



### SOCIAL BOYCOTT AND UNTOUCHABILITY IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

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#### ABSTRACT

In the present novel Arundhati Roy has dealt with the problem of untouchability intriguing the Indian society in her Booker winner novel, *The God of Small Things*. She is surprised and shocked at the uncivilized treatment faced by the lower strata of society, even in this postcolonial age. In this regard, she says that:

**"Fifty years after independence, India is still struggling with the legacy of colonialism, still flinching from the cultural insult (and ....). We are still caught up in the business of 'disproving' the white world's definition of us." (Roy 13)**

The novel confronts between the Big Man and the Small Man. Baby Kochamma, Pappaachi, Mammachi, Chacko are big men are termed as 'Laltain'. On the other hand Ammu, Velutha, Rahel, Estha are small men who are classified as 'Mombattis'. It is to be noted that both Laltain and Mombattis provide us brightness and help enlighten another lamp. The Laltain is well nourished and protected. It can overcome the impediments of life in a smooth and sturdy manner whereas 'Mombatti' is a deprived class which has no support, cooperation or no helping hand to uplift them from their current status. A mere gust of wind can blow them. Through the Laltain and Mombatti example, Roy successfully arouses pity for the deserted and oppressed class. The rich can do anything, can avail anything and the weaker sections are denied to the basic rights and amenities.

#### INTRODUCTION

First of all the very question arises that from where the word caste has been taken. The word 'caste' is derived from the Portuguese word 'casta' which means pure or unadulterated (sharing a Latin root, with the word 'chaste'). The caste system in India is a significant part of ancient Hindu tradition. In ancient India there developed a social system in which people were divided into separate close communities. These communities are known in English as caste. It is commonly believed that the very base and origin of the caste system can be found in Hinduism, but it has affected the entire Indian social system. The caste system is basically a simple division of society in which there are four castes arranged in a hierarchy and below them the outcast. But socially the caste system was more complicated, with much more castes and sub-castes and other divisions. The religious doctrines explain how the four Varnas were founded, but they do not explain how the untouchables were founded. According to the Rig Veda, the very old Hindu book, the

primal man - Purush- destroyed himself to create a human society. The different Varnas were created from different parts of his body. The Brahmans were created from his head; the Kshatriyas from his hands; the Vaishias from his thighs and the Sudras from his feet. The Varna hierarchy is determined by the descending order of the different organs of the body.

Almost every character in the novel is in the search of some 'identity' whether she is protagonist Ammu, Untouchable Velutha, Ammu's kids Estha and Rahel or even Baby Kochamma.

The character who is capable of bringing rolling tears is Velutha. Although he was an untouchable but he was an accomplished carpenter. He had his own set of tools and was gifted with extraordinary German design sensibility. But all his qualities can't sweep the fact that he was a paravan. After independence also, they remained deprived of the Government benefits like job reservation or bank loans at low interest rates as some of the untouchables officially adopted the Christian religion to avoid routine insult but changing faith added insult to injury as now officially they were regarded as Christians and can't claim for benefits.

Velutha symbolically stands for the 'God of Small Things'. Viewing his craftsmanship, Mammachi employed him as factory carpenter but he was not allowed to enter the house. He was paid less than a touchable carpenter but more than a parava carpenter. She told the twins that:

**"Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmans or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan's footprint. In Mammachi's time, Paravans, like other Untouchables, 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 73-4)

Roy portrayed the unjust and malice treatment faced by untouchables in India. They have been suffering severe humiliations without any fault. Although the Indian Government has banned Casteism but then prejudices against people is still there. Mahatma Gandhi, Father of the Nation gave them a new name, 'Harijan' i.e. man of God to uplift untouchables but still no significant progress has been noted. Many people have to listen to derogatory remarks and are forced to live under barbarous conditions even today.

In God of Small Things, Untouchability has aroused as the main issue. If we ignore the rest of the characters criticizing Velutha being his Untouchable, what about his own father? Vellayappan also shared the opinion that Paravans meant to do menial and trivial things. He did not favor Velutha's work as a craftsman. That is the reason of the not so happy relation between Pappan and Velutha.

