

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS: A SUBALTERN NARRATIVE

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Article info

Article Received:21/7/2023
Article Accepted:03/09/2023
Published online:11/09/2023
DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.11.3.176](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.11.3.176)

Abstract

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) is a pictorial presentation of south Indian village, culture, language, social and political practices, taboos, stereotypes, prejudices etc. The novel traces multiple themes like caste practices, communism, patriarchy, class difference, political conflict, social prejudices and taboos regarding marriage and divorce, satire on law/judiciary etc. The novel is quite didactic at the same time visionary to a healthy society reflecting the evils and urges to eradicate them. Velutha, a pravan, is the protagonist of the novel. He is an educated and skilled man who joins the communist party and fights for the rights of untouchables. The present paper enlists the struggle of Velutha to overcome the caste and class barriers and envisions a secular society where each and everyone is equal regardless of his/her caste and class identity. Roy touches almost every nerve of social and political ongoings and advocates greater social reform in the rigid positioning of subalterns.

Keywords: Untouchable, Marginalized, Equality, Stereotypes, Communist etc.

Suzanna Arundhati Roy is an eminent Indian novelist, political activist and environmentalist. She is born on 24th Nov, 1961 in Shillong, in the state of Meghalaya in India. She attains great recognition with her Man Booker Prize winning novel *The God of Small Things* (1997). She has won Sahitya Akademi Award in 2006 for *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (2002), a collection of essays, Sydney Peace Prize for social campaign in 2004 and Norman Mailer Prize in 2011 for distinguished writing. In her autobiographical fiction *The God of Small Things* (1997), Roy depicts south Indian culture and tradition dealing with caste and class inequality with a motive of reforming the society by her writing. Her another fiction *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) is way different as it deals with land reform,

Godhra train burning and Kashmir Insurgency. She has also tried her hand in non-fiction, writing almost 20 works reflecting different social and political issues. Some of them are *The End of Imagination* (1998), *The Cost of Living* (1999), *Walking with the Comrades* (2011), *Kashmir: The case for Freedom* (2011) and the latest work *Azadi: Freedom, Fascism, Fiction* (2020). She is a voluminous writer in almost every field and a spokesperson of people's welfare.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) delves deep into social stereotypes and explores the complex dynamics of caste and class through its central characters, Velutha and Ammu. The novel portrays the struggle between Dalits and Syrian Christians. It highlights the voice of Velutha as

he fights against society's bias attitude towards the marginalized. As a member of the Communist Party, Velutha represents the Dalit community's resistance against the dominance of the upper caste. His struggle aims to dismantle the narrow concept of casteism, promoting equality between upper castes and lower castes. Velutha's story imparts "the cavernous gap between the touchables and untouchables; the exploiter and the exploited, and the powerful and the powerless (Dasgupta).

Ammu, the daughter of Pappachi and Mammachi, is another significant character in the novel. As a Syrian Christian, she becomes involved in a forbidden love affair with Velutha, who belongs to marginalized group known as the 'pravans'. Ammu's family is quite orthodox to caste practices and disapprove her relationship with Velutha. Throughout her life, Ammu scuffles with various forms of patriarchal domination, starting with her father and later her husband, followed by her brother Chacko after her divorce. In each phase of her life—as a young woman, a wife, and a divorcee—Ammu strives to make her own space. It is the spirit of revolt against the oppressive forces of patriarchy that becomes a driving force behind her desire for liberation. Her unwavering love for Velutha serves as an exemplification to her rebellion against these societal constraints.

Velutha, an exceptionally skilled man, works in Mammachi's pickle factory and performs some additional tasks of her home. He represents the untouchable community and their dehumanizing treatment by the touchable caste. The untouchables are not allowed to touch the belongings of the touchable or entering their houses through the main entrance or taking water from their tap. The touchable caste establishes a clear boundary in Ayemenem, and marks a distinction between their caste as "Caste Hindus and Caste Christians" (Roy 73). Looking back on the past, Mammachi recounts the even more inhuman behaviour towards the lower caste "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 Pravan's footprint" (Roy 74). She narrates the pathetic conditions endured by the untouchables in

the past, where they were totally oppressed to any kind of respect, importance, and privilege, and lives completely powerless in command of the privileged caste and class. Furthermore, she explores the social taboos imposed on outcastes, such as they "were not 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 74). Roy also highlights the socio-political scenario that illustrate the strategies of the privileged class to humiliate and exploit the socially degraded class. The privileged caste uses the tactic of converting the oppressed caste into Syrian Christians to escape the curse of untouchability and as an "incentive they were given a little food and money. They were known as the Rice-Christians" (Roy 74). Their hope for freedom and equality shatter when they find themselves trapped in a more brutal world of separation from the rest of the society, with a separate church and a Pariah Bishop. In that way, they become legalized untouchables in order to survive within defined boundaries at the cost of forfeiting all government benefits provided to the Pariahs. "They were not entitled to any government benefits like job reservations or bank loans" (Roy 74). Their attempt to escape the hardships of their caste turns into a complete loss.

