

CASTE AND GENDER DISCRIMINATION: A CRITICAL STUDY OF ARUNDHATI ROY'S NOVEL "THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS"

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Abstract

Indian English writers have been writing with a new zeal and confidence focusing on social issues and phenomenal situations in their literary works. The Indian English literacy from its very beginning has witnessed social-cultural, economic and political changes in the nation. Indian English novelists have been showing their deep concern about these problems in the past also. Even after getting independence, these social issues are still there to be taken care of. Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Shashi Deshpande, Jayant Mahapatra, Namita, Gokle, Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri, Dina Mehta and Arundhati Roy are the main figures among them to highlight these issues. Arundhati Roy is well known not only for her new and original style but also for her thought-provoking attitude regarding social consciousness. The God of Small Things written by her is a semi-autobiographical novel that deals with the postcolonial and some different issues like feminism, caste segregation and untouchability. This novel, apart from other things, deals with the universal theme of social consciousness, the tyranny and injustice against women, child abuse, political bigotry, the caste system and the breaking of love marriages.

Keywords

Gender, Discrimination, Caste, Dalit, Woman, Untouchable, Marginalized.

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Arundhati Roy, born on 24 November 1961 in Shillong, Assam, presently situated in Meghalaya, won the National Film Award for Best Screen Play in 1988 and the Booker prize for her novel *The God of Small Things* in 1997. She is fully aware of the exploitation, oppression and discrimination of the marginalized section of the society and the women. Her characters are continuously in search of their identity. In her semi-autobiographic novel, *The God of Small Things*, she has tried to create consciousness among the deprived sections regarding traditional cruelties in the postcolonial society by exposing the caste and gender discrimination. She has shown that a patriarchal ideology of ancient culture decides and determines the code of conduct for both women and untouchables. Roy clearly points out that the patriarchal ideology is responsible for the violence of the touchable toward the untouchables. This novel is grounded in historical realities. Through her characters, Roy has tried to show the women's struggle in seeking their identity in the male dominant society. Being the internationally acclaimed writer, she has highlighted the political, social and cultural issues which constitute the very fiber of Indian life in her Booker Prize-winning novel *The God of Small Things*. Ranga Rao remarks in this regard:

“The Book of the Year” rightly observes. “Roy’s book is the only one I can think of among Indian novels in English, which can be comprehensively described as a protest novel. It is all about atrocities against minorities, small things, children and fourth, women and untouchable.”

The story of the novel moves around a wealthy, land-owning and Syrian Christian family residing in Ayemenem, a town in Kerala, India. We are introduced to Ammu, the daughter of Pappachi and Mammachi. Pappachi was the father of Ammu who was an imperial Entomologist under the British and became the Joint Director of Entomology in independent India. He was ill-tempered. On the other hand, Mammachi was Ammu's mother. She was a violinist and was popular for pickle making and was running the business of ‘Paradise Pickles and Preserves’. The couple had twins; one daughter Ammu and one son Chacko. Ammu does not like to stay with her parents. With the consent of her parents, Ammu goes to Calcutta to spend a summer with her distant aunt. After some time, Ammu married a Bengali non-Syrian Christian man who is found to be a heavy alcoholic. He abuses Ammu and compels her to satisfy the lust of his boss Mr. Hollick to save his job. Even after giving birth to twins Estha and Rahel, the constant strife between the Ammu and her Bengali husband continued. Consequently, Ammu returned to her parent's home. The novelist exhibits the sufferings of women at the hands of their own husbands consequent upon their different cultures.

