protagonists, Ammu's children Estha and Rahel, and the decisive events of the novel - the cross-caste affair, the subsequent beating

**DR. SANDEEP KUMAR SHARMA**

1Page



and murder of Velutha by the police, and the death of drowning of the children's cousin Sophie Mol - are revealed gradually as the adult twins meet more than twenty years later. Roy's complex doubled time scheme allows for a meditative, almost obsessive remembrance of these family tragedies, and it is through the close juxtaposition of past and present that Roy is able to develop the novel's other central concern, the delayed effects of these damaging events on Estha and Rahel, their traumatized return to the family home in the town of Ayemenem and their incestuous reconciliation in adulthood. Indira Bhatt asserts,

*"The novel is all about atrocities against the small things – childhood and youth, women, young and old and the untouchables" (Bhatt 44).*

The oppression of women is a key subject and provides the catalyst for the novel's pivotal, caste-breaking affair. Ammu's rage due to her subaltern status, Mammachi's experiences of domestic violence at the hands of Pappachi, and Baby Kochamma's humiliation by the men on the trade-union march all condense in their differing reactions. The novel presents social injustice with women in a conventional patriarchal domination where women have a marginalised status and were seldom allowed to take any education as men always dominate women socially, morally, emotionally and psychologically. The novel depicts a graphic picture of the miserable plight of the Indian women, their sufferings and anxieties, and especially their humble submission in a conservative male social set up. It is universally admitted that education must be given to both men and women without any gender bias as it enlightens the outlook of a person and helps to achieve a dignified and respectable status in the society. But it is quite ironical that Ammu, the female protagonist is devoid of any education because her parents think that higher education corrupts a lady, and consequently Ammu has to discard education due to her gender. Alex Tickell remarks,

*"The God of Small Things is a book where you can connect the very smallest things to the very biggest. Therefore the chain of connections delineates the multi-layered pattern of big and small in the novel, originating from the very title which challenges the tyranny of big things and enunciates creative potential of dissent" (Tickell 10).*

Ammu, the main character of the novel is a tragic figure like *King Lear's Cordelia*, insulted, and misbehaved by her father, ill-treated and abused by her husband, emotionally shattered by her brother and insulted by the police, the so called guardians of morality. Her tragic story from the beginning till the end arouses in us the feeling of pity and fear and like the heroines of Shakespeare, she faces endless torture and sufferings. The novel deals with the pathetic plight of a woman, Ammu, divorced by her husband and neglected by her family. Roy has shown subalternity in a hierarchical structure of power in this novel and it is worth mentioning that the novel also deals with and represents subaltern groups and poor



individuals. She makes a legitimate division between the powerful and the powerless in the third chapter of the novel titled 'The big Man The Laltain, The small Man The Mombatti'. By the term 'Laltain' Roy means the elite class and Mombatti symbolises the have-nots and marginalised of the society. The two chief characters of the novel, Velutha and Ammu represent the Mombatti in the novel and all the other power exerting people like Chacko, Baby Kochamma and Comrade Pillai come under the banner of Laltains. Velutha is a helpless victim of caste subalternity and he is the representative of the untouchable in *The God of Small Things*.

Ammu came in contact with Velutha, an untouchable of the village Ayemenem and ultimately becomes a helpless victim of the patriarchal set up. Though there was huge caste difference between Ammu and Velutha yet they indulged in sex act because of their passion and they did not pay any heed towards the code of conduct of their respective castes. Such illicit affair was not permitted and was considered a societal crime to be punished severely. However this resistance of the lovers is brutally crushed by the powerful male dominant upper class society which reflects that the network of power relations is paralleled by a form of resistance. The illicit sexual union of Ammu and Velutha illustrates that both power and resistance are synonymous in a society. "The only way to contain their intimacy is to literally separate Ammu and Velutha by locking Ammu in her room" (239). It is worth mentioning that both Ammu and Velutha are conscious about the fact that they can be caught by anyone and even then they meet and satisfy their sexual desires. Lanone remarks, "Ammu and Velutha's clear desire to be with each other challenges the monolithic social norms and becomes a matter of life and death" (Lanone 30). Ultimately, both of them are physically separated as Ammu is locked in her room and Velutha is forced to leave the town. Brinda Bose comments, "The Ammu-Velutha relationship must end in death because while the affair is conducted secretly, it is also done so in full visibility" (Bose 67). Ammu is compelled to live in loneliness because she has transgressed the boundaries of her high caste and as a result, she is unable to bear this agony and separation and ultimately dies in isolation. The untouchables "were not allowed to walk on public roads, not allowed to cover their upper bodies, not allowed to carry umbrellas and they had to put their hands over their mouths when they spoke" (71). Velutha has no right to love as it is the privilege of the touchables or the upper castes only. As he defies their laws, he has to face the music and ultimately he is punished, separated from Ammu, banished and left to meet his death in exile. In this novel, the women form a subservient class in the patriarchal discourse because they are at the mercy of a powerful ideology.

