

Downtrodden Society in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract— Arundhati Roy's Booker Prize renowned novel deals with the ravages of caste system in South Indian state, Kerala. Roy portrays both the sad predicament of untouchables and also the struggle of a woman trying to have accomplishment in life in a patriarchal society. Velutha transgresses the established norms of society by having an affair with a woman of high caste. The final upshot of this love affair is the tragic death of an "Untouchable" by the "Touchable Boots" of the state police, an event that makes a mockery of the idea of God. God is no more in control of "small things" rather the small things have an crucial power over God, turning him to "The God of loss"

The society represented in *The God of Small Things* is Syrian Christian. The Christians of Kerala are divided into five churches: Roman Catholic, Orthodox Syrian, Nestorian, Marthoma, and Anglican. Syrian Christians claim the Apostle Thomas as their founder. The term "Syrian" refers to the West Asian origins of the group's ancestors and to their use of Syriac as a liturgical language. For centuries, their spoken language has been Malayalam. Syrian Christians have a history that predates European rule. While the Jesuits made only limited alteration to community life in 1830s and 40s, the nineteenth-century British Colonial state played a significant role in undermining Syrian Christian-Hindu connections.

The proposed paper studies the conflict that exists in *The God of Small Things* at individual and societal levels. The novel graphically shows that how people are helpless to resolve these levels of friction. Velutha, the outcast, can never co exist peaceful with the "touchable" communities for so long as the stigma of untouchability attached to him and countless others like him. Velutha is "highly intelligent," an excellent carpenter with an engineer's mind, but he is also the God of Small Things and he fails to leave any impression on the sand of time.

Keywords— *Deprivation, Indian society, Suppression, Untouchable.*

The publication of *The God of Small Things* in 1997 instantly skyrocketed Arundhati Roy to worldwide critical and popular acclaim. Her first (and to date only) novel won the 1997 Booker Prize, one of the most prestigious awards in the English-language literary world. Interestingly, Roy was trained as an architect and had never before considered herself a novelist. The novel, which Roy wrote between 1992 and 1996, has sold over 6 million copies and has been translated into 40 languages.

The God of Small Things is about a family living in India after Independence. Their story isn't told in chronological order but it is revealed bit by bit to the reader.

Rahel and Esthappen (Estha) are seven year old fraternal twins. They are living in Ayemenem with their mother Ammu

and her brother Chacko, their grandmother Mammachi and their great-aunt Baby Kochamma. Their father Baba lives in Calcutta. Ammu left him when the twins were two years old.

The family is expecting the arrival of Margaret and Sophie Mol, Chacko's ex-wife and daughter, who are living in England. Since Margaret's second husband Joe had died in a car accident, Chacko invited them to spend Christmas in India in order to get over the loss. When they have arrived, Sophie Mol is taking centre stage. So Rahel and Estha stroll around on the river bank and find an old boat. With Velutha's help they repair it and frequently cross the river to visit an abandoned house on the other side. Velutha is an Untouchable, whom Ammu and Chacko have known since their childhood. Their family have given him the opportunity to visit a school

and employed him as a carpenter and mechanic in the family's pickle factory.

During the guests' stay Ammu is more and more attracted by Velutha. One night they meet at the river where they sleep with each other. As it is not possible for an Untouchable to have a relationship or even an affair with somebody from a superior caste, they have to keep their meetings secret. But one night Velutha's father observes them and, feeling humiliated by his son's overbearing behaviour, reports everything to Mammachi and Baby Kochamma. As a consequence they lock up Ammu in her room. There Rahel and Estha find her and, through the locked door, ask her why she's being locked up. As she is angry and desperate, she blames the two children that without them she would be free and they should go away. Hurt and confused they decide to run away and stay at the abandoned house. But Sophie discovers the twins' plan and demands to be taken along. While the three are crossing the river, which has risen from heavy rainfall, their boat capsizes. Rahel and Estha are able to reach the other shore but Sophie cannot swim and is carried away by the current. After a long search for Sophie, the twins go to the abandoned house and fall asleep on its veranda. Neither do they see Velutha, who is sleeping on the veranda nor does he notice the twins' arrival. Earlier that night, Velutha had visited the house of Ammu's family, not knowing that their affair had been discovered. When he arrived Mammachi insulted him and chased him off.

In the morning the children's absence is detected. Then they receive the message that Sophie Mol has been found dead by the river. Baby Kochamma goes to the police and wrongly accuses Velutha of attempting to rape Ammu and kidnapping the children. When the police find Velutha sleeping on the veranda of the abandoned house, they beat him up so heavily that he almost dies. The twins wake up and observe the whole procedure. At the police station they are forced by Baby Kochamma to confirm the wrong statement which she has made. In the following night Velutha dies in prison.