Ammu, at the Ayemenem house, did not get a warm welcome and her children were considered fatherless, half-Hindu and Hybrids whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian would like to marry because Ammu had married inter-caste and was divorced by him. Ammu was denied a college education by her father Pappachi whereas Chacko, her brother was sent to Oxford for higher education. Chacko while studying at Oxford, fell in love and married an English woman named Margaret Kochamma who discarded him after giving birth to Sophie Mol for the sake of her affair with another person Joe. Consequently, Chacko also returned to India and got a job as a Lecturer at Madras Christian College. Chacko returned to Ayemenem after the death of his father Pappachi and takes over his mother's business 'Paradise Pickles and Preserves'. This event clearly proves that if a woman becomes a Widow, she loses her husband's protection and a widowed woman cannot run a business independently. The novelist has exhibited the gender discrimination through the characters of Chacko and Ammu. Roy lashes out at the hypocritical moral code of society. It exposes the double standards of morality in society regarding men and women. Chacko was sent to Britain to study at Oxford but Ammu was not allowed to do so. The reason is that she is a woman and so she has no right to go to college, because the college corrupts a woman. The novelist says:

"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".

After getting over the charge of 'Paradise Pickles and Preserves', Chacko started maintaining 'libertine relationships' with the beautiful women in the factory and his mother Mammachi helps him and turns a blind eye to Ammu's needs and comforts of children's development. Baby Kochamma, the sister of Pappachi is also living in their Ayemenem house. In her girlhood, she also had fallen in love with Father Mulligan, a young Irish priest when he had come to Ayemenem to study Hindu scriptures. Baby Kochamma loved a man who did not belong to their culture. Having been completely dissatisfied with the step of his sister, Pappachi brought her back to his home and sent her to America for education where she obtained a diploma in ornamental gardening. After that Baby Kochamma realized the importance of social norms and suppressed her amorous feelings by choosing a life of celibacy.

On the other hand, Margaret's second husband Joe dies in a road accident. After his death, Chacko invites her and their daughter to Ayemenem on the occasion of Christmas. The novel deals with the predicaments of the untouchables in India. In the novel, Valutha is an untouchable but he is an extremely gifted carpenter and

mechanic with a pleasing personality. He participated in politics and had earned a good name. Consequently, he has a sense of equality and self-respect. Mammachi and Chacko found him very useful for their business purpose but discriminated against him from other touchable workers in the factory and pay him fewer wages simply because he is a Dalit and subaltern. Ammu and her twins are bound to face the isolation because of the inter-caste marriage of their parents whereas Chacko's widowed ex-wife Margaret and their daughter Sophie Mol get preferential treatment. Valutha deviates from his path when he is indulged in illicit love affairs with Ammu after having been impressed by her beauty. Ammu also allows him to be drenched in her love every night for two weeks. Valutha provides father's love and affection to Estha and Rahel who also develop a great fondness for him. When Chacko and her family members come to know about the physical relationship between Ammu and Valutha, they lock Ammu in her room and banish Valutha. After this Estha and Rahel decide to run away but their cousin Sophie Mol convinces them to go with her. While trying to reach their abandoned Ayemenem house across the river, their boat is overturned in the river in which Sophie dies.

Chacko and his ex-wife Margaret Konchamma, return from Cochin. and see the dead body of Sophie lying on the sofa. Margaret hits Estha while abusing and blaming the twins for Sophie's death. Baby Konchamma fabricates a false story to take revenge upon Valutha for his illicit love relationship with Ammu. She blames that Valutha for attempting to rape on Ammu, threatening the family and kidnapping the children. Six policemen under the headship of Inspector Thomas Mathew searched Valutha and beat him mercilessly for crossing the caste lines. The twins Estha and Rahel give the witness to the provocation of Baby Konchamma. In spite of having good political relations, Valutha gets no support from his party as well as from the police. When Valutha was in police custody, Ammu reached to police station and explained the real facts about her relationship with Valutha and his innocence. But the police inspector threatens her to leave the matter alone. When the twins Estha and Rahel reveal the truth of Sophie's death to the Chief of the police, he is surprised and astonished. He is worried that the illegal arrest and beating of Valutha will cause to his death and the doubt of the police officer proves to be true when Valutha dies of his injuries. Baby Knochamma is afraid of being exposed. So she convinces Chacko that Ammu and her twins are responsible for his daughter Sophie's death. Resultantly Ammu is forced to send Estha to live with his father and stepmother. After that Estha never comes to live with Ammu again. Chacko is so much depressed after the death of his daughter Sophie that his body is benumbed. Chacko reached back to India when Ammu dies at the age of 31 years. She is denied the dignity of a

funeral as the Church refused to bury her dead body due to her inter-caste marriage with a non-Syrian Christian. Chacko and Rahel completed her funeral. Chacko wrapped her in a dirty bad sheet, put on a stretcher and cremated in an electric crematorium where the beggars and the derelicts are cremated.

