

**CLASS CONFLICTS IN TERMS OF CASTE IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S  
THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS**

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**Abstract**

Arundhati Roy made headlines around the world when she became the first Indian woman to win a Booker prize for her debut novel *The God of Small Things* (1997). Among the women writers of Indian English fiction, Arundhati Roy has earned a discrete space for her particular consideration towards the plight of women and social injustice. Her receptive portrayal and understanding of intrinsic human nature makes her writings germane to current interests. Indian society is all bent upon to abuse a woman as immoral when there is even a slight divergence from the accepted ways of behavior. Class conflicts in the Indian society are not new; rather they are deeply rooted in the ancient culture and civilization. The lower classes of people always suffered and insulted in each walk of life. This view is very much clarified in the novel. Estha's betrayal of the person he loved dearly is a very tragic event. Velutha was considered responsible for the death Sophie Mol. The death of Sophie Mol and reunion of Rahel and Estha are two major events of the novel as they refer to the beginning and end of the novel respectively. This paper scrutinizes the class conflicts in terms of caste in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small things*.

**Key words:** betrayal, discrete, intrinsic, germane, divergence.

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is the candid portrayal of the plight of women in society and their strenuous struggle to be recognized as a human being in the male dominated conservative world. Roy projects class conflicts in terms of caste, making a contrast between touchables and untouchables. There is a narrative which clearly refers to this fact. Velutha makes sexual relation with Ammu. Knowing this fact, the representative of the ruling class opposed it vehemently and all of them stood against this happening. Roy has a great sympathy for the downtrodden as she has presented a living picture of their sufferings and the injustices done against them.

### **2. MORTIFICATION AND AGGRAVATION**

Every inch of life of an Indian woman is filled with multifaceted struggles. Life, for a deserted woman Ammu in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* offers no choice except endless suffering. Like all women she too longs happiness, pleasure and a life, free from all shackles and hindrances. But life never seems to be easy for Ammu right from her childhood. For in her memories what stands treasured are the bickering, beatings cries of desperation, humiliation and puddles of frustration. She also records painfully how her mother has lead a terrorized life as a wife. To Ammu's father, marriage is the only legalized channel to assert his male domination. The story revolves round the life Ammu belonging to a small place called Ayemenem near Kottayam in Kerala, Ammu the protagonist grew up in a family where her father Papachi regards that investing on college education is an unnecessary

expense on a girl. However the same investment on his son's education is gaining capital. Her brother is been send to Oxford for an advanced Diploma Course. The financial constraints crown the family's economic status. Ammu's marriage becomes a burden to her retired father.

“No proposal came Ammu's way. All day she dreamed of escaping from Ayemenem and the clutches of her ill-tempered father and bitter, long suffering mother” (p 38)

For holiday Ammu goes to Calcutta where she meets her prospectus husband employed in a tea estate as Agent who proposes to Ammu to marry her. She gives her consent and marries him. Marriage is the only refuge where one can escape from parental home.

### **3. HUMAN IDENTITY**

*The God of Small Things* is also concerned with the theme of human identity which is destroyed by oppressive forces often symbolized by a superior god who is not allowing inferior gods to exist and occupy places of structure. The novel has at its backdrop the theory of circulation of the elite. This theory implies that the elites of the society create a structure of rhetoric which allows them to remain in power. Among the women writers of Indian English fiction Arundhati Roy has earned a distinct space for her particular attention towards the plight of women and social injustice. Her sensitive portrayal and understanding of intrinsic human nature makes her writings relevant to current interests. Roy's Rahel in *The God of Small Things* helps to establish the ever-changing role of woman in Indian postcolonial Lirature.

Ammu is a divorcee and has two children: Estha and Rahel. Ammu's parents have paradise Pickle factory where Velutha is employed. The relationship between Ammu and Velutha is portrayed as a protest against the existing laws of society. It attacks the institution of family, religion, politics and public administration. The story reveals vital factors of life emanating from the psyche. These are love and sex developing between Velutha and Ammu. Their love affair brings troubles and tragedy in their life because what they do is not

acceptable to society owing to different castes and creeds which are the governing paradigms of Indian society. The lower classes are not allowed to develop love with a person of the upper classes. These are not new; they have come into existence from the beginning of conscious history. Rahel in Roy's *The God of Small things* is portrayed as having great intellect which became apparent, even at a young age. He has the power to see past and the incidents of everyday, to look beyond the borders and barriers of family and gender, and overcome the oppression of women.

