

Gender Discrimination and Untouchability in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Arundhati Roy was born on November 24, 1961 in Bengal. Her full name is Suzanna Arundhati Roy. Her mother Mary Roy, well-known as a social activist is from Kerala, and her father Baba was a Bengali Hindu tea planter. She spent her crucial childhood years in Ayenmenem, a small town near Kottayam. She came into the realm of literature in the year 1977 when her magnum opus, *The God of Small Things* bagged the Coveted Booker Prize for literature. It unfurls a plethora of details regarding the changing political scene in Kerala, the problems besetting women in male dominated society, caste taboos, the lives of rudderless children of a broken home, and vivid description of bees and birds, flowers and trees, sky and river, in a language that is immensely captivating. She delineates the pain and misery of a lonesome mother in an indifferent world as perceived through the eyes of her seven year old children – a world where the age-old subjugation of the underclass still persists. Despite the various forums focusing on the women's physical, financial and emotional exploitation together with their mental anguish traces of oppression seem to have stayed. One cannot emphatically say that women's unequal status in society is a legacy of the past or it is in Indian society that the inequality is legitimized by the caste system which seems operative in the novel.

Though Roy states that, "I don't want brownie points because I am from India. My book doesn't trade on the currency of cultural specificity, even though the details are right...." (*India Today*, October 1997, 28). These details in the form of discrimination against women and the Paravans, a despised lot, seem to overpower and overwhelm the reader. The disparity between man and woman is a result of the complex operation of economic, political, social and other factors. Despite the significant change in women's position in society in the post-independence era, Indian social structure comprises institution like caste, joint family and religious values and practices consolidating women's subordinate position. In this respect Maitreyi Mukhopadhyay observes :

It should be emphasised that the poor status of women, their oppression and exploitation, cannot be examined as an

isolated problem in Indian society. Although the status of women constitutes a problem in most societies in the rigidly hierarchical and inequitable social structure which exists in India, the relative inferiority and superiority of various roles is much more clearly defined. The inequality and subordination of women is an instrument or function of the social structure. (Desai and Patel 82).

The God of Small Things presents a confrontation between The Big Man, the Laltain (lamp) and Small Man, the Mombatti (candle). In other words, the book shows maladjustment between The God of Big Things (Pappachi, Baby Kochamma, Mammachi, Chacko, Comrade Pillai and Inspector Thomas Mathew) and The God of Small Things (Ammu, Velutha, Estha, Sophie Mol). By the term 'Laltain', Roy means the big guns of society. Both 'Laltain and Mombatti' give us light and burn another lamp. The 'Laltain' is well-fed and well-protected. It can bravely face the blowing wind. But on the other hand, the 'Mombatti' has no glass, no protection, no support. It can easily be blown out by the surge of wind. But the advantage of the Mombatti is that it can very soon light another lamp; 'Laltain' on the other hand, is somewhat stubborn to burn other light. Thus through these fine connotations, Roy has aptly and successfully tried her best to arouse pity and catharsis for the Mombatties—the downtrodden, the dalit, the untouchable, the deserted, the marginalized and the defenceless. To put it more candidly the two Mombatties – Ammu and Velutha have to forsake the big things and indulge in the small things:

Even later, on the thirteen nights that followed this one instinctively they stuck to the Small Things. They knew that there was nowhere for them to go. They had nothing. No future. So they stuck to the small things (Roy 338)

Roy lashes out at the hypocritical moral code of society, which makes a great difference between men and women. As a matter of fact, both men and women are the two wheels of the same chariot. But it is a greater fault in the man's nature that he fails to understand and appreciate the nobler and purer side of a woman's love. Man's love is just like a torrent, which spends its force quickly, but a woman's love is a stream, which

flows steadily and smoothly forever. Love for man is a passing phase; for woman it is the essence of her being.

Apart from disparity, Roy also points out untouchability, a great evil of society. Untouchability in this novel is very close to the novel, *Untouchable* by Mulk Raj Anand. Velutha is very close to Bakha in both his vision and venture. Like Bakha Velutha has to struggle hard to achieve identity in society. Roy wants to show that even a dalit or an untouchable can also become a scientist, a doctor or a professor if he is guided properly.

