

Social Consciousness in Arundhati Roy's Novel: The God of Small Things -The Voice of Human Mind

Dr. Sanjay Johari

Assistant Professor Department Of English K.G.K. (P.G.) College Moradabad

Submitted: 25-06-2021

Revised: 04-07-2021

Accepted: 07-07-2021

ABSTRACT

Arundhati Roy is a great crusader for human values and freedom of expression and thought. She is a great champion of the cause of the untrodden-the dalits who despite so much talk about and efforts for improving their lot and status, are still virtually lead of a fire degradation and humiliation. All is a great hoax and in practice nothing appreciable has been done; it is only on paper. In personal life these advocates still practice untouchability.

Key Words: Crusader Expression Champion Degradation Humiliation Hoax Advocates.

In her novel 'The God of Small Things' Arundhati Roy has probed deeper in human mind and exposed our double standard of morality and in doing so she has highlighted the plight of the untouchables. The God of Small Things which won the prestigious Booker Prize is the saga of such an untouchable-Velutha who despite his recognized and appreciated talents and skill is made to suffer terribly and is finally annihilated simply because he is a dalit.

The novelist has realistically portrayed the psychology and mind set up of five generations of the inmates of Ayemenem House in relation to the time they lived in. In portrayal of characters she has given vivid and graphic description of the social values and norms of the time and makes us feel as if he or she were standing before us. Every character is the symbolic representative of the age.

The story is set in a small town of a southern coastal state of India-Kerala. The novelist presents two widely divergent pictures of society. The first is of a feudal casteist society in which the untouchable's lad had no rights. They led a wretched life. They were not allowed to touch anything that 'Touchables', the people of upper classes touched. They were not even allowed to walk on public roads. They were not allowed to cover their upper body or to carry umbrellas. Even their nearness or shadow would defile the life of the caste fellows. But the same persons felt no

pinches of conscience nor did they flinch when they needed the services of the untouchables. Velutha and his father were allowed to enter the Ayemenem House from the back entrance to deliver the coconuts they had plucked from the trees in the compound.

In the latter part of the chronicle we witness a totally changed social setup. The communist led movement gave death blow to all social taboos. People began to feel pride in declaring themselves leftists, E.MS (Namboodripad) who formed the first non-Congress Communist Government in the history of India became the idol of the people especially of the youth. The communists succeeded in an amazing degree in mobilizing the peasants and workers of Kerala. Schools and reading rooms were established. Mass educations programmed were launched and Kerala achieved highly appreciable literacy percentage. All this brought about a great cultural change among the illiterate and the impoverished people. But still the rigid caste divide could not be completely eliminated.

The novel describes the life style of the members of one Syrian Christian family. It presents before us the characters of a few generations. It is through the study of these characters and their mind set up that the novelist tells us how the rigid caste and religious values and norms of the society made the life of the untouchables horrible. The Syrian Christian family is a high caste one. Though Christianity does not allow any such distinction, it is placed in Indian context and cannot allow the untouchables even to come a little nearer or within touchable distance to high caste people.

All the characters in the novel represent some or the other trait of social life. Their life style is in accordance with the norms and values of the society they live in No one is allowed to live or act against them. If one does so, one has to pay for it.

The first character in the novel is of Rev.Ipe. He was a priest of the Mar Thoma Church in Ayemenem. It was a well known church in the Christian community of the age. He was highly

esteemed in the Christian community and was known as Punnyan Kunju _Little blessed one. Every day people would come to him to be blessed. He was an orthodox priest and could not reconcile himself with the changing norms of society. When his daughter Baby Kochamma became a Roman Catholic he started realizing that his daughter had developed a 'reputation' and was unlikely to find a husband. He had the dubious distinction of establishing the first school for the untouchables.

His daughter Baby Kochamma suffered a crushing defeat in her life. For her life was "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." When she was eighteen, she fell in love with Father Mulligan. He was a handsome young Irish Monk who was sent to Kerala for a year and was studying Hindu Scriptures in order to be able to denounce them intelligently." She was sexually excited and made advances to him. The Father was young too and understood the purpose of her hovering around him. Sometimes the temptation was irresistible for him and he felt excited at the sight of "trembling kissable lips and blazing coal black eyes." Her unconsummated love for Father Mulligan shaped her future life and conduct. She was reduced to an ordinary woman whose mind was deranged.