The novel reaches its tragic zenith when Velutha-Ammu relationship comes in light. Ammu's emotional quest is fulfilled by Velutha, whose family has been serving in Ammu's house for a long time. There is a forbidden love-story which they also knew shall never be accepted by society but then it is fairly said that love is blind. Suddenly touched became untouchable and

untouched became touched. Her physical intimacy with Velutha brought all round fury. Nobody recognized their love –affair. They were boycotted by the society as it was against the societal norms. When Mammachicame to know about this episode, she couldn't believe her ears. She at once called Velutha. When he arrived, Ammu's mother at once venommedhim with insufferable insults. But he remained restrained, composed and quietly absorbed all the insults and ill words. Mammachiwas so much infuriated that, "She spat into Velutha's face. Thick spit. It spattered across his skin. His mouth and eyes." (Roy284)

Veluthawas a Marxist but then Comrade Pillai, their leader did not approvedVelutha- Ammu relationship. He said, "It is not in the Party's interests to take up such matters. Individual's interest is subordinate to the organization's interest. Violating Party Discipline means violating Party Unity."(Roy287)

Police is calledas a protector of the people but they also took Velutha into custody and gave him fatal blows. This description in the novel reads:

**"Blood spilled from his skull like a secret. His face was swollen and his head looked like a pumpkin, too large and heavy for the slender stem it grew from. A pumpkin with a monstrous upside down smile. Police boots stepped back from the rim of a pool of urine spreading from him, the bright, bare electric bulb reflected in it." ( Roy319 -320)**

Roy has artistically portrayedthe downtrodden, dalitsand deserted. If we compare the character of Bakha in MulkRaj Anand's 'Untouchable' is very close to the character of Velutha. Both are stressed out, suppressed and oppressed by the society at large. Both of them strive for the sake of identity. The only difference lies in the fact that Velutha does not believe in confrontation whereas Bakha is short-tempered and sustains the quality of rebuking back. A glimpse on his character from the novel:

**"But there was a smoulderingrage in his soul. His feeling would rise like a spurtsof smoke from a half smothered fire in a fitful jerks when the recollection of abuse or rebuke he had suffered kindled a spark in the ashes of remorse inside him. Why was all this? He asked himself in the soundless speech of cells receiving and transmitting emotions, which was his usual way of communicating with himself. Why was all this fuss? Why was he so humble?" ( Anand57-58)**

This kind of behaviour is not demarcated in Velutha's character. It was a height when Mammachi spits on his face but even then he maintained his composure. It shows that he is an innocent man with showers of simplicity. We can also say that Velutha is the God of Small Things, the God of Loss. His intelligence and artistic inclinations though observed by Mammachi, but they were over shadowed by his lower base. Thomas Gray in his famous poem, Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard says:

**"Full many a gem of purest ray serene,**

**The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear.  
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen;  
And lost its fragrance in the desert air.” (Gray 53-56)**

The above lines force the readers to think that God does not discriminate between rich and poor, touchable and untouchable, low and high. In His eyes all men are created equal and so must be dealt equally. The man made laws and countries cannot prosper unless the abandoned are given their right due. In spite of the fact that Velutha is a man of great intellect, he did not receive what he actually deserved. Even his only love Ammu was snatched from him on several baseless grounds. Does a Dalit have no right to love? Their relationship would create no upheavals in the western world, culture and sensibility. Only people of caste based countries, India, in particular are amazed and shocked by such things.

To the novelist, love is not a thing to be personalized but it is a universal thing which attracts huge number of people. Without love everybody is incomplete, life becomes meaningless and useless. It is observed that Ammu's sexual desire was not quenched in her youth by her husband. So she is always seen passionate and aroused. The novelist presents her mental state in this way:

**“Ammu grew tired of their proprietary handling of her. She wanted her body back. It was her. She shrugged her children off the way a bitch shrugs of her pups when she had enough of them. She sat up and twisted her hair into a knot at the nape of her neck. Then she swung her legs off the bed, walked, to the window and drew back the curtains.”( Roy222)**

The other characters who develop a sense of isolation in a narrow set up are Rahel and Estha. What Ammu underwent had various side effects on her twins. They are treated as outsiders by the insiders of the family. Estha encountered nightmarish experience when he visits Abhilash Talkies with his mother, sister and Baby Kochamma. Their Orangedrink Lemondrink Man misbehaves with him. This event is so strongly absorbed in the soft, simple mind of Estha that it sinks deep into the child like psyche of the seven year old Estha and haunted him throughout his life.

Not only Estha but Rahel was also sailing the boat of sorrow and shallow life. She also suffered injustice. If we make comparison between Rahel and Estha, we found that Rahel is smarter than her brother. She sustains the same rebellious fling as her own mother. Once she burnt the hair bun of her Housemistress in order to show her protest, contempt and artificiality in society.

Through the characters in the novel, the author wants to state that everybody in society wants personal security, love, affection and care. These are the primary requirements of man. From the in depth reading of The God of Small things, we point out that almost all the characters of the novel are suffering from this problem of personal security, acceptance and identification. It is the ultimate desire of protection which forced Ammu to discard societal regulations and engage in an

incestuous relationship. The emotional blows are so violent that they leave permanent impression in the mind.

So Arundhati Roy through this novel has voiced the pity and plight of the have nots who are rejected altogether, downtrodden and vulnerable. Readers identify with each and every situation as the novel is minutely dealt and handled. Untouchability and social boycott are the very base of this master tailored novel.

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