After Sophie Mol's funeral Ammu and the twins have to leave the family's house because Chacko, manipulated by Baby Kochamma, accuses them of being responsible for Sophie Mol's death. Estha is sent to his father in Calcutta where he attends school and later college. Ammu is forced to leave Rahel in Ayemenem in order to look for employment. But Ammu is not able to earn enough for a living and so she dies of bad health a few years later alone in a hotel room.

Rahel returns to Ayemenem at the age of 31. She hasn't seen Estha since they were separated after Sophie Mol's funeral.

She married an American and moved with him to Boston. After their divorce she has been working to make a living. Now Rahel returns to Ayemenem because she wants to see Estha, who has already returned to their family's house. During his stay in Calcutta he someday stopped speaking. After spending a whole day together in Ayemenem, Rahel and Estha, sister and brother, are sleeping with each other.

The fact that Estha has stopped speaking and that Rahel and Estha sleep with each other are only two aspects in which one can see how deeply hurt they still are by the events with Velutha and Sophie Mol that happened long ago.

A bird's eye view of the story clearly reveals to the reader that the prominent theme dealt within the story is the caste system and particularly the status of the Untouchables. A few decades ago the caste system controlled every aspect in the life of an ordinary Indian, like the profession, the marriage partner and the everyday life. One does not really know about its origin but it is assumed that the castes were introduced by priests to steady their position of power. The myth of Purusha, the divine ancestor, can give an explanation for the emergence of the main castes called varnas in Sanskrit. The Brahmans originated from Purusha's mouth, his arms are represented by the Kshatriyas, his thighs by the Vaishyas and the Shudras are building his feet. The Brahmans traditionally were priests and academics, the Kshatriyas warriors and superior officers, the Vaishyas land owners, farmers and merchants and the Shudras mechanics and day labourers. Below these four castes the Untouchables are found, called Paria, Harijans or Dalits. The four varnas are again split into jatis (subcastes), of which 2000 to 3000 are said to exist.

Untouchability is an important topic in the God of Small Things. When Mammachi is referring to the past, there is a part in which it is said that the Untouchables were not allowed to walk on public roads and that they had to wipe out their footprints so that nobody of a higher caste could accidentally step into them. They had to cover their mouths while they were speaking so that nobody had to breathe in their polluted air. They actually were not given permission to exist. This non-existence is referred to several times in the book for example when Velutha does not leave footprints or ripples in the water. This makes him almost inhuman and supernatural.

In Hinduism one believes in rebirth. This is a considerable part of the caste system as it explains some facts which are difficult to understand. Hindus believe that if one lives a moral and religious life and does not commit crimes or injustices one will

be reborn in a superior caste. As a conclusion one will be reborn in a lower caste if one does not respect moral and religious instructions and the law. Thus the Untouchables believe that it is justified that they are badly treated and avoided by the community and hence bear their nearly unbearable life. This aspect the author refers to in the person of Velya Paapen, Velutha's father. He feels that it is not right for his son to work in the pickle factory, for this is not a position an Untouchable may hold. When Velya Paapen finds out about his son's relationship to Ammu he is so ashamed that he offers to kill Velutha with his own hands.

In the Indian constitution of 1950 the Untouchability is legally abolished. Today any discrimination due to the caste system is forbidden by law. Nevertheless the caste system has not disappeared from everyday life. Notably in villages the Untouchables are still excluded from the society and live in separate colonies. However, contingents in the education system and in public administration are granted to Untouchables in order to integrate them into the society and increase their standard of living.

The theme of untouchability is portrayed at two levels in the novel. Firstly, we have socially untouchables, or **Parvan**, who are on no account permitted basic human rights. Secondly, we have symbolic untouchables in high castes. Here bias communicates itself in marginalizing the women in their personal and public life.

In the novel religious differences appear in the disagreements between Father Mulligan (who belongs to the Roman Catholic Church) and Reverend Ipe (who belongs to the Mar Thoma Church) as well as in Baby Kochamma's conversion to Catholicism and her consequent lack of suitors. The socio-political changes brought about by colonial rule led to upper-caste Hindus shunning the Syrian Christians. Between 1888 and 1892 every one of the main Syrian Christian denominations founded so-called Evangelical Societies that sought out low-caste converts and built schools and chapels and publicized mass baptisms (Bayly 314-320). **The God of Small Things** thus refers to the school for "Untouchables" built by the great-grandfather of the twins, Estha and Rahel. However, as Roy points out, even though a number of Paravas and members of other low castes converted to Christianity, they were made to have separate churches and thus continued to be treated as "Untouchables." After Independence, they were denied government benefits created for "Untouchables" because officially, on paper, they were Christians and therefore casteless (Roy 71).

