

Representation of Caste and Social Issues in Arundhati Roy's 'The God of Small Things'**Prof. Shivguru Shrirang Vhandkar**Assistant Professor, Dept. of English,
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drmhkhandagale@gmail.com**Abstract**

Arundhati Roy, Indian Author, a Social Activist, born in Meghalaya and mostly stayed in Kerala has expressed the problem of untouchability and different social issues in her Booker winner novel 'The God of Small Things'. Her novel explores the issues like caste system, gender inequality, patriarchal society that have existence in India even after seven decades of Independence. The novel discloses the huge gap between touchables and untouchables; the powerful and powerless; the exploiters and the exploited. This is bitter reality of Indian society that author has tried to present in the novel. Here, in this paper, I will discuss the maltreatment conveyed out to Velutha and Mamachi, these are the characters through which social issues like Caste system, Untouchability, Gender Inequality have been explored in the novel.

Key Words: Untouchability, Caste System, Gender Inequality, Patriarchal Society.

It is rightly said that literature is mirror of society and literature is an expression of the most intimate consciousness of life and society in which it grows and develops. It has some purposes to fulfill; some thoughts to be contemplated and according to that plans to be acted upon for the welfare and betterment of society. When we contemplate over the social issues, we find these issues need to be changed. In its corrective function literature projects the evils of the society with a view to making the society realize its mistake and make amends. Indian literature is also doing the same thing. It expresses thoughts, feelings and emotions in a rational and interesting manner and directly or indirectly throws light upon different changes in its own way.

The Indian English Literature from its beginning has witnessed socio-cultural, economic and political changes in the life of the nation. Today, when India is a democratic country, Indian English writers are now writing with a new zeal and confidence and raising voices against these evils of society in their literary works. To name a few, there are Vikram Seth, Shashi Deshpande, Jayant Mahapatra, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri and Arundhati Roy. Arundhati Roy is one of the most intellectual writers of India, whose book, 'The God of Small Things' won the Man Booker Prize and put Indian literature on the

map. Her books mostly raised voices against evil practices ruling in India. While her works can be pretty depressing, but they reflect the ground realities that most people often lose sight of.

Her most popular novel is 'The God of Small Things' which brought her fame and popularity. The title itself conveys the theme of the book is about how even small things affect the people's lives. Untouchability is one of the evil practices in Indian society. Though its impact seems to be coming to an end. It was practiced. Untouchability is an evil part of the caste system. It is not merely the inability to touch a human being of a certain caste or sub-caste. It is an attitude on the part of a whole group of people that relates to a deeper philosophical process of thought and belief, invisible to the naked eye, translated into various physical acts and behaviors, norms and practices. Untouchability is like a cancer that has been eating our society from ancient times towards this has been handed down from generation to generation. Initially, the caste system was a kind of division of labour. Then it became a tool in the hands of the upper caste people to exploit and marginalize the lower castes. Millions of Indians are still untouchables in the sacred land of Gandhi, Buddha and Ambedkar. They live the parallel universe of isolation. It must be somewhere stopped.

Arundhati Roy's Booker prize winning novel deals with the ravages of the caste system in

south Indian state, Kerala. Arundhati Roy presents both the miserable plight of untouchables and also the struggle of a woman trying to have fulfillment in life in patriarchal society. Velutha, the God of small things, transgress the established norms of society by having an affair with a woman of high caste. The ultimate outcome of this love is tragic death of an 'untouchables' by event that makes a travesty of the idea of God. God is no more in control of "Small things" rather the small things have an ultimate power over God turning him to "The God of loss(265)". The ideas of untouchability is explored at two levels in the novel. Firstly, we have socially untouchables or Parvan, who are never allowed basic human rights. Secondly, we have metaphoric untouchables in high castes. Here discrimination expresses itself in marginalizing the woman in their personal and public life.

If we turn towards the story, then we find that the novel portrays the story of a Syrian Christian family living in the southern part of Kerala, India. The plot of *The God of Small Things* revolves around this family spanning three generations of Syrian Christian Anglophone families. Pappachi Kochamma, the father of the family is a retired imperial entomologist. He was working in Delhi but after his retirement, he returned to his hometown with his wife, Mammachi Kochamma and two children, Ammu and Chacko. Several years after their arrival, their daughter Ammu who married a Hindu man experiences an unhappy marriage which results in divorce. Ammu who is the protagonist of the novel is a divorced lady with her twin children naming Estha and Rachel. She being a divorcee is not welcome in her own parent's house. She with her two children start living in her parental house in Ayemenem with other family members, Mammachi, Chacko and their aunt.

The family sends their son, Chacko to study in Oxford but this doesn't imply to their daughter as the novelist explains: Pappachi insisted that a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl; She should wait for marriage proposals while she helped her mother with the housework. Since her father does not have enough money to raise a suitable dowry. (Roy: 38)

While studying there, Chacko meets Margaret whom he married later but their marriage doesn't last long and it ends in divorce after the birth of their daughter in the same year. Then Chacko leaves his daughter Sophie Mol with Margaret in England and comes back to his father's house in Ayemenem, Kerala. After her divorce, Ammu tries to rebuild her life in Aynemen. She starts working in her father's factory where she meets Velutha, an untouchable character introduced by Roy in the novel. He is the servant of her family and is very much loved by her children, Estha and Rachel. She eventually falls in love with a man who is considered untouchable by her family and society. This forbidden love story is the heart of the novel. In this way, Roy has tried to raise her voice against the caste system existing in Indian society. This forbidden inter-caste romantic but tragic relationship ends disastrously. When Ammu's family came to know about the love affair of their touchable daughter with an untouchable family servant they were filled with rage and held Velutha responsible for it. They tried every means to punish him and send him to jail on fake charges of murder. In the prison, he was tortured so badly that he dies there. The policemen didn't have any mercy on Velutha because for them by punishing him they were trying to restore the lost dignity of the high caste and for them, an individual of low caste is just like an animal who is subjected to torture. Roy has presented the picture in the following way.

