



ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*: A STUDY OF MARGINALITY

ANIL VINAYAKRAO DAHATONDE

Ph. D. Research Student,
Dept of English
Dr. B.A.M.U., Aurangabad.
(MS) INDIA

ABSTRACT

Caste and creed plays an important role in Indian Society. It divides the society into upper class and lower class. Dalit Literature is prominently about the oppressed class in Indian caste system. It emerged prominently as a collective voice after 1960's in different regional languages through self-narratives poems, short stories and specially autobiographies. The present paper focuses on marginality in concern with Arundhati Roy's debut novel The God of Small Things. One of the central themes of the novel revolves around the love law. The love of as Ammu and Velutha violate this law. Vautha is a dalit in the cast based society. Velutha's grandfather and his family had embraced Christianity and they were converted Christians. In spite of this he and his family cannot escape from the curse of untouchability. Besides this Ammu's character is very important. Novel presents the male dominated society but Ammu dares to cross the boundaries of caste. In short, the paper will investigate Dalit problems and women identity.

INTRODUCTION

Dalit Literature has been the most powerful form of literary expression. It has acquired a prestigious position in Indian Dalit narratives have been a part of the Indian social narratives since 11th century and onwards. It was Sekkizhar's Periya Puranam who portrayed dalit woman like half-naked and sexually exploitable. Dalit writing mainly started during post

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independence period with Marathi language and soon writes up appeared in Hindi, Kannada, Telugu and Tamil languages in the forms of short stories, poems and autobiographies. It changed the tracks of current literature from romanticism to realism and Dalit politics. It also focused on writing that includes Dalit characters, Dalit life and its real experiences.

First Systematic exploration of anti-caste ideas is included in Bhakti poetry which attempted on amalgamation of the castes and the out castes. In the modern age, Dalit literature received its impetus with the leaders like Mahatma Phule and Ambedkar who brought the problems of Dalit community forth of society through their writings and books. By the 1960's, Dalit literature saw a fresh crop of new writers like Mahasweta Devi, Namdeo Dhasal, Daya Pawar, Arjun Dangle, Raki Singh, Basudev Sunani, Bama Akhimani, Poomani, Imayam. Mangal Ratherl, Neerave Patel, Perumal Murugal, Palamalai, Sudhakar, D. Gopi and others. Dalit literature is often compared with the African-American literature especially in its depiction of racial segregation and injustice as in Slave narratives.

In the part colonial era, Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Untouchable* and *The Road*, Raja Kanthapura, Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, Narendra Jadhav's *Outcast: a Memoir Life and Triumphs of on Untouchable Family in India*, Vikas Swarup's *Q & A* and Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* have presented faithfully the social history and problems of untouchables through powerful critique of the moral corruption and hypocrisy of the Indian Society. *The God of Small Things* is awarded the prestigious Booker prize for the very first time for any South-Asian women novelist and the second Indian novelist after Salman Rushdie (1982, *Midnight's Children*).

The plot of *The God of Small Things* is complicated. The plot skips from the present to the past and vice-versa without any hint, and so frequently that it leaves even an alert reader perplexed. The entire novel is displayed in the very first chapter. The whole novel centers around Ammu, her two children Rahel and Estha, her parents, brother Chacko and his wife, daughter Sophie Mol and her lover Velutha. Novel opens with Ammu's life full of conflicts. Her husband divorces her. Here is the struggle for her livelihood and education of her children. The novel presents the writer's own life through Ammu's character. All characters are victims in some way or the other. The novel is set in a small town Ayemenem near Kottayam in Kerala, with the surrounding region inherited by Syrian Christians in large numbers.

Ammu's tragedy begins when she is young. Her father Pappachi thinks it unnecessary that she should have college education. She realizes life, a burden more than that of charming one. No one cares for her in her home itself. Her eighteenth birthday goes unnoticed. She feels



depressed, lost. Ultimately she receives permission to go to Calcutta to join her aunt where she meets her future husband, an assistant manager of a Tea Estate in Assam. Ammu's husband is a full-blown alcoholic. Later it is aggravated by the loneliness of Tea-Estate life. The manager Mr. Hillock asks him to resign from job. Actually he takes the benefit of situation and makes an indecent proposal with an eye on Ammu's beauty. He asks Ammu's husband to go on long leave by sending Ammu to his bungalow. Roy puts it as:

