

Complexities of Dalit Representation and Systematic Nature of Caste in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract

Arundhati Roy an Indian author and political activist well known for her creative engagement with Dalit representation and politics through her novels. She has given a platform to the narratives of marginalized communities through her writings and has deeply dealt with the caste and issues of social injustice in her works. *The God of Small things* (1997) by Roy is an honest reflection of how caste influences the Dalit identity formation and affects their social interaction. The central characters of the novel along with the supporting characters represent the struggle and resilience of the Dalit people and their community to strive in a world dominated by the high caste people. Focusing on the themes of power dynamics, themes of caste and assertion of Dalit voices the paper explores deeply the Dalit experiences and their provocative issues enabling the writer to chronicle the challenges within their historical and cultural milieu.

Keywords - Identity crisis, marginalization, loss, Dalit voices, power dynamics.

Caste is an important aspect and burning issue of the Indian culture and society and within years it has exercised immense influence over the aspects of identity and social hierarchy in the Indian political and social scenario. There is an extensive variety of literature significantly known as the Dalit literature existing in the world that performs a crucial task of sensitizing various aspects of caste and Dalit struggle. *The God of Small Things* by Roy deals specifically with the pathos of Dalit life and showcases complexities in Dalit representation.

Caste is the major concern and ruling theme of the novel and through her narrative art Roy makes a detailed analysis of both the ideologies and practices of caste system. The Hymn of Rig Veda reflects that the four castes originated from the creator's body (Thapar 39) where in the Brahmin originated from the mouth and the Shudra from the feet of the Creator. The other two varnas, the Kshatriya and the Vaishya were created from the creator's limbs (Thapar 39).

This symbolic representation of the four varnas was an attempt to give “religious sanction to caste divisions” (Thapar 39). According to Rege, lowest castes have an inherent interest not simply in rising in the system but in overthrowing it. Chakravarti(12) quotes that there are often such instances observed in day to day life where violation of rules set by the upper class is reflected as punishment to the lower caste as and when they do not conform to the set codes. He further expresses :

The ideas of “power and vulnerability, privilege and oppression, honour and degradation, plenty and want, reward and deprivation, security and anxiety”, inherent in the meaning of caste, make it a system of conflict and clash

Caste system happens to be one of the most determining factors of the Indian society right from the time of the ancient ages till date it is responsible for shaping the identities. The novel unfolds the story of a Ammu, a Syrian Christian and her love affair with Velutha, a Paravan. The status of Ammu has been shown to be marginalized on twin platforms as first of all she is a woman who is already looked down ad considered lesser in comparison to men in a patriarchal setup of society and secondly she is a divorced woman who has the responsibility of a pair of twins as a mother. In this respect if she even thinks of being in a relationship with someone already she is socially and morally slained due to her limits that she is trying to extend as a woman. But hardly anyone thinks that apart from her life of 'motherhood and 'divorcehood' Ammu has a life of her own and needs her own space to stretch her wings of freedom (44). The “unmixable mix” of her personality “led her to love by night the man her children loved by day” (44, 332). By loving a man who is a Paravan , Ammu had not only tampered the love laws but also destroyed herself completely (33).

In the narration of the love story between Veutha and Ammu Roy is much conscious of the caste ridden society in the surrounding that interferes in their love life. Velutha is a Paravan by birth and a Paravan is an outcaste in the society in Kerala and in this description Roy has intentionally used her own locale for the fiction because the rigidity of the caste and customs is very strictly maintained and followed in her locale which she has been observing right from the time of her childhood.

As far as the Gendering caste is concerned in that context Uma Chakravarti states : “*in Kerala, traditionally, the lower castes were even required to observe a minimum distance from the brahmanas so that the latter would not be defiled...*” (10). Even the converted Christians were not free from caste prejudices, and the high caste convert remained aloof from those of the

lower order (Kumar 126). Roy very honestly portrays the entire situation keeping in mind the demography of the place :

Pappachi would not allow Paravans into the house. Nobody would. They were not allowed to touch anything that Touchables touched. Caste Hindus and Caste Christians...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. (73, 74)

In the novel Ammu appears to be a representative of the fourth world who suffers inequality at dual plains, at the level of family and society both. Dalits were completely deprived of the mainstream and they suffered exclusion for a much longer period of time. Even the basic amenities like education, health care, sanitation and right to possess the property was not a part of their list and the readers observe Ammu also living in a similar pattern of life. At several instances she is representing the typical life of an oppressed Dalit as she reflects the pathetic social reality of the caste system.