Women like Ammu, Rahel, Mammachi and Margaret Kochamma become victims to the torture of the male members, who exert their superiority and power over females in the male-dominated Indian society, that treats women as inferior objects subordinate to men. The bright example of oppression on women in the novel is Ammu's predicament as she is



frequently beaten by her father. She is also beaten by her addicted husband in his intoxicated mood. She has to tolerate his outrageous treatment till he compels her to satisfy the sexual hunger of his boss Mr. Hollick. When she refuses to submit to his Boss's desire, he beats her violently in an angry mind. This time, his violence against his wife goes beyond her endurance and as a result, she runs away to Ayemenem House with her children Estha and Rahel for shelter. Ammu now leads her life as a divorced wife in the house of her parents. But to her misfortune, she is tortured physically and emotionally by her parents and brother Chacko without remorse. Ammu feels tortured and burdened by the cold indifference of Pappachi and Mammachi and on the other hand Chacko treats her and her children as unwanted burden and an encumbrance on his parents. Thus Ammu is punished for being a divorced woman separated from her husband. It is an irony that a divorced daughter is oppressed upon by her own parents, who welcome and bestow their love and affection on their estranged son. It is a matter of social injustice and discrimination that the estranged son Chacko is kindly treated by his parents but on the other hand the same parents turn biased against their daughter on account of her helplessness and homelessness. In this context baby Kochamma's jealous comment directed towards Ammu is worth quoting that

*“a married daughter had no position in her parents’ home. As for a divorced daughter...she had no position anywhere at all. As for a divorced daughter from a love marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochamma’s outrage” (45).*

Another example of social injustice depicted in the novel is women's deprivation of parental property. Chacko, the brother of Ammu proudly exercises and asserts his full right as the inheritor of the property of his parents, but his sister Ammu cannot claim any property of her parents, as a woman as a daughter has no claims to her father’s property. Chacko arrogantly asserts his power before his sister every now and then by saying: “What’s yours is mine and what’s mine is also mine” (57). This haughty claim of his property hurts the sentiment of his sister but Chacko does not mind hurting her emotionally. The next example of Chacko's claim of property is cited by his partnership with Ammu in his running the pickle factory named Paradise Pickle. Although Ammu works in the factory as much as Chacko did, the latter always claims the factory as his own. His frequent assertion of his claim of property is suggestive of social injustice meted out to Ammu. Thus the power structure of the Ayemenem House is quite repressive where the all powerful Chacko asserts his power and authority to oppress Ammu time and again. Arundhati Roy condemns this kind of discrimination not only as an act of injustice but also a kind of social oppression to which she give vent. Thus casteism and patriarchy are the major discursive practices which form the backdrop of the tragic drama unfolded in *The God of Small Things*. Ammu was such a character that she was deprived of any sympathy and compassion in her days of adversity and misfortune, her kith and kin who came to see her on the pretext of showing sympathy, shed



crocodile tears on her miseries and she gradually learnt to study their hypocrisy and hate them.

Conclusively, it can be argued that in *The God of Small Things*, women have become a helpless and poor victim at the hands of the patriarchal ideology. Whenever an untouchable is accused for any crime, the touchable become united to remove that person for ever which is a plain truth that has reflected in the novel. The hatred towards untouchables and the marginalised women cannot be removed until the society would accept them as the fellow human beings. In Kerala, the Communists were in power and they have advocated human Liberty, Equality and Fraternity but it is quite embarrassing that in the case of women and the untouchables, they change this policy without any repentance. Thus the novelist has portrayed the social injustice meted out to women in a crystal clear manner in this novel and this aspect has been delineated very forcefully by Arundhati Roy.

## WORKS CITED

- Bhatt, Indira. "Victims and Victimizers: A Study of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*" *Critical Practice* 6 (1999): 42-27. Print.
- Bose, Brinda. "In Desire and in Death: Eroticism as politics in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*." *Arundhati Roy: Critical Perspectives*. Ed. Murari Prasad. New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2006. Print.
- Lanone, Catherine. "Seeing the World Through Red-Coloured Glasses." *Reading Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things*. Ed. Carole and Jean-Pierre Durix. Dijon: Editions Universitaires de Dijon, 2002. Print.
- Roy, Arundhati. *The God of Small Things*. New Delhi: IndiaInk, 1997. Print.
- Tickell, Alex. *Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things*. New York: Routledge, 2007. Print.