

ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*: A DALIT FICTION?

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Abstract

*Caste is an important aspect of the Indian culture. As an ever burning issue it continues to exercise an immense influence over the Indian socio-political scenario. An extensive body of literature on caste and its various aspects exist today. Many notable novelists undertook the task of sensitizing people about the plight and predicament of the victims of the caste system. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is such a glaring example of a fiction dealing with the pathos of Dalit life. It beautifully depicts the oppression, struggle and resistance of the Dalits or the Untouchables. This article tries to analyze the various issues which give the novel a flavour of a Dalit fiction and explore the appropriateness of terming it as a Dalit fiction.*

Lately, the genre of Dalit literature and life narratives emerged as the new focal area of interest for the literary academia. The augmented attention to this genre motivated the mainstream English publishing houses to “render these writings (Dalit fiction and life narratives) into English” (Rege 9). These writings, which are “mostly autobiographical in nature”, represent not simply the “journey of an individual voice, emotion and consciousness” but also a “social and community-based chorus of voices” (Rege 10, 13). Dalit literature is simultaneously a literature of “anguish, waiting and sorrow” and “a historical necessity in promoting human freedom” (Rege 12). They are, 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). But the situation was very different in the preceding eras. In the late nineties, there were hardly any significant attempts to make a proper widespread channelization of the Dalit voices. During this time a number of notable novelists used their works as a vehicle to project the plight of Untouchables. These novels foreground the pathos and the predicament of the lives of the distressed class.

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). Using the novel as a garb, the novelist criticizes the practice of the caste system in society which has become a curse in the name of custom. The book simultaneously juggles with the attempts of the Dalits to assert their identity by getting rid of their age old humiliation of untouchability and the violent reaction of the higher castes against these assertions. The dexterous treatment of the theme of caste and the poignant depiction of the existing dichotomy and conflict between the upper and the lower castes make *The God of Small Things* a living documentary on the life of the Dalits or the Untouchables. This article attempts to consider and illustrate the varied nuances of Dalit life that are scattered throughout the novel and finally it tries to question the idea of describing it as a Dalit fiction.

Since caste is the major concern of this article, it is necessary to make a detailed analysis of the ideology and the practice of the caste system. Caste, which is derived from the Sanskrit word *varna*, meaning colour, is a system of discrimination. The caste system, which was invented by the Aryans to subordinate the dark *Dasas* (that means slave) and maintain their pure identity, originated in the Rig Vedas. A late hymn of the Rig Veda provides a mythical origin of castes. It considers that the four castes originated from the creator's body (Thapar 39). 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). Most notably, the Untouchables were excluded from this caste classification, and were therefore literally outcasts. Significantly the origins of this system, first articulated in the *Law Book* of Manu, were functional. So caste "comprises a series of hereditary groups or *jatis* characterized by hierarchy or gradations according to ritual status" (Chakravarti 10). But with the development of the system, the high and the low were opposed to each other because of their respective associations with notions of pure and impure in terms of blood and the nature of work. Presently caste emphasizes a "stratification system in which distances are rigidly maintained through endogamy, pollution and legitimacy of rituals" (Kothari 8). 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 (qtd. in Chakravarti 12). Often there are instances of violation and its consequential punishment of those, who do not conform to the codes of hierarchy. Thus the "lowest castes have an inherent interest not simply in rising in the system but in overthrowing it" (Rege 73). Independent India might have eradicated the caste through the Constitution in 1950 but the actual picture is starkly different. Caste continues to be an influential factor shaping the body politic of the Indian social system. Thus, it is one of the major pillars of Indian social structure that continues to mould the socio-political life of India, from the ancient to the present age.

Roy's novel, *The God of Small Things* unfolds the tale of Ammu, a Syrian Christian and her love affair with Velutha, a Paravan. She is a divorced lady with a pair of twins. Apart from the world of "motherhood" and "divorcehood", Ammu had an independent world of her own, a "better and happier place" (44). The "unmixable mix" of her personality "led her to love by night the man her children loved by day" (44, 332). By loving this man who happens to be a Paravan, Ammu had not only tampered the "Love Laws" but also destroyed herself completely (33). The torments of Ammu are poignantly poised against the tragedy of Velutha, who had been shattered to death by authority for attempting to rise against it. Roy had superbly depicted the trauma of Ammu and Velutha, who by loving each other "crossed into forbidden territories" (31).