Thus, if we talk about disparity and discrimination, *The God of Small Things* is the truthful portrayal of the plight of the women in society and their marathon struggle for seeking the sense of 'identity' in a male-dominated conservative framework. The social structure of an Indian woman is full of many ups and downs, ifs and buts. Life offers little choice for a forsaken woman like Ammu, the central character, who yearns for pleasure and happiness and a life far from shackles or constraints. Roy delineates a detailed picture of the lady's childhood to adolescence, to the experience of marriage to a sympathetic and affectionate mother, to a rebel wife who challenges the age of long hypocritical moral stand of patriarchal family. As a little girl, Ammu had to face cares and anxieties, fret and fever of life. She had seen the cruelty of her father, Pappachi who used to beat her and her mother, Mammachi with a brass-vase. Once it so happened that her father tore apart the shoes she had brought for herself. She was also deprived of the higher education because, according to Pappachi, college education is not at all useful for a girl. This shows that Pappachi is a man of schizophrenia. He behaves like a decent man but demonstrates his male ego and bourgeois mentality when he tyrannizes his wife child:

Every night he beat her with a brass
flower vase. The beatings weren't new.
What was new was only the frequency
with which they took place. One night
Pappachi broke the bow of Mammachi's
violin and threw it in the river (47-48).

Marriage for him is the male domination over woman and women are nothing but the flowers in the hands of man.

Ammu paid a visit to one of her relatives in Calcutta where at someone's wedding reception she met her future husband who was on

vacation from his job. He was an assistant manager of tea estate in Assam. Ammu was in a hurry to marry him because she knew that in Ayemenem people were quite dead against her wishes and so something was better than nothing. The novelist observes :

Ammu didn't pretend to be in love with him. She just weighed the odds and accepted. She thought that *anything*, anyone at all, would be better than returning to Ayemenem. She wrote to her parents informing them of her decision. They didn't reply. (Roy 39)

Soon after the marriage, Ammu discovered that she had jumped out of the frying pan into the fire. Her husband whom she loved so much, proved to be an alcoholic. He even went to the extent desire of Mr. Hollick, his boss, so that his job could be saved. Mr. Hollick says to Baba :

You're a very lucky man, you know wonderful family, beautiful children, such an attractive wife...an extremely attractive wife...And for the period of time he was away, Mr. Hollick suggested that Ammu be sent to his bungalow to be looked after. (41-42)

Such extreme humiliation created a sense of great hatred in the heart of Ammu for her husband. In a scuffle, she hit her husband with a heavy book and left the place with the twins – Estha and Rahel. Ammu returned Ayemenem with her pulled out cheeks and there too, she found her parents cool and indifferent to her and her children. Her eyes welled up when she saw the miserable condition of her two children. She imagined her twins “like a pair of small bewildered frogs engrossed each other’s company lolling arm in arm down a highway full of hurtling traffic.” (Roy 43)

It is to be noted that the woman has been the subject of great mystery and controversy in our history and tradition, myth and legends. She is allegedly charged with so many drawbacks mostly imaginary. It is said that she is temptation symbolised, more a Fury than a Fairy. Her charms are irresistible but they invariably spell ruin and disaster. She is wily like a serpent, domineering like a tiger and fickle like a weathercock.

A woman is generally more emotional, sensitive and tender though she is also endowed with a greater power of endurance and patience. She

can be viewed in numerous ways, but none of her themes is so overwhelming as the physical attraction she arouses for herself in the heart of the male sex. In the field of love and mating, she plays a role so exceedingly significant that the very basis of creation and procreating will come to a standstill. It is here that we find her in the role of a beloved, a wife and a mother. She forms the pivot and nucleus of family life. Without the presence of women, home is not home but a dreary wilderness. A good daughter, an affectionate mother, a loyal wife – it is those who create a heavenly atmosphere in our earthly life. G.B. Shaw, in his famous play, *Candida* has given a high pedestal to the woman. So, it is not the woman but men who are fickle in their opinion. Thus, it can be said that woman has a great place in the life of man. If man is a flower, the fragrance is woman. If man is a ship, the radar is woman. She can be sweet as well as bitter; kind as well as cruel; tender as well as rough; soft and seductive at times but elusive and hard to please also.

Roy flings a harsh irony on the man's domination over woman. She seems to say that a woman is not a mere toy or an object of pleasure or a means of gratifying the man's baser passion but the noble and richest part of a man's life. Thus, *The God of Small Things* is a realistic portrayal of Indian society. In this respect, Roy is very close to Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Manju Kpaur.