Another character who makes impression on our mind is Pappachi, the brother of Baby Kochamma. He is a minor character and is forced to live a 'lost life'. He is a high ranking ex-government official but after his retirement takes up pickle making though he always considers this job unsuitable for a person like him. He is a disgruntled person and represents feudalistic outlook. He is a sort of male chauvansit and frequently beats this wife Mammachi for no fault of her. He does everything to impress others that he is of high status. Even his children have no good words to say about him. Ultimately he dies a disappointed man.

Mammachi is another character who is a perfect presentation of the female psychology of the feudal society of the age. In Indian society male supremacy is grafted in the mind of the female child. Woman has to lead a life of subordination to her husband. The greatest irony is that women believe in female subordination and teach it. Baby Kochamma, as the novelist tells us believed that "a married daughter had no position in her parent's home."

Mammachi might have dreamt of a happy and peaceful life but she was destined to be beaten up rather frequently by her husband. Brought up in traditional social setup she did not resent it. She became a sleeping partner in her husband's pickle

factory and often relieved herself by venting her resentment and annoyance on the workers. She was not at all kind to them. When the accountant informed her about the discontent among the workers, her reply was, "Tell them to read the news papers. There's a famine on. There are no jobs. People are starving to death. They should be grateful that they have any work at all." This reply of Mammachi is typical illustration of the approach of capitalists towards the workers.

The novelist also exposes how gender distinction determined the attitude of the parents towards their own offspring. Sons enjoyed all care and attentions of the parents while the daughters didn't. Mammachi connived with the misdeeds of her son Chakko. She even arranged girls for him. She got a separate entrance built for his room so that the object of his 'needs' would not have to go traipsing through the house. She had no objection or moral scruple. But the same lady could not endure her daughter Ammu having relations with an untouchable Velutha. She felt disgusted even at the thought of it. It was the thought of her (Ammu) naked coupling in the mud with a filthy untouchable that made her condemn Ammu. She wondered how Ammu could endure his foul breath and smell. Perhaps, the small of an untouchable female was different from that of a male untouchable.

Roy condemns this approach when she says Mammachi was at her cruelest when Velutha arrived before her. She, "continued her tirade, her eyes empty, her face twisted and ugly, her anger propelling her towards Veltutha until she was shouting right into his face and he could feel the spray of her spit and smell the stale tea on her breath." She threatened him that she would have him castrated like the pariah dog. Whenever he was near, she spat into his face thick spit that splattered across his skin, mouth and eyes.

Another important character in the novel is Mammach's son Chacko. The novelist informs us that in his early life he was a voracious reader and looked forward to lead a happy life but it was not destined. His inter-caste marriage and subsequent divorce changed everything. He could not enjoy life as he wished. He was biological father of Sophie who considered her step father Joe a better man than Chacko. He is the representative of conservative feudal society of his time. Though like other youths of his age he professed to be a Marxist, his behaviour and conduct are bourgeoisie. Comrade E.M.S. was his hero and his father would often address him as 'Karl Marx'. But his conduct was not that of a Marxist. Though his sister Ammu had equal rights in the pickle factory

and did as much, work as he did. Chacko always referred to it as, “my factory, my pineapples and my pickles.” He believed in the strange logic of the age that did not allow a daughter any right. “What’s yours is mine and what’s mine is also mine.” He would take the female workers mostly untouchables to a room on the pretext of teaching them Marxism and flirt with them and seduce them.

Chacko was a frustrated youth. He believed that he deserved much but could not get. He was the cleverest man of the time according to his mother. Separation from his wife Margaret Kochamma, denial of daughter’s true love and then her early death added much to his unhappiness. His bourgeoisie temperament made him indifferent towards all. When his sister Ammu was caught-handled with an untouchable, Velutha, he felt disgraced. The company of an untouchable was not allowed. But when she died in her prime his brotherly love came out and he tried to get for her a Christian burial which was not allowed. He was completely broken.