The novel is also a saga of the twin brothers Estha and Rahel and the multiple events that build up in order to follow the details of their drowning cousin brother, an unfortunate incident that they witnessed when they were children. Along with the complexities of the caste system and marginal aspects the novel also deals with the inner complexities of a family including their social and cultural boundaries that still bear the burden of Indian caste system laying its cruel hands on the limitations of love. According to Rege Dalit literature is more of the autobiographical nature and so these narratives emerged as the new focal area for the academia. These writings are not only representing the journey of an individual voices, emotion and consciousness but also a social and community based chorus of voices. It beautifully depicts the oppression and exploitation of the Dalits in the real life and this is the reason why anguish, waiting and sorrow are the three important ingredients of these narratives which pine for a historical necessity in promoting the human freedom. As Rege opines : "one of the most direct and accessible ways in which the silence and the misrepresentation of Dalits have been countered" (Rege 13).

Arundhati Roy's representation of Dalit issues, particularly in *The God of Small Things*, is complex and has been subject to both praise and criticism. While the novel offers rich portrayals of Dalit characters like Velutha, who exhibit agency and resilience in the face of caste discrimination, some critics argue that Roy's representation can be seen as overlooking the

nuances of Dalit experiences and potentially perpetuating stereotypes. The compelling portrayals of the Dalit characters like Ammu and Velutha provide a deep insight into the dehumanizing process carried out by caste system that treated the low caste people no less than animals.

In this context Velutha is portrayed as the resourceful and dignified individual who refuses to be defined by his caste. Roy's portrayal of the Dalits however completely recognizes the systematic nature of caste and also reinforces the image of Dalits as hapless and mischievous at the same time when he accepts his fate while representing resilience which is nothing but a form of resignation. The novel has also been criticized as an attempt for making political appropriation because Roy though a Dalit, hails from a privileged position and family endeavours to write on the experiences of marginalized community portraying as 'real'. According to critique such interventions are not creative but potentially well intentioned and can perpetuate power imbalances in the society slyly suppressing the voices of those who are truly oppressed and underprivileged in the social political scenario.

Despite the criticisms Roy's work is well acknowledging the complexities of Dalit identity and experiences and explores the way in which caste intersects with other forms of oppression like gender and class structure of the society. The work can still be termed as a powerful tool to create awareness among the masses on the issues of caste discrimination and social injustice and by bringing forth the caste issues in a vast and wider panorama, her works are greatly contributing in the broader conversation of talks related to power, privilege and a need for systematic change in the social and political scenario. according to Shashi Tharoor :

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is one such remarkable work which chronicles the sufferings and sorrows of the Dalits in an exclusively unique style. It stands out as a tale of love, betrayal, hatred, spite and guilt. In her very first venture the author successfully captures the plurality of India and the different identities „that vary depending upon class, caste, region and language“ (Tharoor 6).

In the context of Kerala the novel presents the systematic nature of the caste system in India and how much it is deeply ingrained in the human psyche that has been seasoned since past to shape its mentality and thought process in a Pre aligned system. Caste dictates in all the spheres as shown in the novel wherein one finds its influence in social status, access to resources, basic human rights, relationships, choices and destinies. The novel has a powerful theme reflecting the idea that how rigid caste system gives rise to a rigid social hierarchy where certain groups are considered to be inferior and some superior. This is quite evident in the context of Velutha's

character and the attitude of society towards him as he belongs to an outcaste and has limited access to opportunities and basic human rights.

In a dream sequence, Velutha is depicted as leaving "no footprints in sand, no ripples in water, no image in mirrors"—a metaphor for the erasure of his identity and humanity by caste-based discrimination. Mammachi recalls a time when 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" . (The Criterion)

It is caste and its set social system that shapes the romantic relationship between Velutha and Ammu, in fact a kind of forbidden love which is also deeply impacting their decision to get married depending upon the social acceptance as no one can exist without a society which is a human compulsion. Vellya Paapen, Velutha's father, exemplifies how deeply caste prejudice can be internalized. Upon discovering his son's relationship with Ammu, Vellya offers to kill Velutha, not out of hatred, but to uphold the caste system's sanctity. This act of betrayal highlights the extent to which caste norms can override familial love and moral judgment (Litcharts).

The character of Ammu is a revolutionary and revolting character as she reacts against the societal expectations and her divorce from Baba, who was a man of higher caste and her reflections on making Velutha as her choice for remaining life is highly challenging the prescribed roles of a woman in the society. She also crosses the caste boundaries in the process however her defiance leads to her marginalization as the society punishes her for stepping outside the circle defined for her.

On the other hand Velutha's life is marked by actions that fight against the caste expectations because even being a low caste he is educated, skilled and politically active. He has acquired excellence in carpentry and his involvement in the communist party challenge the notion that untouchables are confined only to the menial roles. Despite his talents he has limited or no opportunities in his life and his talent is completely restrained.