Ammu watched her husband's mouth move as it formed words. She said nothing. He grew uncomfortable and then infuriated by her silence. Suddenly he lunged at her, grabbed her hair, punched her and then passed out from the effort. Ammu took down the heaviest book she could find in the bookshelf- The Reader's Digest World Atlas- and hit him with it as hard as she could on his head, his legs. His back and shoulders. When he regained consciousness, he was puzzled by his bruises. He apologized abjectly for the violence, but immediately began to badger her about helping with his transfer. This fell into a pattern. Drunken violence followed by post-drunken badgering. (Roy, 1997, P.42)

The author suggests here that Indian women can withstand physical suffering, even torture but refuses to succumb to immorality. She soon divorces him and returns to Ayemenem with her twins Rahel and Estha.

Frustrated and neglected Ammu returns home. There is emptiness in the life of Ammu. Velutha recognizes Ammu as a woman. Ammu also is captivated by Velutha's arresting look. Unable to bear loneliness and mental tension, she crosses all the barriers and goes to Velutha. She did not care for further consequences. The caste Inhibition's are so profoundly dejected by such an affair involving a respectable lady with an untouchable paravan is enough to rouse great wrath in the locality and it is highly condemned. Roy suggests that it is the crossing line between touchable and untouchable that society never allows anybody to cross.

At her stay in Calcutta at her aunt in order to minimize her sense of insecurity, she drifts into a loveless marriage for:

"She thought that anything, anyone at all, would be better, than returning to Ayemenem" (Roy, 1997, P.29)

Nevertheless it turns her bad luck when she discovers him; she realizes that she has jumped out of the frying pan into the fire.



Ammu is the victim of society. She is always in search of happiness, but always gets suppressed since her childhood. She witnesses the daily violence unleashed by her frustrated father on Mammachi, when young, it is a drunken husband who trades his job by handing her over at the hand of his boss. There are only her children to love to protect her. All of her dreams are shattered one by one. First gets alienated from family, home and society. It follows the brutal death of loving Velutha at the hands of Police station. In her later life, she is lonely exiles and dies in a hotel room at age of thirty. Roy beautifully has projected the plight of women in Indian Society. Indian society has patriarchal family system in most part of India and woman is treated as a second-rank citizen. She faces injustice and oppression in andocentric society. From the very birth woman is under control and strict supervision of mother, father, during childhood brother, after marriage husband and as a widow under sons. Ammu is always under pressure and fails to find her own identity. She always struggle for economic freedom.

Shri. Benaan John Ipe, Known as Pappachi was an “Imperial Entomologist” under British rules. He is seventeen year old than his wife Mammachi. She is exceptionally talented. Despite Pappachi disallows her to begin the pickle factory under the head ‘Paradise Pickles and Preserves’ and runs it successfully. Pappachi never likes this. Being very resentful at some loss in his government job, he beats Mammachi regularly with a brass vase until Chacko’s intervention every time. Nevertheless Mamamachi bears this all her life but doesn’t even cry at Pappachi’s funeral. Roy suggests here that in our Indian man dominated society males are never showing any respect for the female ire respectful of how successful she is.

Chacko is Ammu’s intellectual and self-absorbed older brother, but very untidy scholar at Oxford. He gets married with Margaret and divorced after a daughter is borned. He returns to Ayemenem House. When he is all alone, he maintains sexual relationship with many factory women workers. Mammachi loves her son and tolerates this and even facilitates Chacko’s affairs with factory workers although she is so horrified when she hears of Ammu’s affair with Velutha that she attacks both Velutha and his father and locks Ammu in her room. Roy shows here that Mammachi is partial in her treatment. She understands that Chacko can have physical needs and she helps for it but the same Mammachi doesn’t want to understand about Ammu and reacts so badly. Mammachi reacts so because of two reasons (1) Ammu is female (2) Velutha is a dalit youth.