Pillai's double standards are also seen when despite his slogans of "caste is class," he deliberately distances himself from Velutha in order to maintain the support of Chacko's other workers who dislike working with a Paravan. Chacko himself appears to be an armchair Communist with no real understanding of the politics that surround him. Roy's representation of the Communist Party has met with much criticism from the Party. The late E. M. S. Namboodiripad criticized **The God of Small Things** for promoting sexual anarchy and bourgeois values (**Deccan Herald** 6) while the Marxist Chief Minister of Kerala, Mr. E. K. Nayanar, said that Roy had painted a "factually incorrect" picture of the social conditions in Kerala during the period 1950-70 and of the role played by Communists during that period (**Deccan Herald** 7).

It is within this social, political and religious context that we read the tragedy of the Koachammans. Shunned by the upper class Hindus, they are over conscious of their family's prestige. Roy deals with the classical material of tragedy in the modern context. The members of this family are introverts. Baby Kochamma, Ammu, Chako and Pappachi are unable to come to terms with their complexes. They struggle against the outer world, and the defeat renders them confused and frustrated. The sense of failure expresses itself in dehumanizing others around them.

In **The God of Small Things** the conflict exists at individual and societal levels. The novel graphically shows that how people are helpless to resolve these levels of friction. Velutha, the outcast, can never co exist peacefully with the "touchable" communities for so long as the stigma of untouchability attached to him and countless others like him. Velutha is "highly intelligent," an excellent carpenter with an engineer's mind, but he is also "The God of loss", "The God of Small Things" --He left no footprints in sand, no ripples in water, no images in mirrors" (265)

In contrast to Velutha, Chacko can get away with his debauchery -- or his "man's needs" as his mother terms it -- because he is a "touchable". Roy has justly put the issue when she says, "Change is one thing. Acceptance is another" (279). The society presented in the novel is patriarchal. On the one hand we have a group of characters, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, and Kochu Maria the cook, who perpetuate the division of caste, race, and gender. On the other hand, Ammu and the twins, Rahel and Estha, consciously and unconsciously resist these hierarchies. Ammu, the biggest victim of the system, is an archetypal image of a daughter marginalized in a patriarchal society. "Perhaps Ammu, Estha and Rahel were the worst transgressors. They all broke the

rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tampered with laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much" (31). Ammu, the central character of the novel, has only a marginal existence in the family structure. A traditional patriarchal society places little importance on women's education. Ammu's father Pappachi, does not like the idea of spending money on his daughter, and she is never encouraged to find her place in life. Marriage is the only justification of her survival.

Velutha offers what is denied to Ammu, Estha and Rahel in society and family. In the daylight, he is the best companion of the children, who feel suffocated in Ayemenm because of their divorced mother. The outer world is hostile, and only the few moments they spend with Velutha afford real happiness. Ammu meets him in darkness, along the river bank -- a symbol of division between the two classes. Baby Kochamma, spending a frozen life in her past, appears as the guardian of system. Velutha, "the Untouchable" is killed by the "Touchable Boots", of the state police. Ammu is banished and dies alone, only thirty one "a very viable diable age" (161).

The system also has a fatal influence on the twins, who cannot relate to anybody other than each other. Estha's marriage proves a failure, and she feels satisfied only with the twin brother Rahel, as it were coming back to the prenatal world of pure innocence. Velutha offers a release from the deterministic world of Ayemenm. For a short while he provides an opportunity to live in consonance with one's own self. But the release is illusory.

The author presents a pessimistic picture of society. With the death of Velutha, the last ray of hope disappears. He is accused of kidnapping the twins, and Estha falsely confirms it. Estha becomes a silent creature whose incomprehensible "Yes" served to prove an innocent man guilty. Roy expresses her disillusionment with the social conditions of the postcolonial world in which the untouchables of the past still face a hostile society that does not let them live as free and independent individuals. Velutha, the God of small Things, the outcast can never co-exist peaceful with the "touchable" communities for as long as the stigma of untouchability is attached to him and countless others like him. Ammu, another "untouchable" within the "touchable" cannot pursue happiness because doing so threatens the existing order, and the society takes every possible step to stop change.

The writer has witnessed the harsh and sorrowing demonstration of the bottom dogs crying under the burden of dearth, hunger, mistreatment and discrimination. All

experiences and observations of her childhood left an indelible impression on her sensitive mind and aroused her inborn sympathy for the exploited, and the froth and scum of society. She leads a crusade against the dehumanising and barbaric distinctions. The novel is spun on some institutionalised catch words like equality, liberty and justice for all citizens of India. The democratic India is still reigned over by four-caste and man-made barriers that divide humanity. The novel breathes a strong protest against social injustice meted out to untouchable. In the earlier days, during the British rule the paravans accepted Christianity to escape the scourge of untouchability and were allowed separate schools and churches. Roy protests the stems from her sense of indignation at the slave-like position of women of untouchables and untouchables in liberated democratic India.

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