Rahel goes to America to study where she marries Larry Mccashin and starts living with him in Boston but gets divorced very soon. She worked as a night clerk for several years at a gas station outside Washington. Roy says that only a woman like Rahel who was shorn of the feminine virtues like sweetness, modesty, humility and subservience, could do such kind of job. Only the women of cultured societies cultivate these qualities. She returns to Ayemenem when she comes to know that Estha is there. Estha, the twin brother of Rahel, is just opposite to her as he is serious and intelligent. Estha is an introverted person whereas Rahel is detached and aggressive. Both Estha and Rahel are of thirty-one years of age, and are once again united for the first time after their childhood. For some time, Estha and Rahel blame themselves for the false statement they had given about Valutha and their grief-ridden past. Now they understand each other. Both the twins, Estha and Rahel have renewed their intimacy and reaffirmed their closeness by sleeping together and having sex. The novel ends with their reunion.

Even today, in spite of a fundamental improvement in woman's status, one can see in the villages of India that the conservative and superstitious minds of a large number of people are against the higher education of girls. The only escape for Ammu, from the oppressive atmosphere, was through marriage. While taking a break at an Aunt's place in Calcutta, she chanced upon a sober-looking Hindu Bengali from the tea estates in Assam, and without looking back stepped into matrimony. Simone de Beauvoir remarks:

"There is a unanimous agreement that getting a husband-or in some cases a 'Protector'- is for her (woman) the most important undertaking... She will free herself from the parental home, from her mother's hold, she will open up her future not only by active conquest but by delivering herself up, passive and docile, in the hands of a new master".

The same happened with Ammu but she did not bow before her new master for a long time and got divorced. She returned to her parental home reluctantly. It is a great irony that a daughter estranged from her husband is tortured and tyrannized even in her parents' house. But on the other hand, an estranged son, Chacko not only receives a warm welcome but also remains the rightful inheritor of the family's wealth and fortune. He is rather encouraged by his own mother Mammachi in the name of "Man's needs" when he flirts with a low-caste woman whereas the love of

Ammu with Valutha, a Paravan is termed as illicit, untraditional and sinful. Although Ammu works in the factory as Chacko does, legally she has no claim on property as outdated and outmoded inheritance rights were weighted against her. So, Chacko always said, “What’s yours is mine and what’s mine is also mine.”

Arundhati Roy, a great supporter of the Dalit and the deserted women, points out those unnoticed shades of a social problem, which generally escape the eyes of social scientists. Valutha’s grandfather Kelan, along with a number of other untouchables embraced Christianity. Even religious conversion fails to give the dispossessed an esteemed able status. Irrespective of religious affiliation the underdogs remain as fallen as ever in the dog-eat-dog-society:

The novel shows that in spite of the long strides made in the field of technology and scientific knowledge, which caused major changes in the society, the caste hatred in our communities and the caste mindset have remained as rigid as ever. Valutha is a highly talented worker. He is a mechanic and a keen craftsman. However, his exceptional talents and skills, his keen understanding and his deep sensibility did not get the respect of any one of those who were far less talented. People were awed by him, and could not get over the fact of his being a Pravan, an untouchable. The cruel irrational orthodoxy didn’t respect even a highly talented person.

Arundhati Roy presents politics as a very complex force, operative at different levels beginning with home, and manipulating different people for different ends. The novel focuses on the problems created by the deceptive roles played by the political radicals who have vowed to bring about a Marxist revolution to banish all exploitative systems and establish a society based on equality and respect for the man as man. This is represented by comrade Pillai, a great political manipulator.