Ammu does not get her education properly due to lack of proper amenities. Chacko is her brother. Mammachi is the name of her mother. Pappachi is her father whose temperament is not good. He beats his wife and they suffer meekly. After Ammu's marriage, her husband asks her to live with his English Boss, but she refuses to do so. Being disappointed, she returns to Ayemenem to her parents with her twins. What all she detested a few years back in Ayemenem, she came to terms now with the reality. She lives a miserable life. In her own house she lives as a subsidiary to the wishes of all. Her parents fail to understand her needs and desires. And they behave indifferently with her and to her children. At times her eyes fill with tears when she sees her children, she imagines them like,

“a pair of small bewildered frogs engrossed in each other company. Lolloping arm in arm down a highway full of hurtling traffic” (p 43)

But the Syrian Christians hated her and this thwarted her desire to live there peacefully. Both her children and she stood orphaned. Though they were physically present in the village, they were socially boycotted and isolated. Similarly Velutha, because of his status as an untouchable, remained isolated always and emerged a playmate for the children of Ammu. During short span of time, romance bloomed between Velutha and Ammu. Ammu started viewing Velutha in a strange way. Gradually he lost herself in the world of Velutha. The social constructs of *love laws* were shattered. She lives a miserable life and dies at the age of twenty seven. Ammu desires to leave her maternal home and after taking up a job, she stays with her kids. She dies at Bharat lodge in Alleppey while preparing for an interview.

The church refuses to bury her. Wrapped up in a dusty bed sheet, she is disposed of in the electric crematorium in the presence of Chacko and Rahel.

Duel tendencies are commonly found in the life of man. They determine the course of his life, always remaining in conflicts to each other. In the life of Arundhati Roy, readers may find such conflicts abundantly which are indirectly expressed in the novel at several places. These conflicting forces constitute the opposing forces in the structure of the narrative. Papachi is found torturing his wife always quite brutally. In order to escape from these tortures, Ammachi starts scribbling cooking tips which later prompted her to establish a pickle factory. The story ends with the ruins of the pickle factory. Ammu fell in love with a Bengali drunkard betraying and antagonizing her parents. Deserted by the drunkard, she experienced the agony of remaining husbandless. Her relationship with Velutha quenches her sexual thrust which then gets converted into a sensitive romantic affair. Ammu is a rebel struggling inside her to cross the limits that block Indian women:

“ It was what she had battling inside her- an unmixable mix, the infinite tenderness of motherhood and the reckless rage of a suicide bomber. It was this that grew inside her, and eventually led her to love by night the man her children loved by day” (p 44)

Ammu like Velutha, has to pay a heavy price for transgressing the love laws by having an illicit affair with Velutha. Ultimately she is disowned by the society, separated ruthlessly from her children and faces death. Of all the characters in the novel, Ammu stands indomitable against the hegemonic forces of male oriented society, its cruel tenets and traditions. Many of Raphael's qualities mirror that of her mother, Ammu. Ammu also did not accept the life that was handed to her; rather, she embarked on a journey with a man she loved – an untouchable that begged more trouble than ever anticipated. While her lover had already been from an oppressed caste, Ammu chose the road he had been set upon in order to be with him, and it resulted in her demise. The strong willed mother set an example for her independent daughter, and at a young age, Rahel was able to see past the boundaries of death, circumstance and fate. While Estha, who had lived much the same life as Rahel, he moved

around mutely and lived in a closed-off-world, his twin sister dared to dream and let herself go. She imagined what she could not conjure; she believed what she could not see. Rahel's willingness to see the good in people inherently brings out her feminine qualities, and the relationships she embarks on, much like her mother, reflect this. Her actions showed her determination not to let the world around her shape her and in this, she defies the world altogether.

There is always oppressor and always an oppressed. This universal paradigm is generalized in terms of the Big Things and the Small Things which allies with the symbolism of the lantern and the lamp. On this level of ideas, this would mean more or less, the same thing as Karl Marx's analysis of the moneyed class and the poor people. The former have become rich by virtue of the labours put up the poor. The poor have become poorer because they are not allowed to share the surplus they generated. This could also be viewed in terms of patriarchal and matriarchal structure. Further binaries are implicit too.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The novel thus turns out to be continuous saga in the low- mimetic mode, of the ever, suffering humanity which has been for long, victimized by forces who have enjoyed position, power and language. Once the binaries are created, which novel beautifully does, the implications as well as the suggestive localities keep on multiplying. The novel thus annihilates vast areas of social experience into the multiple layers. Roy portrays her women characters as being torn between traditional boundaries and modern fee zones. No doubt, Arundhati Roy shifted the issues related to women which were till recently in the periphery.

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