

## **Cultural Ethics in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things***

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### **Abstract:**

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is rich in cultural values of India in the time after the colonialism. It includes the phenomena of caste and gender bias. The system of caste in India has big impact to the position of people in society. It becomes an important consideration when someone wants to make relationship with other people. My paper will focus on the cultural values regarding caste and gender bias depicted in this novel. Besides the caste, gender is also an important consideration in arranging the position of men and women in Indian society. The gender rule in India is influenced very much by the cultural teachings. The rule has made the possibilities for man to dominate the woman. And for the people who break this rule, there will be some negative consequences from the society like what has happened to Ammu.

**Keywords:** subaltern, dalit, cultural ethics, values, caste, gender.

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Arundhati Roy is one of the few writers who is keenly interested in the socio-political issues. Her novels are globally acknowledged and she is the second Indian novelist to have bagged the prestigious Booker Prize. Her novel, *The God of Small Things* captures many social values of Indian society. Set in a small town Ayemenem near Kottayam in Kerala, the novel describes clearly the culture of Indian society and it is a story of caste exploitation at the centre of which is the forbidden love between Ammu and the untouchable Velutha. The caste and the gender bias are the cultural values seen reflecting through this novel. My paper focuses on these cultural values of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*.

One of the major themes of this novel is based on caste as the main protagonist is suppressed as he is from a low caste and is referred as an untouchable. They are considered polluted and not to be touched. Velutha is the titanic figure that stands out as the representative of the untouchables in the novel. 'Velutha' which signifies 'whiteness' in Malayalam, is represented as one with black completion. Many of the untouchables are talented and brilliant. They can do all works as good as the touchable do. But because the identity of 'untouchable' labeled them, they can nor develop or actualize their selves. Likewise, here Velutha works like a little magician. He could do wonderful things like making tiny windmills and minute jewel boxes out of dried palm reeds. Vellaya Paapan, Velutha's father a toddy tapper by profession was a paravan. Velutha, the untouchable boy had been in the habit of going to Ayemenam House with his father for work.

It was Mammachi who first noticed Velutha's remarkable ability as a carpenter. Despite his untouchability and poor background, Velutha is of a great help to Ammu's family. Among Velutha's contribution to Ammu's family are, he is the best operator of machine in their factory besides he also has great carpentry skills. But, like Mammachi said, if Velutha hasn't been a Paravan, he might have become an engineer. Unlike the scholarly Oxford-training Chacko, it is Velutha who maintains the new canning machine and the automatic pineapple slicer. It is also Velutha who oils the water pump and the small diesel generator, and so on. So, it is clearly notable that the whole family of Mammachi depends more and more on Velutha. But, Velutha's identity as the untouchable has made Mamachi's family cannot appreciate him properly.

Vellaya Paapan had his own fears when Velutha grew into a young man. Things took shape and one day Vellutha disappeared. For full four years nobody knows where he was. Later he reappeared in Ayemenam but he never revealed where he had been. After his arrival Mammachi put him in charge of the general maintenance of the factory. This caused some resentment among other touchable factory workers. His father was fully aware of his son being a rebel feared for him more than ever. But very soon terror holds of him when “he saw what his untouchable son had touched. More than touched” (254). The only thing he could do was to rush to Ayemenam House and report the matter to Mammachi.

The caste system has also made the love between Ammu and Velutha cannot be acceptable. However they love each other, Ammu as the touchable never be allowed to have any ‘special relationship’ with Velutha, the untouchable. Baby Kochamma rushed to the police station to explain the circumstances that had led to the sudden dismissal of Velutha. It was Sophie Mol’s death which comes as the last nail in Velutha’s coffin. He was falsely implicated though everyone knew that it was an accidental death. The police brutally manhandled Velutha that led to his death. Velutha’s body was dumped in the Pauper’s pit where the police routinely dump their dead. That marked the end of the life of an untouchable, a trade unionist, a rebel, a carpenter and to cap it all, a lover. His desire to ‘relive’ as a touchable triggered the tragedy.