The novel reveals that Roy is very much conscious of her surrounding caste-ridden society. Her male protagonist Velutha is a Paravan by birth. A Paravan is an outcaste group in Kerala. Probably, the novelist deliberately uses Kerala as the locale of her fiction, because the rigidity of the customs of caste is most strictly maintained and followed here. In *Gendering Caste*, Uma Chakravarti states that "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). In *The God of Small Things* Roy graphically portrayed this situation:

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)

The rules of the caste were so rigid that the Untouchables were prohibited from walking on public roads and were compelled “to put their hands over their mouths when they spoke, to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed” (74). The height of ostracism is such that even the servants considered themselves superior to the untouchables:

Kochu Maria couldn't stop wearing her kunukku because if she did,
how would people know that despite her lowly cook's job...
she was a Syrian Christian... Not a Pelay, or a Pulaya or a Paravan.
But a Touchable, upper-caste Christian . . . (170)

Wearing the kunukku was essential for Kochu Maria because it enabled her to demonstrate her upper caste status.

The vast difference and the division that continues to exist between the high caste and the lower caste are also visible in the nature of their dwellings. Social scientist C. Joe Arun writes:

Most of the houses of the Paraiyars are huts,
which have roofs of dried palmyra leaves.
The huts have neither doors nor windows. (34)

The description of Velutha's hut echoes Arun's account of the Paraiyars residence:

... a low hut with walls of orange laterite plastered with mud and
a thatched roof nestled close to the ground... Three untidy
banana trees grew in the little front yard that had been fenced off
with panels of woven palm leaves.(205)

Arun further points out that “abject poverty, dependence on the ... higher castes and the enormous amount of debt seemed to have been the general characteristics of their life ...” (55). Roy's narration of Vellaya Paapen's dependence on and attitude to Mammachi's family is a faithful representation of Arun's insight. An excerpt from *The God of Small Things* proves Arun's insight:

When he had his accident with the stone chip,
Mammachi organized and paid for his glass eye.
He hadn't worked off his debt yet, and though he knew
he wasn't expected to, that he wouldn't ever be able to-
he felt that his eye was not his own. His gratitude widened
his smile and bent his back. (76)

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)

The illustrative description of the dichotomy of wealth and material resources between the Upper and Lower castes, points out to the inequity and exploitation, which is inherent in the caste system. It is the society that decides and determines the professions of its various members and punishes those, who violate this “systematically arranged” framework (Thapar 38). The novel faithfully records the inequality between the castes in terms of access to knowledge and social status. The “Touchable factory workers” of Paradise Pickles and Preserves resented against the rehiring of Velutha because “Paravans were not *meant* to be carpenters” (Roy 77). Moreover, despite having the capability, the Untouchables were often denied their position and status because that would lead to the violation of this “systematically arranged” framework (Thapar 38). Mammachi with her “impenetrable Touchable logic” can aptly say that if only “he hadn't been a Paravan, he might have become an engineer” (Roy

75). Instead of recognizing Velutha's service, she thought that she was bestowing a favour to him by allowing him "to touch things that Touchables touched" (77).

The society very successfully makes the lower castes accept the hegemony of the upper castes as natural. Arun has aptly pointed out that "the older Paraiyars ... do not want to put up a fight with the higher castes of the village. They want to hold on to their life as slaves of the Higher castes" (38). 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)

His every movement revealed his lack of hesitation. This air of confidence, which is perfectly "acceptable" in "Touchables" is "construed" as "insolence" in a Paravan (Roy 76). He, according to the Touchable Baby Kochamma, showed signs of "some rudeness, some ingratitude..." (81). She was apprehensive "that man will be our Nemesis" (184). The words which were uttered "to get him into trouble", surprisingly became a prophetic articulation (184). Velutha, a Paravan, "broke the rules", and it brought his "own annihilation" (31, 333). He transgressed the bounds, when he made the "unthinkable thinkable", by loving and touching the Touchable Ammu (256). 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)

Living within the society Velutha dared to violate the norms of it. Naturally, he met with the same fate. He was "smashed and broken" (Roy 309). Roy foregrounds the condition of the marginalized people who find no place of refuge in this society. The various mechanism of the social structure actively hunts down and punishes the guilty. Velutha is also hunted down by the "Servants of the State" and he becomes a prey to these forces who were "Dark of Heart" and "Deadlypurposed" (304). Ironically he is alleged and punished under a false case of attempted molestation:

A few days ago he had tried to, to... to force himself on her niece,
she said. A divorcee with two children. (259)

Baby Kochamma deliberately "misrepresented the relationship between Ammu and Velutha... to salvage the family reputation in Inspector Thomas Matthew's eyes" (259). Roy is caustically ironical

in her description of the role of the “Touchable Policemen” on whose “thin but able shoulders” rested the responsibility “for the Touchable Future” (307, 309):

...it ... was a clinical demonstration in controlled conditions... of human nature’s pursuit of ascendancy. Structure. Order. Complete monopoly (309).