Another important character whose psychology, has been faithfully studied by Roy in the novel, is Ammu. She is the tragic heroine of the novel. She is the most conspicuous representative of the fourth generation who died at a very young age of thirty one which the novelist describes as, “not old not young” but a “viable die-able age.”

Her life was a never ending tale of suffering and woe. She suffers as a result of social system which is dominated by gender and caste distinction and discrimination. Her father Papachi did not allow her to study because he believed that college education was not necessary for a girl. He also did not have enough money to raise a suitable dowry. She worked hard and sincerely in the pickle factory but had no ownership right. The family atmosphere was also bad, disturbed and irritating cradling. She began to dream of escaping from Ayemenem, from her ill-tempered father and bitter, long suffering mother. Finally, she was sent to Calcutta.

She hoped for a better and happier life which eluded her. In Calcutta she met her future husband and had an elaborate wedding. But he proved a misfit for her in more than one way. She could not endure his habits and life style. The English manager of the concern had an eye on her and pressurized her husband that Ammu be sent to his bungalow to be ‘looked after’. Now the only choice left before her was to return to her parents in Ayemenem where she was not welcome. In the mean time she had become mother of twins. She understood her fate but could not help it.

Ammu’s return to Ayemenem verifies the veracity of Thomas Hardy’s verdict, “Happiness is but an occasional episode in a general drama of pain.” Here she came across Velutha and in due course of time fell in love with him. He created ripples in her. Her twins looked very happy in his company and she also felt very happy but it proved the beginning of the end. She forgot that Velutha was an untouchable unconsciously in her quest for happiness she broke the age old social norms ‘who to love’ and had to pay terribly. She developed irritable temperament and gave vent to her frustration on her children. “If it were not for you I would be free I should have dumped you in an orphanage the day you were born. You’re the millstones round my neck.”

Ammu challenged the defiled social order and what it represents first by marrying a man of her choice and then breaking that marriage and then getting entangled in a forbidden love. She acted against the norms of ‘motherhood’ and ‘divorcehood’ prescribed by society and precipitated her tragic end. She died in fear. She was so much terrorised for loving an untouchable that she got terribly gripped in fear of being branded as a for ‘Veshya’. She had recurrent dream that a policeman was approaching her trying to hack off her hair so that she might get labeled as a veshya and another policeman would easily identify her as such to oppress her. Such dream would torment her endlessly for she had seen such women in the market, “The women with vacant eyes and forcibly shaved heads in the land where long, oiled hair was only for the morally upright.” Such dream and consciousness of her guilt of ruining the life of Velutha knawed she inwardly and she died at an early age.

But her tragic fate haunted her even after her death. The church refused to bury her. Chacko had to hire a van to transport her dead body to the electric crematorium. He wrapped it in a dirty bed sheet and laid it a stretcher. Finally she became a number. The crematorium incharge gave him a pink receipt Receipt No. Q 498673 to collect her remains.

Velutha is the tragic hero of the novel. He is an untouchable. It is through him that Roy has raised voice against the inhuman atrocities heaped upon the untouchables by the casteist society and championed their cause. It is strange that evens the untouchables though highly conscious of this humiliation felt the pinch but meekly bear it and side with the oppressors, if one of them raises his voice against it.

The hero is called Velutha. It is ironic name given to him by his father for in Malayalam

'velutha' means 'white' and our hero in black. He is brought up in traditional casteist set up and in the beginning looks content with his fate. He would come with his father Vellya Paapen to the Ayemenem house by the back entrance to deliver the coconuts as the untouchables were not allowed to touch anything that the touchable touched. They were not even allowed to walk on public roads. The family of Velutha had converted to Christianity in the fond of hope of finding respectable place in society but could not get rid of the stigma untouchables. The lower castes were forbidden to come physically within the touchable distance of higher caste people and if they did, they could be punished by death for violating this taboo. This fear haunted Velutha and proved true in his case.

Velutha was a very able man. He was an excellent carpenter and had a way with all sort of machines. He designed the first sliding folding door in Ayemenem that became a craze. He could mend radios, clocks, water pumps etc. In fact he could do every thing needed in life and yet despite all his abilities he was looked down upon simply because he was a Parvan, an untouchable. Even Mammachi who spat on his face and humiliated in every possible way often said, "If only he hadn't been a Parvan he might have become an engineer."

