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THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS: CASTE, CLASS AND GENDER DISCRIMINATION

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ABSTRACT

In the contemporary scenario there are many women writers who, through their writings, have been successfully in protecting the existing social inequality. In case of Arundhati Roy, who has her own opinion on society and has successfully made a mark for herself in the world arena. Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* can be seen as one of the most powerful novels on definite social problems that of the oppression of the downtrodden, also touching upon related problems. The present study aims to highlight the social discriminations which the characters suffer throughout the novel. Light will be thrown on how women protagonists are victims of the prevalent gross gender discrimination. The paper tries to explore those men and women who have been relegated to the margin of the society and have to pay a price for being born either an untouchable or a woman. Through the character of Valutha, Roy has portrayed that the untouchable is completely neglected in society and is a victim of class discrimination. He remains a 'dalit' and is not a fully privileged of free India.

Key Words: Untouchability, inequality, exploitation, domination, society, oppression, gender, caste.

INTRODUCTION

The famous booker prize winner Indian novelist Arundhati Roy is deeply involved with India's social problems, particularly those concerning the socially marginalized and dispossessed people i.e., dalits, women etc. In the novel entitled "The God of Small Things" Valutha represents the untouchable, who has been since a long time exploited by society simply because he belongs to the so called lower caste. It problematizes the oppressive machinery based on caste discrimination and collusion with it of certain political forces. In this novel, the laws of India's caste system are broken by the character of Ammu and Valutha, an untouchable or paravan. Valutha works at the paradise pickles and preserves factory owned by Ammu's family. Yet because he is an untouchable, the other workers resent him he is

paid less money for his work. Valutha's presence is unsettling to many who believed he acts above his station. Valutha's lack of complacency causes him many problems throughout the novel. Although he is a dedicated member of the Marxist Party, his untouchable status makes other party members dislike him, and so local party leader Comrade K.N.M Pillai would be more politically successful without him. The division between the touchable and untouchable is so ingrained in Kerala society that Valutha is seen as a non-human.

As Allison Elliott points out the origin of caste could be dated back to 1200 BCE. Caste comes from the Spanish and Portuguese word "casta" with the meaning of "race", "breed", or "lineage". Yet nowadays many Indians use the term "Jati" instead of the ancient ones. So far, there are 3,000 castes and 25,000 sub-castes in India and each is related to

a specific occupation. These different castes are categorized into four varnas: Brahmins-priests, Kshatryas-warriors, Vaishyas-traders, Shudras-laborers. Outside the caste system are the untouchables. They are considered polluted and not to be touched. Since upward mobility is hardly seen in the caste system, most people remain in the same caste for their whole life and marry within that caste.

Furthermore, all the personal events in the novel are imbued with historical meanings and each individual is intervened and correlated to historical events. The history house, which is a place holding small events and traumatic memories is also the haunted house of "her stories". To a certain extent, Roy creates a gendered space for her female characters to narrate their own stories. In this space, women construct the language of their own to rebel against patriarchy/empire the colonizer. However, Roy does not try to reverse history, rather by deviling on the small things; Roy brings out big issues from history. It is also through the act of writing against empire that we get a chance to revise our conception of India and its history. Most important of all, Roy's novel reveals to us a possibility of dismasting the western code and performing postcolonial subversion through the process of literary decolonization.

It is interesting to note that in this novel there are more women than men; most of the men are shadowy, while women are sharply portrayed and occupy the center-stage. Mammachi, baby Kochamma, Ammu, Sophie Mol, Rahel keep in motion the story. As we have earlier seen the God of Small Things is about several things, one of the chief issues it brings into focus is the family and social mechanism evolved over centuries in traditional Indian society to suppress women and her independence as a human being. Right at the center is the woeful tale of Ammu, mother of Rahel and Estha who suffers silently, yet simmers inside in her a deep discontent.

Traditional joint families are neatly structured where some women assume dominant role with greater authority over others who are lower down and, therefore, enjoy certain power. The complex structure is deeply embedded and has given rise to

countless stories of personal tragedies of unequally placed women; their unequal position creates great misery, suffering and hardships in their lives forcing them to accept the oppression system in a spirit of religious submissiveness and personal renunciation. There is a terrifyingly sordid side to this issue, and Arundhati Roy's novel is a powerful protest against this. Like the untouchability being surrounded from all sides and subjected to all kinds of dignities in order to deprive them of chances of self-enhancement.