"They were not arresting a man; they were exorcising fear...Touchable policemen acted with economy, not frenzy. Efficiency, not anarchy. Responsibility, not hysteria. They didn't tear out his hair or burn him alive... After the epidemic, they were merely inoculating a community against an outbreak". (Roy: 307-309)

This incident badly affects Ammu as she was left with no one to console her and she was left with no hope to live. She being heartbroken sends her son, Estha to live with his father and leaves her parent's house to live alone. While her daughter, Rahel stayed within Ayemenem but Ammu came back to her house. She dies of illness with no one around her. In this way, their love affairs meet tragic ends with the disastrous end of two individuals who were trying to mend each other's

lives by their love. Roy has depicted the adverse state of untouchables in the novel in many places. For example: Mammachi told... Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sway their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan's footprint. In Mammachi's time, Paravans's like other untouchables were not allowed to walk on public roads, or 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: 73-74)

In the novel, *The God of Small Things* Roy has shown the utmost reality of the Indian society which beliefs in the caste system. The caste system is an integral part of Hindu society since ancient times. It is believed that Portuguese travellers were the first to use the word, "caste" in the 16th century. Earlier Indians have always used the word "jati" for the same. This "jatipratha" is part of Varna-vyavastha based on occupation. This Varna-vyavastha implies Brahmins for the priest class, Kshatriyas for the warrior class, Vaishyas for traders and merchant class and Shudras for the lowest class means labours or untouchables. For ages, this class has been exploited by the upper three classes resulting in their subaltern status. In the novel, Roy has also discussed the large scale conversions of shudra or lower class Hindus to Christianity for achieving respect and dignity which they have been deprived of in their religion. She depicts in the following ways: When the British came to Malabar, several Paravans... converted to Christianity and joined the Anglican church to escape the scourge of untouchability...it did not take them long to realize that they had jumped from the frying pan into the fire they were made to have separate churches, with separate services, and separate priests. After independence, they found they were not titled to any Government benefits like job reservations or bank loans at low-interest rates, because officially, on paper, they were Christians, and therefore Casteless. (Roy: 74)

This is a very strange notion to believe that Church, where everybody is considered as equal, differentiates between lower caste and upper caste

people. By pointing this, she had tried to prove that conversion of lower-class people from Hinduism to Christianity didn't benefit them in any way rather they remained untouchable in their new community as well. The caste system has dominated Indian society in terms of occupation and other social obligations. High caste individuals enjoyed all the facilities and opportunities while low caste people performed menial jobs in society. This resulted in the prosperity of the upper caste and the downfall of the lower caste. Moreover, they were not allowed to enter public places like Temples and social gatherings. As Arundhati has presented in the novel: To keep the others happy, and since she knew that nobody else would hire him as a carpenter, Mammachi paid Velutha less than she would a Touchable carpenter but more than she would a Paravan. Mammachi didn't encourage him to enter the house (except when she needed something mended or installed) She thought he ought to be grateful that he was allowed on the factory premises at all and allowed to touch the Paravan (Roy: 77) Though in the current times, the society has become more liberal and such things as "untouchability" doesn't exist but still, the society is divided based on upper caste and lower caste. Still, in many places there is hostility among different castes and people of upper castes doesn't like to mix up with people of lower castes. The best example is seen in terms of marriages because when it comes to marriage, families are firm in marrying in their caste.

In *The God of Small Things*, the conflict exists at individual and societal levels. The novel graphically shows that how people are helpless to resolve these levels of friction. Velutha, the outcast, can never co-exist peacefully with the "touchable" communities for so long as the stigma of untouchability attached to him and countless others like him. Velutha is "highly intelligent," an excellent carpenter with an engineer's mind, but he is also "The God of loss", "The God of Small Things" --He left no footprints in sand, no ripples in water, no images in mirrors" (265)

Gender inequality is another recurring social issue in the novel. In *The God of Small Things*, characters like Mammachi, Ammu and Baby Kochamma are discriminated against because they are female. In the book, male characters

predominantly have more power. For example, Pappachi is a high ranking individual who is part of Government and Mammachi is in charge of the household duties. When Mammachi starts a pickle factory and becomes more powerful, Pappachi becomes jealous and abusive towards her. In the novel the female characters appear resourceful and smart, yet they never fully develop to become strong matriarchs because of the strict social structure. Although higher class female characters like Rahel, Ammu and Mammachi are physically healthy, they are not the decision makers in the family or society. An example of this would be when Ammu's first failed marriage to the man she had met at a wedding.

She was described as a typical Indian bride who did not dare to stare at her fiancée in her face until they got married.

Additionally, people use abusing words to women who do not marry in society. This is evident when Roy talks about Baby Kochamma, who accepted her unfortunate fate of not having any husband, resenting Ammu because she saw her fighting against that same fate. When Baby Kochamma truly could not find a spouse, her father sent her off to college. This shows that families view marriages as more important than education for women. Women have to follow social rules, they can't stay independently.

Conclusion:

Arundhati Roy has presented the bitter reality of Indian society, its ups and downs, tears and turmoil. She has presented issues like casteism, gender inequality, patriarchal society very effectively in the novel. She has raised voices against evil practices of society. We must say that "The God of Small Things" is, indeed, a fine study of individual and social psychology. The characters of the novel themselves are affected by the two psychological factors- denial of basic psychological and social needs. There are unmistakable clues in the text itself which suggest the reader pay some attention to the psychological aspect of the narrative.

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