As an untouchable, Velutha becomes the subject of insult and humiliation. He faces rejection in the workplace when Mammachi hires him as the "in charge of general maintenance" (Roy 77). The upper caste factory workers express a great indignation on his upliftment because they believe that "paravans were not meant to be carpenters" so he has to subjugate himself to higher caste (Roy 77). The privileged class deliberately divides the society into higher and lower strata reflecting that "the prejudices of the people restrict them to the lower strata of society" (Rakhi Krishna 303). Velutha accepts the violation of his rights, aware of his powerless position due to his poverty and degraded caste identity. Roy portrays the age-old pattern of domination, where "the powerful have always suppressed the powerless in the name of moral and social conducts" (Dasgupta). Not only socially, but

also economically, Velutha submits himself to the whims of the owners and accepts lower wages compared to the touchable workers. Mammachi pays “Velutha less than she would a touchable carpenter but more than she would a Paravan” (Roy 77). This episode clearly reflects the social pressure on Mammachi to avoid the wrath of the higher caste for employing an untouchable. Despite being an exceptionally powerful man as a member of the communist party, Velutha ironically cannot assert his rights due to his unacceptance within the Syrian Christian community. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak asserts that “it is not that individual subalterns cannot say anything, but rather that speaking from a subaltern’s position in society means you will never be heard” (Riach 39). Velutha is aware of his subjugated self but fails to project himself individually before others amidst the majority of Syrian Christians.

Velutha’s journey revolves around his relentless pursuit of equality, transcending the boundaries of caste and class. Awareness of his economic and social position drives him to acquire diverse skills in carpentry and machinery. Venturing beyond Ayemenem, he challenges the caste barriers and remains determined in his convictions. In his book, *Capital* Karl Marks states “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary their social being, that determines their consciousness” (Marxist Literary Criticism). He envisions a better future and strives for self-independence from an early age. Being a skilled craftsman, Velutha creates small wooden toys to please Ammu, and earn himself the sobriquet ‘The God of Small Things’ and makes unique place in her life. Though he attends an untouchable school, but gains practical wisdom about the touchable community. His journey towards equality takes him to the workshop of a German carpenter, where he aspires to assimilate global woodworking artistry into his own culture. Living in the company of the Christian Mission Society, he encounters the concept of ‘Unitarianism’ which becomes the reason behind his determination to achieve equality within the Christian community. Velutha’s fight is not mere rhetoric; he takes action to empower the marginalized like himself. He challenges the power

dominance of the privileged people by upgrading his technical knowledge in the factory and carpentry skills in the household. Despite being constrained by his untouchable identity, “he struggles towards self-realization” (Baker and Almostafa 50). His educated presence and determination disrupt the traditional power dynamics, influencing the higher castes and classes. Even Mammachi, acknowledges his exceptional role in their business and gradually allows him into their working premises. His individual liberty from dependency becomes evident with their recognition that he “knew more about the machines in the factory than anyone else” (Roy 75). Mammachi appreciates Velutha’s skills saying “that if only he hadn’t been a paravan, he might have become an engineer (Roy 75). He challenges the existing social taboos and triggers jealousy and hatred among the touchable class. Velutha presents the flux between stereotypical harsh division of caste and liberal perspective of the contemporary world. Ojha writes “in him coexists humanism and creativity with the beauty of the marginal and the subaltern” (124). Mammachi’s employment offer and her gradual erasure of limitations signifies “a big step for a paravan” (Roy 77). Velutha’s unique identity among the underprivileged promote a pragmatic and progressive image, reshaping society’s perception of him. Through his consciousness of the outer world, he compels others to acknowledge his talents and capabilities. Velutha lives a self-sufficient life defying social expectations and creates a distinctive space for himself in a caste-conscious society.

Arundhati Roy presents a compelling narrative with courageous and forward-thinking characters, intended to influence readers and highlight the need for societal change. Despite his subordinate position in the social structure, Velutha possesses immense empowerment. He actively strives to transform his marginalized status into that of an exceptional individual, advocating for the rights and equality of the lower caste and class. In his pursuit of justice, Velutha participates in a communist march to challenge the authority of the Syrian Christian elite. The march in Trivandrum serves as a means for him to voice his anguish against the exploitation faced by the untouchables.

It becomes a psychological fulfillment, as it allows him to express his suppressed desires, which remain unfulfilled due to the dominance of the privileged class. During the communist parade, he communes the slogan, "Long Live the Revolution! Workers of the world unite!" (Roy 66). The protesters gather to make their demands for justice heard by the capitalists, articulating their rights through "the Charter of People's Demands" (Roy 69). This charter encompasses a range of issues, including the revision of working hours and conditions for both men and women. It is that "paddy workers who were made to work in the fields for eleven and a half hours a day- from seven in the morning to six- thirty in the evening- be permitted to take a one-hour lunch break" (Roy 69). It also addresses the need for fair wages, advocates pay increments and the elimination of gender disparities that "women's wages be increased from one rupee twenty-five paise a day, to three rupees, and men's from two rupees fifty paise to four rupees fifty paise a day" (Roy 69). Furthermore, the protesters demand equality based on caste, asserting that untouchables should not be "addressed as Achoo parayan," (Roy 69). Velutha strongly supports these ideas, which aim to uphold the dignity of untouchables and recognize their contributions in the factory. Velutha aligns his own beliefs with these ideals. He raises his voice for his own rights and those of others, transcending caste, class, age, and gender. The desire for change and the aspiration to live in a society free from untouchability and poverty unite opponents from all walks of life. During the protest, Velutha stands alongside fellow rebels, holding a red flag and proclaiming "Inquilab Zindabad!" (Roy 66), signifying his unwavering commitment to the cause.