It would not be beside the point to say that Arundhati Roy has been intensely pre-occupied with the caste-discrimination factor in Indian society, particularly the brutal denial of the basic human position and dignity. In spite of the long strides made in the field of technology and scientific knowledge which caused minor changes in society, the conservatism in our social outlook and mind-set has remained as rigid as ever.

Arundhati Roy uses a compressed language, a thrifty style to foreground the essential predicament of the socially oppressed; such is the extraordinary quality of her narrative art. When in chapter 1 the Kottayam police inspector Thomas Mathew addresses Ammu, his lecherous glare expresses his authority making her wince. In brief, the naked truth of his coercive behavior can be depicted as follows, "he started at Ammu's breasts as he spoke." He said the police knew all. They needed to know and that the Kotayam police didn't take statement from Veshyas or their illegitimate children..." (7). And "if I were you, he said, I'd go home quietly, then he tapped her breasts with his baton tap, tap..." (8).

In point of fact, there could be nothing more humiliating than to be called Veshya (prostitute) for a respectable woman. Thomas Mathew knows his power and is determined to make her feel it by stripping her of her dignity when he calls her children 'illegitimate'. This brief scene burns a painful spat in the reader's consciousness.

Another instance where sex is used to show superior authority is the Estha-Orange drink-lemon-drink man episode in chapter 4. In this chapter, Orange drink-lemon-drink man makes Estha come behind the counter for a free drink. He makes Estha

fondle his penis while he drinks his drink. Then he sends him back into the theatre, but Estha is nauseated. The Orange drink-lemon-drink man flirts with Ammu and gives Estha free sweets. Ammu notices that Estha is out of sorts, so she makes the family leave the movie early.

As a matter of cause, Ammu-Valetha relation is the key factor in the novel that brings about catastrophe and misfortune on all. Their sexual attraction and relation is beautifully woven in more than one level, it represents a union that openly defies all society constructed restrictions and leads to a sense of fulfillment and contentment.

This is not the only case that shows the domination of man as a husband on a woman. Domestic violence was also part of life. Papachi, often beat Mamachi with a brass flower vase. In addition, Papachi insulted Mamachi as she was never allowed to sit in his Plymouth, until after his death.

The other man who dominated Mamachi's life was Chacko, her privileged and Oxford educated son. When he returned home after his divorce from Margaret, he takes over Mamachi's pickle factory and referring to the factory as "... my factory, my pineapples, my pickles" (57) without regarding Mamachi who had started and developed the factory before Chacko returned home.

Mamachi did nothing but accept his passively. Whatever her husband did, being a virtuous woman, she had to accept it because it was sanctioned by the society.

Ammu, the woman in the second generation in the novel is also confined. Because of her parents' traditional beliefs, she lives as the second. As a matter of fact, her parents give more affection to his brother for being a man than her as a woman. Moreover, being a single parent of two children, her position in society in worse. She had no other choice but to live in her parents' house controlled by men.

When another marriage took place, Ammu leaves Ayemenem and lives in Calcutta with her second husband. But, unfortunately, her second husband is not well employed and one day he said Ammu to his manager. This forced Ammu for the second divorce and that makes her position worse in society. It is because the society believes that a good

woman should live with her husband and accept her husband unconditionally. A divorced woman is considered equal to an un-virtuous woman.

Chacko is a representative of exploitative male who oppresses women. He troubles his mother, his sister and even his wife. Ammu's inter-religious marriage is abused but Chacko's relation with low caste woman is accepted in the name of man's needs. In this novel, marriage is a trap for all and no marriage is successful.

From this prospective, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* focuses on the above-mentioned points. Roy through the character of Ammu has portrayed, that the female sex is completely neglected in the society. When Ammu makes the physical relationship with an untouchable man Valutha, their relationship exceeded to an extent that it came to be labeled as illicit. In this novel, it is found that both male and female are treated differently as Chacko, being a man lives happily even after divorce but on the other hand, Ammu, after divorce, suffers in the whole novel. It shows different social conditions of men and women in the society which is very decisive.

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