The caste system has great impact on relationships and choices that is shaping the relationship of Velutha and Ammu as they are led to discrimination and marginalization for they are considered as lower castes and this is very much evident when one comes across Velutha's experiences of being denied of the basic rights and so are treated with disdain. The novel also explores the concept of symbolic untouchability, where even within high-caste families, women can be marginalized and treated as inferior. This is seen in the experiences of Ammu and Rahel, who are subjected to traditional restrictions and societal expectations. *"The God of*

Small Things underscores the enduring legacy of the caste system, even after formal abolition, highlighting how its influence permeates social structures and relationships. In essence, *The God of Small Things* is a powerful critique of the systematic nature of caste, demonstrating how it shapes individuals' lives, relationships, and the overall fabric of society in India, particularly in the region of Kerala. The novel's denouement illustrates the devastating effects of caste-based discrimination. Ammu's love for Velutha, though pure and sincere, leads to her social ostracism and eventual death in poverty. Velutha's brutal death at the hands of the police, who exploit his Untouchable status, further exemplifies the lethal consequences of caste violations.

The huge financial gap between the two groups enables the upper caste to dominate the lower. Chakravarti states that this “dominance is based on wealth, that is, control over land, which also gives the dominant caste access to political power” (13). The prosperity of Mammachi’s house is antithetically balanced against the poverty of Velutha’s home. Several things that were rejected by the members of the Ayemenem house, were salvaged in Velutha’s hut: Rich things in a poor house. A clock that didn’t work, a flowered tin waste-paper basket. (209)

In *The God of Small Things*, Vellya Paapen, Velutha’s father “was an Old World Paravan”, whose gratitude “to Mammachi and her family for all that they had done for him, was as wide and deep as a river in spate” (76). But there are always certain transgressors even among those who lie at the bottom end and they have forged their identities differently from the way the Upper castes have typecast them. Velutha is one such exception. He is the epitome of “the second type ... of the younger generation, who are assertive and articulate, decently dressed and educated” (Arun 39). He stands in stark contrast to his father. He possessed an “unwarranted assurance” in all his actions (Roy 76):

In the way he walked. The way he held his head. The quiet way he offered suggestions without being asked. Or the quiet way in which he disregarded suggestions without appearing to rebel. (76)

Velutha forgot that he lives in a society where the “Love Laws” laid down “who should be loved and how” and which imposes huge restrictions on inter-caste marriages and regards “endogamy as an inexorable rule of social life” (Roy 33; Kumar 124). In his society there is no place either for adulterous relationship or for a love affair between the “female members of the higher varna and the males of the lower varna” (Kumar 124). This society actively thumps out such a transgressor. Chakravarti poignantly records the situation:

...when the lower caste man dares to fall in love or enter into a relationship, or elope with and marry a higher caste woman, he is... subject to the collective power of the upper castes who will stop at nothing to punish the transgression. The last few years have witnessed a spate of brutal killings of such couples. Since a woman's sexuality is still under patriarchal and caste control... these killings have the explicit consent of the community, especially that to which the woman belongs. (qtd. in Chakravarti 157)

The God of Small Things is also exposing the identity crisis and marginal status of a Dalit woman who is a sufferer of the caste driven society. In order to maintain the identity and distinctiveness of a particular caste the caste system favours endogamy, which means one should get married in his or her own caste and this is counted as a crucial element of the caste system. However with the advent of inter caste marriage systems or hyper gamy the marriages are taking place between high caste and low caste people as a matter of their personal choice and preferences in life which almost is looked down with disdain. Such marriages result in the abusive status of the family or individual in the community and loss of the family status. And so when it is considered as a form of social adultery - "*the most important offence resulting in stringent action from the community and the State*" (Rege 22). In this respect Roy comments :

"Ammu in The God of Small Things committed the first blunder by transgressing not only the rules of caste but also community. She, being divorced from an "intercommunity love marriage", lost her "position in her parents' home" (Roy 45).

It is looked upon her unpardonable crime that she made relationship with Velutha which becomes an instance of adultery between the two different caste members. She obviously brought her misfortunes when she and Velutha make the impossible things happen in their life. As a part of the punishment she has to pack her bags and leave and left alone to die (159,161). Her affair with Velutha brought the "end of living" for her and her children because she by her dishonourable conduct not only ruined her family but also violated "the idealized norms of the community" (Roy 321; Chakravarti 151). This is not only the thing narrated in the novel but it is also an instance observed in real life and as Chakravarti comments :

Both in cities and in rural areas social transgressions are also perceived as tempered by caste... hierarchies such that when an upper caste... man desires a lower caste woman, and rapes

or seduces her, the act is... accepted or even naturalized. (Chakravarti 156)

Roy's work is a significant contribution in the present times that voices and uses her narrative art as a vehicle to project the plight of the Untouchables, the idea is to foreground the pathos and predicament of the life of the oppressed class that has been suffering and struggling since centuries to be treated as normal in the mainstream. The themes of loss, identity crisis and complexities of the narrative are the features that place the novel as a tool to criticize the practice of caste system in society which is no less than a curse and hurdle in the path of a nation's progress. The plot juggles with the attempts of the Dalits to assert their identity by getting rid of age old humiliation and stigma of untouchability.

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