

Giving Voice to the Unvoiced: A Study of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract

Premchand, the doyen of Hindi literature, in his Presidential Address of the first meeting of the All India Progressive Writers Conference held in Lucknow in 1936, located the Progressive writing in the domain of socialist philosophy. He read a paper titled "Sahityika Uddeshya" (The Purpose of Literature) and traced a new kind of writing that would help the Indian society to fight against all kinds of inequality and to establish a new social order. The writers who met at this conference pledged to use literature as a weapon against established socio political norms, drawn out traditions, hypocrisy and dreary customs. In their writings, the progressive writers highlighted the condition of the poor and the oppressed and pledged to work for the eradication of inequality in society. The present paper studies Arundhati Roy's approach as an activist author in her Booker winning novel *The God of Small Things*. Her novel is a characteristically progressive work where the author highlights the issues of contemporary relevance including gender discrimination, child abuse, caste politics, class-based subalternity and untouchability. The novel discloses the cavernous gap between the touchables and the untouchables; the exploiters and the exploited, and the powerful and the powerless. It depicts the oppression, struggle and resistance of subaltern. It chronicles the superfluous and malicious behavior against a poor caste male (Velutha) by the upper caste people for his love affair with a lady belonging to upper caste. The paper intends to capture the typical progressive strain in the novel *God of Small Things* to reaffirm the position of the author as a leading author to keep alive the activists spirit in literature.

Key words: Progressive, Untouchability, Subaltern.

The 21st century having egalitarian vision aims at faster, sustainable and more inclusive growth. But under the ambit or project of human rights certain challenges and issues like the widening gulf between rich and poor, powerful and the powerless, oppressor and oppressed, untouchability, unemployment, gender discrimination still persists in India. In spite of modernizing blows marginality in the form of oppressive caste disabilities is a living Indian reality. The Dalits were mostly indigenous people who were traditionally considered at the bottom of the Indian Sanskritic system of social stratification. They were also known as Avarnas meaning thereby those not accepted within fourfold caste system of the Aryans. They were perceived as so polluting that even their touch or shadow would defile the people of the high

castes and hence they were named Achhuta (untouchables). At present they constitute nearly 17% of the population still pinning to get honourable life. Literature being only weapon to combat such social evils helps to create empathy towards untouchables and provides to them a platform to express and assert themselves. The doyen of Hindi literature, Munshi Premchand who presided over the first meeting of the All India Progressive Writers Conference (1936). In his paper "Sahityika Uddeshya" (The Purpose of Literature) he traced a new kind of writing that would help the Indian society to fight against all kinds of inequality and establish a new social order. He says:

The name 'progressive writer' is defective - an artist or a writer is by his very nature progressive. But perhaps it is necessary to use this qualifying word because progress has a different meaning for different people. For us 'progressive' is that which creates in us the power to act; which makes us examine those subjective and objective causes that have brought us to such a pass of sterility and degeneration; and finally which helps us to overcome and remove those causes, and become men once again.... We must, resolutely, give up writing those love romances with which our periodicals are flooded. We have no time to waste over sentimental art. The only art which has value for us today is that which is dynamic and leads to action. (83)

Literature being reaction and criticism of life is not immune from the contemporary socio-cultural, economic and political scenario rather it reverberates the panorama of life. Sufferings of minorities and other marginal voices have found a perfect platform at contemporary literary scenario- be it feminist writings, queer theories, Dalit writings, tribal writings and other fourth and fifth world literary writings. Some worth mentioning writers of the contemporary era who penned down the social issues are Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, Manju Kapoor, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, Aravind Adiga and Mohsin Hamid etc.. The present paper unpacks the social activism of Arundhati Roy through her Booker winning novel *God of Small Things*. It highlights the oppression, struggle and resistance of subaltern. It is an attempt to give voice to the unheard, unsung and unvoiced. The term subaltern came from the writings of Antonio Gramsci. In Indian context, the term gained popularity through the use of it by the Subaltern studies group formed by Ranjit Guha. He takes subaltern into consideration as the subordination based on class, caste, age, gender and office. Roy represented subalternity in a hierarchical structure of power in her novel. She makes a distinction between oppressors and oppressed in the third chapter of the novel and it is being entitled as Big Man the Laltain and Small Man the Mombati. i.e woman, children and untouchable. The novel is set in Ayemenem, a southern state of Kerala where untouchability was practised more rigorously than elsewhere. It depicts the traumatic experiences of an anglophile family through the eyes of one of the fraternal twins Rahel and Estha. The plot of the novel orbits two events: unfortunate and untimely death of Sophie Mol and a forbidden relationship between an untouchable Velutha and a Syrian Christian divorcee woman Ammu. Through this novel, Roy depicts the trio Vellya Paapen, Kuttapen and Velutha the three types of Dalits in Indian society respectively docile conformist, the discontented paralytic and the rebel who moves for equality at the cost of his living. The

