

## The Politics of Caste, Class and Gender in *The God Of Small Things* on the backdrop of Ammu- Velutha Relationship

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After umpteen times of reading of the novel, and a number of articles published covering almost all the aspects of the novel, the novel *The God Of Small Things* still intrigues no end. Arundhati Roy has woven a very intricate plot and colored the characters in shades of so many hues, that it has not stopped the readers from reading and exploring the novel only to discover one more aspect which he/she feels, needs more attention. Roy has partly painted it as autobiographical, though many events do not directly relate to her life. The various conflicts that form the core of the novel are not fictitious or imaginary. Roy has amazingly portrayed the real scenario of her native place and country. While one prides in one of the most ancient culture/ traditions in the world, it cannot be denied that India has its dark side too. Roy has brought forth this dark side of India in the novel, not exactly to expose it to the world, but rather to come face-to-face with it and kill the demons that lurked in her subconscious. Caste, class and gender discrimination has always dominated the way of life in India. To the extent that religion and the scriptures too supported it, accepting it as god created system. This research paper deals with this distinction of caste, class and gender in Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things*. I have explored this aspect with the help of the two major characters in the novel- Ammu and Velutha, who are in several ways a victim of this system. Nowhere in the novel do we find Ammu and Velutha being treated as human beings. Ammu as a woman and Velutha as an untouchable are given no other specific identity apart from their gender and caste. They both belong to the deprived and subjugated class. Ammu, because she is a woman and Velutha because he is an untouchable. While Roy presents these two characters as virtues and good, the society cannot see them beyond their gender and caste.

The novel is placed in Ayemenem, a small village in Kerala. The story is set in the caste dominated society of Kerala where the society was divided between the touchable and the untouchables. The novel does not aim at portraying the history of Kerala. As Roy states, "...for me, I have to say that my book is not about history but biology and transgression. And, therefore, the fact is that you can never understand the nature of brutality until you see what has been loved being smashed. And so the book deals with both things- it deals with our ability to be brutal as well as our ability to be so deeply intimate and so deeply loving."<sup>1</sup> Roy has dealt with the brutality of the class people and the deep ingrained love of the suppressed. The untouchable Paravan caste was not permitted to consider themselves equal to the high-caste. They had no right to visit their homes nor were they allowed anywhere near the high-caste people. This distinction was very strictly followed and any mistaken in this would call in for severe punishment. Many a times this even cost the lower caste their life. The untouchables were polluted beings and their touch was a taboo. This social system was very rigid and had become an unwritten rule. It was accepted without any questions. Secondly, along with the caste system, what dominated the small Ayemenem village was the economically based class system. The Ipe were considered high-class as they were financial upper class. They owned the factories and hence were rich. The untouchables worked hard and yet had difficulty in making the ends meet. The third very strongly followed practice was the gender discrimination. What was right for men was not necessarily right for the women. There were separate rules for both. The women were not to cross the line and there existed no line for the men.

The novel shapes up on this background. Velutha, is a carpenter who is very talented and hard

working. Velutha's grandfather Kelan had embraced Christianity, but this had not changed their destiny. They were still considered untouchables. He is an active member of the communist movement. His dark skin, poverty and caste define him as an individual. On the other hand, Velutha tries to rise above the class distinction by his manners and behavior. Though he is talented, he is not accepted by the high class people. He is hired on very low wages by Baby Kochamma. It was a period in Kerala when society was divided on the ground of class and caste and breaking the barriers was next to impossible. "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 Parvan's footprint" (74).