These mechanisms are always ready to maintain and preserve the complete monopoly of the social structure and to batter and crash those “who broke its laws” (308). By punishing Velutha, “they were inoculating a community against an outbreak” (309), by setting forth an example. The repetition of the full form of the term “POLICE” (8,304), and the qualities suggested by each of its letters reveal the huge gap between their preaching and practice. Roy’s scathing irony becomes glaringly visible in this continuous reiteration.

The spectre of caste continues to haunt the postcolonial Indian society (Dirks 17). Even the political leaders suffer from the malady of caste biasness and prejudice. Comrade Pillai, the Communist used to deliver high-pitched speeches about the “Rights of Untouchables (‘Caste is Class, comrades’),” but he was very different in actions (281). In his own house there is no entry for a Paravan. Most ironically, his Communist faith failed to drive away his Casteist mentality:

He is just a Paravan. It is a conditioning they have from birth. (279)

His hypocrisy is further revealed when he, who initially acknowledges Velutha as a cardholding ‘party worker’, deviates from his own standpoint when he encounters Inspector Thomas Matthew (227):

He...omitted to mention that Velutha was a member of the Communist Party. (262)

Instead of helping Velutha, he most pretentiously tried to use the former’s death for his own profit.

The God of Small Things also foregrounds the woes of a woman who becomes a victim of the values of a caste-ridden society. The caste system, in order to maintain its identity and distinctiveness, makes endogamy, i.e. marriage within one’s own caste or sub-castes, a crucial element. But the practice of inter-caste marriages in the form of hypergamy or *anuloma*, i.e., the marriage between “female members of lower *varna* and males of higher *varna* and hypogamy or *pratiloma*, i.e., the marriage between female members of higher *varna* and males of lower *varna*” are also prevalent (Kumar 124). However, “*pratiloma* was looked with disdain” and such a marriage resulted in the abuses and loss of family status of the female (Kumar 124). Thus, it is natural that in this society adultery will be “the most important offence resulting in stringent action from the community and the State” (Rege 22). 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). But her unpardonable crime is that her relationship with Velutha, far from being a case of *pratiloma*, becomes an instance of adultery between two different caste members. Obviously, she brought her doom, when she and Velutha made the “impossible really happen” (31). As a punishment she had to “pack her bags and leave” and had to die “alone” (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). In stark contrast to the position of the female, the upper caste male “wields the maximum amount of power” and is the “most privileged segment of our society” (Chakravarti 160):

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 foregrounds the hypocrisy of the caste ridden male chauvinist society through the attitude of Mammachi whose “tolerance of ‘Men’s Needs’ as far as her son was concerned, became the fuel for

her unmanageable fury at her daughter” (Roy 258). The same mother, who made arrangements for the satisfaction of her son’s “Men’s Needs”, became furious and locked her daughter up, when she heard about her love affair with an Untouchable. The height of social prejudice becomes glaringly visible in the words of Baby Kochamma:

How could she stand the smell? Haven’t you noticed?

They have a particular smell, these Paravans. (Roy 257)

She, instead of being sympathetic to Ammu, pitilessly and shamelessly “misrepresented the relationship, between Ammu and Velutha”, to suppress the “scandal and salvage the family reputation” (259). Her attitude shows that caste is very much successful in dividing women and erasing a possibility of sisterhood. But when the reality comes to the fore, she didn’t even bother to use dying Velutha as a bait to save herself from a “criminal offence” (315). Here Roy is pungently critical of the Upper Caste society, which continues to exploit the Lower Caste in every possible means.

After reviewing *The God of Small Things* in the context of the observations of the various social scientists it may be aptly said that the text perfectly voices the anguish and the sorrow, the pain and the penury and the struggle and resistance of the Untouchable oppressed people. Roy has so beautifully depicted the various colours of Dalit life that book seems to a living documentary on Dalit life. The numerous strings of the Dalit life have been so well-knitted in the novel that one gets motivated to regard it as a fabric of Dalit fiction or literature. But certainly, to compartmentalize it into a genre of Dalit fiction is to ignore the other dominant themes of the novel. So it would be better to regard it as a paradigm of a fiction that fulfils the criteria of a Dalit fiction and that ultimately tries to chart out the triumph of limitless love over the limitations of caste.

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