novel also shows woman interrogating and transgressing the hegemonic love laws. She deals with the three generations of women from Mammachi to her sister-in-law, Baby Kochamma to her daughter Ammu and then to Rahel.

Practically untouchables are not only found in Hindu religion but sometimes atheists, Islam and Christianity go by caste consideration even when they do not subscribe the discriminative theory of caste system. The untouchables converted to Christianity are known as Rice-Christians. They were just given a little food and some money as an incentive. But it did not take them long to realize that they had jumped from the frying pan into the fire. The novel depicts cross caste conflict. Black crow indicates towards Valutha- untouchable, black in appearance. Bright mangoes suggests Ammu – ‘Mem Sab’ of Valutha – a Syrian Christian lady of the upper caste – though a divorced woman, discarded by her parents, mal-treated by her husband, mother of two children, still bright and blooming young lady. The novelists’ presentation of Dalits is blended with irony. We can see so called touchable who are well placed attempt to be kind and sympathetic to untouchables but their deep rooted prejudices and the fear of losing their supremacy undermine their progressive aims. In the novel a gentleman, Punnyan Kunju, the great grandfather of Estha founded a school for Untouchables as he does not have courage to place them in the same school with the touchables. As Mammachi says, “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” (74). A leader, Comrade K.N.M. Pillai talks about social revolution but he did not refute the allegation of attempted rape in Baby Kochamma’s FIR rather he omitted to mention that Velutha holds the Communist party card. Chacko as a factory owner wants to prevent the growth of real trade union led by Velutha in his factory. An employer, Mammachi recognizes the merits of her employee but attaches more importance to his caste. She pays Velutha less than she would a touchable. Mammachi says, “He ought to be grateful that he was allowed on the factory premises at all, and allowed to touch things that touchable touched. She said that it was a big step for a Paravan” (77).

Vellya Paapen, the oldest of the three untouchables in the novel is an “Old World Paravan’ he had seen the crawling backwards days and his gratitude to Mammachi was as wide and deep as a river in spate because she paid for his glass eye. He takes for granted the social disabilities imposed on the untouchables. He fears for his younger son for his ‘lack of hesitation’ and ‘unwarranted assurance’ He cannot find fault with him. But he resents, “It was not what he said, but the way he said it. Not what he did, but the way he did it....in the way he walked. The way he held his head. The quiet way he offered suggestions without being asked. (76). He saw, “His untouchable son had touched more than touched. Entered. Loved.”(78). As a Paravan and a man with mortgaged body parts he is torn between loyalty and love. Out of fear his body trembled like a man with malaria and he asks, “God’s forgiveness for having spawned a monster” (78) and offers, “To kill his son with his own bare hands. To destroy what he had created” (78).It is because his son and Mammachi’s daughter Ammu have, “made the unthinkable thinkable and the impossible really happen” (256). Mammachi was not ready to hear all this and pushed Vellya with her all strength. She spits on him and he is lying in the slush wet,

weeping, groveling. She shouts and calls him by names like, “Drunken dog! Drunken Paravan Liar!”(256), Amitabh Roy quoted Ranjana Harish in his book who contrasts Vellya Pappen with his younger son Velutha in terms of symbols of mombatti and mirror. In the novel Mombattis stands for “smallness as well as illumination.... All small men are not Mombattis most of them usually are pieces of mirror reflecting Laltain Sahib’s Light” (116). Velutha is a Mombatti who is self-illuminated while Vellya his father is a mirror reflecting the light of Mammachi and Baby Kochamma and symbolizes the docile, conformist section of dalits.