Valutha represents the class of the downtrodden used by the politicians and the police as mere pawns in the political game of chess. He refused to help Valutha when he needed him. Valutha stands betrayed by society, by his party, which has been seen by millions like him to be a substitute for religion.

Roy ridicules the discriminatory attitude of the police whose basic duties of protecting the innocent and checking the criminal are blithely trampled upon by none other than the Inspector himself. He bullies the common citizens, leers at women, and connives with local politicians to trap and liquidate the untouchable Valutha. Roy spares no literary device to hit hard at the utter hypocrisy, cruelty and unscrupulousness of an administrative agency whose work is to protect the citizens from the violence of lawbreakers. Inspector Mathew’s behavior with Ammu is totally uncivil. After Sophie’s mole’s burial, when Ammu came to the police, to tell the

truth before the police inspector Mathew but he did not entertain her. Any government official can behave as Mathew does only when he is devoid of any sense of decency, and respect for women. This, however, could be an occurrence, taking place every day in any corner of the country. Roy mentions the arrogance of the police in the following words:

“His eyes were sly and greedy... stared at Ammu...He said the police knew all they needed to know and that Kottayam police did not take statements from Vashyas or their illegitimate children”.

Roy in several places uses the expression Touchable police, in order to remind the readers of its role in oppressing the untouchables and in sustaining the caste-based division of society even while performing their duties. Here the lower classes are denied forcefully their basic rights to equality. In their chase of Valutha, they show much alertness as if they were catching a terrorist. Roy mentions the functioning of the police in the following words:

“Responsibility for the Touchable future on their thin but able shoulders..... 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 also throws light on the condition of the upbringing of children, especially of the divorced mother. The maltreatment of Rahel by men in Abhilash Tokies had a great impact on her future life. The breakup of Amma's marriage has its repercussion on the lives of her children. Baby Kochamma hates Estha and Rahel. The novelist mentions the attitude of Baby Konchamma in the following words:

“She was always keen for them to realize that they lived
on sufferance in the Ayemenem House, their maternal
grandmother's house where they really had no right to be”

Their willingness to love and to be loved raised manifold questions, whenever they came across glimpses of the boundless affection of Chacko hugging and kissing his stepdaughter Sophie Mol. But the twins did not get love from their own family members. Valutha, an untouchable shows humanism and provided them with the love and affection they needed. But it was not tolerated by Baby Konchamma and others. The subsequent brutal death of Valutha left one more everlasting scar on their painful memory. Roy has been sociologically very sensitive while recording even the slightest stirs in their life. After being caught with Valutha, Ammu relegated

them and blamed them for being responsible for all wrongs in her life. The climax of hatred in the heart of Ammu is mentioned in the following lines:

“If it weren’t for you I would be free. I should have dumped
you in an orphanage the day you were born. You were the
millstones round my neck”.

These words had a deep impact on the children’s psyche. And after that, they decided to go away and hide which did show in their anguish when accompanying Sophie Mol. If Ammu had worked patiently, perhaps the children would not have decided to run and the death of Sophie would not have taken place.

Taking all the aspects together into consideration, it can be concluded that her novel *The God of Small Things* is the proud possessor of sociological imagination in the true sense of the term. This novel is quite in line with Roy’s statement, acknowledging the condition of the world around and him without any distortions and aberrations. A close reading of the novel validates her statement. The post-sixties India is scanned on micro as well as macro-structural levels. Ayemenem becomes a transforming world in miniature. The novel is spun on the very fabric of social stratification prevalent in society for several centuries. She admits that only a writer is supposed to bring change in the society by highlighting the important issues through his or her writings. She very humbly says:

“She humbly says, if you are a writer, you tend to keep those achieving eyes open. Every day your face is slammed up against the window pane. Every day you bear witness to the obscenity. Every day you are reminded that there is no such thing as, innocence and every day you have to think of new ways of saying old and obvious things, things about governance, about power and peace, about death and beauty and things that must be said over and over again”.

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