The discussion about caste in this paper will guide us to understand the symbol of river presented in the novel. The river that is told cutting across in front of Velutha’s house is the symbol of the boundary between Velutha as the untouchable and Ammu’s family as the touchable. The novel reveals that in all walks of life he suffers segregation of the upper caste people.

The next main cultural ethics is based on the gender bias. The position of man and woman in society is influenced very much by the culture. In Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, there are three generations of women who each of them was born and raised under different circumstances. Starting from the oldest generation, there are Mammachi, then the generation of Ammu, and the youngest generation is Rahel. Mammachi, Ammu’s mother lives under the control of men. She got married in puberty age with seventeen –year-old man who has nearly controlled every step of hers. In the beginning years of their marriage, when Mammachi had been a promising violinist player, she left her career because Papachi asked her to leave it.

It was during those few months they spent in Vienna that Mammachi took her first lessons on the violin. The lessons were abruptly discontinued when Mammachi’s teacher Launsky-Tieffenthal made the mistake of telling Pappachi that his wife was exceptionally talented and in his opinion, potentially concert class. This case is not the only one that shows us the domination of man as a husband on a woman as his wife. The other case is the fact that there were some domestic violence occurred in Mammachi’s family. Papachi, in his life time often beat Mammachi with a brass flower vase. In addition, Papachi insulted Mammachi as she was never allowed to sit in his Plymouth, until after his death.

The other man who has dominated Mammachi's life is Chacko, her privileged and Oxford educated son. When he returned home after his divorce from Margaret, he takes over Mammachi's pickle factory and referring to the factory as ". . . my factory, my pineapples, my pickles" (57) without regarding Mammachi who has started and developed the factory before Chacko returned home. Facing these facts, Mammachi has done nothing except accepting what has done on her. Whatever her husband has done, as a virtuous woman, she accepts it because it is the obligation of being woman as the culture has ruled her society.

Ammu, the woman in the second generation in the novel is the one who was mostly restricted by situation. She is mercilessly oppressed when she tries to emerge as an individual in her own right. As the matter of fact, her parents gave more affection to his brother for being a man than her as a woman. She had no other choice but to live in her parents' house and to wait for marriage proposal. In all those days she dreamed of escaping from Ayemenem and from the clutches of her ill-tempered father and bitter long suffering mother.

Ammu went to Calcutta to spend her summer in a distant aunt's home. There Ammu met her future husband. He was working as an assistant manager in a tea estate in Assam. She later discovered that her husband was an alcoholic and a liar. She then divorced him when he decided to sell her to his owner and returned to Ayemenem to her parents. The society believed that a good woman should live with her husband and accept whatever done by her husband. Neglected and ignored at Ayemenem, Ammu became extremely possessive of her vulnerable twins- Rahel and Estha. Velutha was a very good friend to the twins and he was ready to go to any extent to entertain them.

Ammu's love to Velutha has also become a forbidden love for being contradict to the cultural law at that time. As explained, the touchable people or the people who have certain caste will never be allowed to have any relationship with the untouchable people. This is why; Ammu's love to Velutha cannot be acceptable for both people in Ammu's caste like Mamachi and Baby Kochama, and also for people in Velutha's caste like his father who revealed their secret love to Ammu's family.

From the character of Ammu, we can learn that Ammu is the woman who tries to rebel the cultural values and patriarchy system in Indian society. Unlike her mother, she cannot accept the bad attitudes and actions of her husband and prefer the divorce than keeping her marriage. Ammu is also the example of a member of society who breaks the communal laws of India.

Rahel, Ammu's daughter is the woman who has no place in both her family and society. Living in her grandparent's house, she does not enable to live like normal child. She lives as the witness of injustice of her mother's life. As Rahel is growing up, she never experiences the real cultural tradition because no one regards her present, so that, Rahel becomes a free woman who unlike her mother, is not restricted by the mental restriction of the cultural tradition. This is why, at her return to Ayemenem, she answers an old man who asked about her marital status by

“We’re divorced” (130), without worrying what the old man will assume about her answer. In spite of her trials and tribulations, Rahel emerged as a strong individual. The author through this novel presents before us the constant struggle of the woman against their incessant exploitation, torture and struggle which they undergo because of the male dominated conservative framework.

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