Velutha's consciousness and progressive attitude inculcates fear in others. While Chacko, an Oxford scholar and believer in Marxism, sees no issue in employing Velutha, other workers raise complaints to Comrade Pillai, citing violations of Ayemenem's caste rules. Comrade Pillai, discusses the discontent among other workers with Chacko stating, "he may be very well okay as a person. But other workers are not happy with him" (Roy 278). This episode highlights Comrade Pillai's own apprehension about potential disaster and loss of

power. He fears Velutha's awareness of power dynamics and the idea of an untouchable holding power. Despite a communist party member, Velutha faces marginalization within his own group due to the predominance of the privileged class. When his affair with Ammu is revealed, he receives no support from his party and is left to face punishment, even to the point of death. Pillai differentiates Velutha from others for outcast status and withholds party support, stating, "it is not the party's interests to take up such matters. Individual's interest is subordinate to the organization's interest" (Roy 287). Velutha recognizes that as an individual, he has the power to challenge the fate of the untouchables and he deserves recognition for it. However, within the majority of the privileged caste and class, he is disregarded and proven wrong for his progressive outlook, which poses a threat to the authoritarian governance of one caste and class over another.

Roy skillfully depicts the deep-rooted reality of casteism and underlines the difficulty of changing beliefs and mindsets. Caste and class practices are so ingrained in society that they cannot be overlooked. It is contradictory that the power of the higher caste is secure as long as the lower caste is disempowered. However, the moment the subjugated caste begins to overcome these barriers, the higher caste individuals become more resistant to change and deny opportunities to the socially disadvantaged. Velutha accomplishes remarkable feats in the eyes of Mammachi, earning a specific place in professional and social settings. However, his relationship with Ammu shatters all his achievements and pushes him back into the critical realm of caste and class stereotypes, where he is seen as dirty and impure subaltern. In truth, his relationship with Ammu is an "act of rebellion against society's oppressive codes, values, and religious beliefs" (Baker and Almostafa 52).

In the end, police take Velutha in his custody, as he is accused of violating Ammu's dignity and kidnapping her children. The false accusation on Velutha is a deliberate strategy of the powerful upper caste individuals, management, and police, who are ignorant of his political influence. Pillai and others state that "the management had implicated the paravan in a false police case because he was an

active member of the communist party" (Roy 303). The police subject him to brutal beatings, resulting in a fractured skull, smashed cheekbones, shattered ribs, paralyzed body and ultimately, he dies. The action of the policemen is beyond any justification because "they were exorcizing fear" among others who dare to challenge the prevailing caste practices (Roy 309). In a way, he becomes a scapegoat for the faults of both sides and is held solely responsible for breaking the laws due to the community's hatred toward the entire untouchable class. By portraying Velutha in a brutal light, "they were merely inoculating a community against an outbreak" (Roy 309). His death serves as a subjugation to the system, and the lack of support demonstrates his submission to societal treatment. His unheard protest is a testament to the dominance of power, which diminishes his voice and prevents others from taking notice. As Spivak asserts, "subaltern voices are systematically silenced" (Riach 49).

Directly or indirectly, Velutha becomes a voice for change and revolution against the old and stereotypical practices of caste and class. In the words of Ilyas, "he possessed the power to bring about a change and to trigger a revolt" (1924). Here, Velutha's fight is a victory over the rigidity of caste and class. He demonstrates his power by challenging and surpassing the Syrian Christians, ultimately joining the communist party. His death can be attributed to his poverty; otherwise, no one would be able to ignore his influence. Thus, "Velutha symbolizes the power of the proletariats" (Ilyas 1925).

To sum up, Velutha's journey from subjugation to consciousness and his advocacy for the rights of the marginalized caste and class create a significant impact on society. He becomes a voice against unjust criticism of marginalized and portrays a strong character in adversity. Velutha demonstrates his power within the social sphere and establishes himself as an independent individual. Therefore, Velutha is a lifelike portrayal of the anguish experienced by the underprivileged, who bravely stands up for their rights. In fact, Velutha's existence is "metonymous for hope" (Guldager 8). Even in his tragic death, he leaves a profound impression on readers and evokes empathy towards

the plight of the lower caste and class in their struggle for rights and equality. In this way, Arundhati Roy skillfully depicts the inequalities entrenched in the social structure, shedding light on caste taboos.

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