Apart from gender discrimination, untouchability is the greatest evil that our country has been facing from time immemorial. In the *Manusmriti*, the Hindu's law book of social code and domestic life, we see the pathetic picture of the untouchables who are deprived of gaining knowledge particularly the Vedic knowledge. An untouchable, according to this book, has no right to go to the temples; no liberty to listen to the incarnation of *The Vedas* or other great scriptures. They are also deprived of the right of reading and studying the language, Sanskrit, which is supposed to be the richest language of the world. This resulted in the deterioration of this great language, which has come to be almost standstill these days. So one of the causes of the degeneration of Sanskrit language is untouchability and perhaps this is why Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, R.N. Tagore and Swami Vivekanand, Maharsi Dayanand and Bal Gangadhar Tilak – all have attacked on the casteist mentality of India. In this respect, Mulk Raj Anand presents a truthful portrayal of untouchability in his famous novel, *Untouchable*. Bakha, the protagonist of the novel, has to suffer insult and abuse without any rhyme or reason. He suffers only because he is an untouchable. The novel starts with the

obvious description of the dirtiest and unhygienic dwelling places, sorrows, and sufferings of the people who clean the dirt of the whole society :

The outcastes' colony was a group of mud-walled houses that clustered in two rows, under the shadow both of the town and the cantonment, but outside their boundaries and separate from them. There lived the scavenger, the leather-workers, the washer-men, the barbers, the water-carriers, the grass-cutters and other outcastes from Hindu society...The absence of a drainage system had, through the rains of various seasons, made of the quarter a marsh which gave out the most offensive smell. (Anand 11)

Thus, untouchability is that disease which creates contagion in our social structure. It is the evil, which eats into the vitality of a healthy nation.

Arundhati Roy, a great champion of the cause of Dalit and the deserted points out those unnoticed shades of a social problem which generally escape the eyes of social scientists. Velutha's grandfather Kelan, along with a number of other untouchables embraced Christianity to escape the scourge of untouchability. But they, later on, found that they had done a blunder. Though they were given separate churches and separate priests and in a special favour they were even given their own separate pariah Bishop even after the independence, they found they were not entitled to any government benefits like job reservation, nor bank loans at low interest. Why? Because they were Christians and untouchables. Roy delineates:

It was little like having to sweep away
your footprints without a broom. Or
worse, not being allowed to leave
footprints at all. (Roy 74)

It is interesting to note that Roy's portrayal of the plight of the untouchable is very close to that of Mulk Raj Anand. Once, Bakha inadvertently touches a caste Hindu in the market. The caste man begins to hurl abuses and rebukes. Bakha apologizes and retreats, but in vain. It is a Muslim tongawallah who comes to his rescue. What an irony! A Hindu humiliating a Hindu but a Muslim consoling a Hindu! The basic difference between Bakha and Velutha is that Bakha is more active and aggressive than Velutha. Velutha never believes in a frontal attack. He is a man of

sober nature and mild behaviour. But Bakha, on the other hand always strives to raise hail and fire on the high caste people. Velutha never behaves like fuming and roaring tiger; never tries to hammer the age-old norms of society; never behaves like a rough and savage man – a man who has nothing to do with etiquette and manner, decorum and decency. He is a man of innocence and simplicity- the God of Small Things, the God of Loss, a man who knows how to make intricate toys, tiny wind mills, rattles, minute jewel boxes out of dried palm seeds; a man who could carve perfect boat out of tapioca stems and figurines on cashew nuts. When Mammachi decides to enclose the back verandah, it is Velutha who designs and builds the strong folding door. According to Roy :

He knows more about the machines in the factory than anyone else.“Mammachi often said that if only he had not been a Paravan, he might have become an engineer. (75)

Moreover, even a dalit or an untouchable can become an engineer, a doctor, a lawyer or a professor if he is given proper education and proper facilities. God never makes any difference between a touchable and an untouchable; between the poor and the rich; between the rough and the sublime. The mind of all men is almost equal. The thing, which is needed, is to appreciate the discarded and abandoned and to dive deep into the bosom of their lives to dig out pearls and gems, which are always hidden. So, the obscure living cannot be condemned. They are the significant competent of the nation in the sense that they work honestly in the fields. The economy of the country cannot remain in its key without the co-operation of the down-trodden. They thus cannot be consigned to oblivion.

The novelist aptly delineates the heart rendering and pathetic condition of untouchables. Velutha, the untouchable is caught and punished by the hollow egotism of an orthodox society. He is severely beaten by Ayemenem police. Ultimately he succumbs to his injuries and meets his tragic end. Ammu, too, suffers a lot of social humiliation and family torturing before meeting the isolated end of her tragic life in the Bharat Lodge where she has come for a job interview. Even the church refused her body for social and religious reasons. So her brother Chacko hires a van to transport Ammu’s body to the electric crematorium where,

No trains, no crowds. Nobody except beggars, derelicts and the police-custody dead were cremated there. (162)

Thus, it is obvious that in spite of all the efforts made till now the Indian society is far behind its destination of reaching its casteless-classless status and the justice without any disparity. Roy's *The God of Small Things* shows a very fine picture of the dalit and deserted in the patriarchal society. She seems to fling irony on the upper caste rich people of society who insult and persecute the untouchable without any meaning – just only to show their superiority and disparity.

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