Baby Kochamma, is very caste and class conscious. She has played a vital role in the novel, and it is she who defines the destiny of Ammu and Velutha. By upholding the discrimination in the society, Baby Kochamma maintains their privileged position in the society. She is the central character in the novel as she shapes the destinies of the other characters. She is the maternal aunt of the twins Rahel and Estha. She was in love with an Irish Catholic Priest and her unrequited love was the reason of all the bitterness she carries. The emptiness in her life deprives her of all the love for her family members, more so with the female members in the family. When Ammu returns home after her divorce with her twins, she is not welcomed. A divorced woman is a disgrace to the family and hence Ammu is never made comfortable in her house. She was considered equal to a widow and expected to live a life devoid of any colors. The twins, Rahel and Estha too do not enjoy any privileged place. They are strangers and are often reminded of it. As Baby Kochamma states, the twins are "Half-Hindu Hybrids whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian would ever marry". (78)

Ammu and her brother Chacko's relation are strained. While Chacko is sent for further studies to Britain, Ammu is denied the right to education. Pappachi insisted that a college education is unnecessary for girls. Chacko enjoys all the freedom a man is supposed to have while the restrictions are all imposed on Ammu because she is a girl. Chacko's

wayward behavior is excused as "Man's need" while Ammu's relation with Velutha is weighed on the morality ground and condemned by all. This is the time when all the upper class, communist and the so called morality torch bearers unanimously unite to punish Ammu and Velutha. Arundhati Roy's vision of Ayemenem is often discussed as a negative one. She has presented a very disheartening picture of the place which is stooped in caste and class struggle. Even if one accepts the scenario as 'reality', Roy seems to have taken pleasure in vividly describing the rather brutish imprudent behavior of the upper class, almost painting them as the villains.

Arundhati Roy has portrayed Ammu's character as rebellious, independent and adventurous. Her marriage, divorce and her return to Ayemenem with the twins, speaks of her courage to live life on her own terms. "The other major issue of feminism covered by this novel is the struggle engaged in by women for the establishment of their identity and their economic and sexual freedom."<sup>2</sup> The most striking decision Ammu takes is to have an affair with Velutha. Ammu's attraction towards Velutha is an act of rebellion. She longs for love and sex. She also realizes that very soon she will be old. To fulfill her desires she finds Velutha attractive as he is kind and well built. It is she who makes the first move and allures Velutha into the relation knowing that it has no future. That night, and all the other nights that followed, 'instinctively they stuck to the Small Things. The Big Things ever lurked inside. They know there was nowhere for them to go. They had nothing. No future. So they stuck to the small things.' (338) They share a bond of understanding. "She comes to love by night the man her children loved by day." Velutha loves the twins and they too, find in him a loving father figure.

It is Baby Kochamma, who finds the affair outrageous and finally puts an end to it. Ammu is confined to the four walls of the room. Velutha is held on a false complaint of murder of Sophie( daughter of Chacko) . He is tortured and beaten to death by the police. Arundhati Roy has explicitly drawn attention towards the exploitation of the have-nots by the upper class. The poor, socially and economically backward are shamelessly used and abused. The entire system, be it religious, political or social, unite to stand against them. Velutha cannot



prove his innocence and has to bear the torture solely because of his lower caste. Roy, also points out the rift between the class and caste and how the people's mind are drilled into believing that it's God's created system which cannot be defiled by anyone. Velutha dies in the custody. Ammu dies at the age of 31, sick and lonely. The twins go their separate way only to return home at the age of 31 years. They realize that nobody in the world understands them as they understand each other. In the end of the novel, trying to find solace in each other's company, they become intimate. Here one wonders what Roy is implying. There has to be some explanation to this (ab)normal relationship. One simple explanation, can be that the Estha and Rahel have longed for love and compassion all their life. When they were rejected by one and all, they try to seek solace in each other's arms.

Conclusion: The novel *The God of Small Things* created history in its own way. The Booker prize brought laurels for the author as well as for India. It was received very well by the critics. However, there are certain aspects which draw our attention. The story is from the perspective of seven year old twins. The South Indian culture and politics have not received right justice. Syrian Catholics are wrongly portrayed. There is a biased presentation of the Marxist and Communist ideology.

The age old caste and class struggle forms the background of the novel. Gender discrimination also holds a prominent place. Ammu, Veluth and the twins are the victims of these deep rooted practices. Baby Kochamma is unable to grasp the changing times, hence is bound by the wrong traditions. It is she who decides the destiny of all the characters,

almost destroying their lives in this process. Arundhati Roy has wonderfully woven all the characters together into a story that speaks of love, hatred, disgust, violence, caste barriers, class distinction and gender discrimination.

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