The humiliation he suffered at the hand of high caste people made him a rebel. He thought it was his life mission to change the existing conditions. He declined to pay heed to what his father said. The communists were fighting for the cause of the untouchables and he also became a card holder an activist of the communist party to great disappointment of his father.

But this tragic hero who promised much, proved too weak before fate and social forces. Like a Shakespearean tragic hero he also died helplessly. His love for Ammu which may well be called a tragic flaw, proved his undoing. He broke the social law. An untouchable falling in love with a high caste divorcee was not permitted by society and a case was fabricated against him. He was brutally tortured to death in police custody and his dead body was thrown into the paupers sit. But what is worse, as Roy tells us, even his party did nothing for him.

Roy has also studied mind set-up of minor character in the given social context. Vellya Pappan, Velutha's father represents the suffering class in a feudal society. The untouchables were mere bonded slaves available at call to serve the high-caste masters. Their psychology had been so such perverted that they believed they were created only to do it. They would not even dream that their

miserable plight was caused by their masters. They prided themselves on their loyalty to their masters. Vellya Pappan could not digest his son's affair with Ammu. His years of loyalty to the Ayemenem house had collapsed by this single act of his son. It was something beyond his comprehension and he rushed to the Ayemenem house to report what he had seen without bothering about its fatal consequences for his son.

The novelist has also presented the psychology of the children of divorced parents. Estha and Rahel are made to suffer for no fault of theirs. They had some movements of joy only in the company of Velutha the untouchable. They were detested in the family and even their mother Ammu regarded them as 'millstones' round her neck. Their innocence was exploited by all. Estha was made to depose against Velutha. He knew that it was false but gave witness against the man whom he liked and loved because he had been frightened to the extent of believing that if he didn't do so, his mother would be put in prison But their physical affair described in the latter part of the novel is unnatural and cannot be accepted.

Besides untouchability Roy has also exposed some other great evils of the casteist feudal society. The snobbish ways of life have been exposed through the character of Baby Kochamma her father Rev Ipe, Father Mulligan Pappachi and Mammachi. Their false pretences have also been exposed.

In fact a vein of satire runs through the entire fabric of the novel. The very title of the novel 'The God of Small Things' has a satiric tone. Velutha is the god in this case but he is punished like a villain. Narrow religiosity double standards of morality and dowry system have also been satirised.

But what is most remarkable is that the study of the novel, 'The God of Small Things' also gives up a peep into the mind set up of the novelist herself. In her tirade against communism Roy has deliberately avoided referring to some facts. She has condemned Com. Pillai and pointed out that in Velutha he saw a political rival and manipulated the latter's elimination. There is political rivalry even amongst the communists but not to this extent. Her views about E.M.S. Namboodripad are biased. Infact it was under his inspiring leadership that in Kerala the 'communists waged relentless battles for the cause of the untouchables and when they formed the first non Congress Communist Government lot was done to ameliorate their lot.

Similarly her view that during the freedom struggle the untouchables kept themselves away for fear of the rule of Brahmin oligarchy under

Congress cannot be accepted. 'Latest researches have shown that they had as much love for the motherland as the upper class people had and contributed heroically. Many rose to the status of martyrs D.C.Deengar in his book 'Swatantra Sangram Me Achuton Ka Yogdan' has described the martyrdom of many untouchables.

The novel 'The God of Small Things' may perhaps be reflection of Roy's own personal life. There are references to a few incidents and happenings in her life. The picture of Ammu and Velutha coupling may be her own longing. Her description and that too second by second of the outrageous and highly condemnable act which innocent child Estha is forced to do at the cinema hall, is unbelievably and astonishingly true and that too by a woman.

REFERENCES:

- [1]. Roy, Arundhati: The God of Small Things, New York, Harper Perennial.
- [2]. Pushpanath, Salim : The Magic of Kerala, Kottayam: Dee Bee into Publications, 2004.
- [3]. Arundhati Roy, "The Most Cowardly War in the History." Truthout. Org. 2006-07-15.
- [4]. Seby Varghese Thokkadam, "Arundhati Roy: A Life Full of Beginnings and No Ends." 2006-07-15.