Ammu undertakes an act of great moral courage when she goes in Police Station to expose the error and accepts the charges of an act. But inspector Thomas Mathew calls her vaishya and her children illegitimate. Roy presents here a new woman



On the other hand, there are many problems faced by Dalit (Untouchable) community in India. They have to discharge their duties and occupations within the limitations of untouchable community. Touchable community thinks that not only their touch but also their shadow would pollute them. Hence Dalits make efforts to earn their livelihood with the inherited occupations prescribed for them from generation to generation. In this context Mammachi recalls her days:

Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan's footprint. In Mammachi's time, Paravans, like other Untouchables, were allowed to walk on public roads, not allowed to cover their upper bodies, 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 (Roy, 1997, P. 73-74)

This way Velutha and Vellya, his father undergoes the most inhuman treatment in the days of Mammachi and Pappachi in Ayemenem on this patriarchal notions of Kerala's touchable society on which Arundhati Roy makes an attack in *The God of Small Things*.

Velutha is skilled and expert carpenter, when Mammachi appoints him in factory as carpenter and later when makes him in charge of general maintenance, it causes resentment in other touchable factory worker because Roy put it as:

... Paravans were not meant to be carpenters. And certainly, prodigal Paravans were not meant to be rehired.

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 didn't 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 Touchables touched. She said that it was a big step for a Paravan (Roy, 1997, P.77)

Roy suggests here that Mammachi always cares for her business only.



Velutha secretly joins the Communist Party for redemption from being untouchables. Arundhati Roy refers here the history of Comrade E.P.M. Nambubripad. Roy brings out the political hypocrisy, manipulation of power and caste politics through Comrade Pillai. He cleverly changes his opinion suitable to him and thus manipulates the power.

When the affair of Velutha and Ammu comes into light, Baby Kochamma convinces to inspector Thomas Mathew that Velutha attempted a rape of Ammu, responsible for children's disappearance from the house and responsible for Sophie Mol's death. Mammachi helps her so that they could save family's reputation. Mammachi and Babby Kochamma think that Velutha is simply a paravan, a coolie, a dalit, an untouchable hence family reputation would be spoiled. Inspector Thomas Mathew simply helps them and registers the false F. I. R. because he and former two are from higher class. Even Comrade Pillai rejects to recognize him as a member of his party because he thinks that it will spoil the name of party.

Arundhati Roy shows here that how political hierocracy works in India especially against a paravan and how a false F.I.R. could be registered against a paravan, because of his low class. This also reveals that even after the 65 years of Independence, the social attitude and mentality of upper caste and class has not changed in India. Dalits are still being humiliated by upper caste because of their feudal mentality.

Velutha is an excellent carpenter. He is an accomplished carpenter and skilled mechanic. Also he acquires that the status of acceptable among touchable. i.e. Pappachi's family. He is the only carpenter who designs the first sliding folding door in Ayemenem. Mammachi often says about him:

"if only he hadn't been a paravan, he might have become an engineer" (Roy, 1997, P.75)

We can witness how a master craftsman Velutha is with following:

When Chacko resigned his job in Madras and returned to Ayemenem with a Bharat bottle –sealing machine, it was Velutha who reassembled it and set it up. It was Velutha who maintained the new canning machine and the automatic pineapple slicer. Velutha who oiled the water-pump and the small diesel generator. Velutha who built the aluminum sheet-lined, easy-to-clean cutting surface, and the ground-level furnaces for boiling fruit. (Roy, 1997, P.75-76)



Despite of all his abilities, he is looked down upon. He becomes the victim of caste system and his relations with Ammu leads to tragic end. Roy shows here that even a dalit can become a doctor or an engineer if he is given an opportunity of education and facilities for it.

Velutha is so expert and newly-acquired religious status as a converted Christian, despite this society doesn't grant him all other facilities & status as other touchable, this sorrowful truth Roy brings forth to us.

Velutha has always been going with his father in the Ayemenem House to deliver coconut. Family never allowed any other paravan in their house or touches anything in their house. Mammachi remembers the period thus:

Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan's footprint. (Roy, 1997, P. 73-74)

After the death of Ammu, Rahel and Estha have to struggle for their existence in the society.

CONCLUSION:

The novelist Arundhati Roy fully tries to show strong protest against social injustice meted out untouchable. She has portrayed Marginality in Indian society in a different way through the struggle of Ammu. 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.

Novel presents more women than men, most of the men are shadowy, while women are sharply portrayed and occupy the centre-stage. The novel gives a new vision of Indian woman Ammu who dares to cross the boundaries of caste and stands on fringes of Indian society. Ranga Rao observes very minutely:

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 things: children and youth, women and untouchable. (Rao, 1997, P. 13)



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