Kuttapen is a discontented paralytic. He could neither read nor write. A black hen in the hut is the only company he has. In fact his physical immobility might be interpreted as being symbolic of his mental state. He is bored with the life of insignificance he is living. He envies mad man who can walk and seems willing to barter his sanity for serviceable legs. This longing for insanity symbolizes his dissatisfaction with stasis. Though he is unable to move but hates to be immobile. But unlike his brother Velutha, he has not moved forward with the times and grasped no progressive ideas.

Velutha the younger son of Vellya Paapen is not a conformist like his father and elder brother. He is transgressor transcending the forbidden territory. His name is ironical because the word Velutha means white in Malayalam but his complexion is black. This conflict between name and reality seems to be indicative of his rebellious nature who yearns to be accepted and recognized like O’Neil’s Black protagonist, Yank, in *The Hairy Ape*. He is an activist of the Travancore –Cochin Marxist labour union which has three demands- an hour’s lunch break in between a nonstop eleven and a half hour’s work, increase in the labourer’s wages and the removal of caste names showing the labourer’s untouchability. It is for the first time under his leadership untouchables demanded not to be called as, “to be addressed as Achoo Para van kelan Para van on Kuttan Pulayan but just as Achoo, or Kelan or Kuttan”(69).

The Orthodox society had imposed its own standard of laws “whom to love” who should be loved and how. And how much” (17). Plenty evidences are available in the Ancient Literature of India which puts a ban for untouchables to love or marry high class woman. Matsya Puran – one of the oldest Purans ban the inter-caste relationship, “If a low caste man wants to marry a high caste girl and does so, would be punished with death. Similarly a high caste woman marrying a low caste man, should be punished with death” (CXXVI 131, II). In case of Valutha & Ammu both had ignored the imposed law as the lust in them fired on both the sides. Ammu became his’ Mem Sab’. Their relationship can be recognized as the attempt of both of them to revolt against “the smug, ordered world” (167). But velutha became the victim of Baby Kochamma’s conspiracy. She fired F.I.R. against him regarding Sophie’s death. The Kerala Police takes him under custody. He was so mercilessly beaten by the police that “blood spilled from his skull like a secret” (P. 320). Not only Valutha, the untouchable but Ammu & her twins are also very brutally and in an unabashed manner behaved by Thomas Mathew. He calls her ‘Veshya’ & her children as illegitimate ones. At police station Mathew taps at her nipples with his baton like some lifeless object. Thus both become the victim of rigid caste system in Ayemenem & naked brutality of the police system and undergo the torture and inhuman treatment. Valutha’s sexual relationship with Ammu cost him his life. He is killed by the touchable boots and Ammu is expelled from Ayemenem by Chacko and thus she is separated

from her dear durlings to die ‘unwept, unhonoured, unsung and unremembered’: Thus lies the end of the two lovers – Valutha – the Dalit & Ammu – his Mem Sab. But Velutha is an embodiment of humanism and real God of Small Things. The subaltern speaks through him. He is suffered physically but he made the upper caste suffer psychologically. He wins Ammu who is a forbidden fruit for him and exposes the vices of Christianity and disappears leaving no trace, no footprints. Thus the present paper shows Roy skillfully fulfills the duties of writer and the social activist. It expresses her disillusionment with the social conditions of postcolonial world in which the untouchables of the past and untouchables within touchable like Ammu gets inhuman treatment. In one of her interviews Arundhati Roy holds the view:

Fiction for me has been a way of trying to make sense of the world as I know it. It is located very close to me this book. It is located in the village I grew up in. if I had to put it very simply, it is about trying to make the connections between the smallest of things and the biggest ones and to see how they fit together.(Interview)

In nutshell we can say the text, *The God of Small Things* under study depicts our microcosm attitude and prevailing stereotypes towards our fellow human beings (untouchables) in our society. The writer has used the literary technique compassion which makes her writing moral and progressive. She says that there is really no such thing as the ‘voiceless’ rather there are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard. This bold portrayal of Ammu and Velutha’s lovemaking is the revolt of the ‘small’ against the “obeisance” of the “Big God”. Their “faith in fragility” and in “Sticking to Smallness”, is Roy’s way of keeping the struggle of the individual against Structure. Order. Complete monopoly, It makes us to learn empathy with the unvoiced as Nietzsche proclaims that “No artist tolerates reality” (Newton121) and according to Italian novelist Umberto Eco “the real literature always talks is about losers...losers are more fascinating” (Manu). It portrays the real picture of our caste ridden society where a change in social set up is needed and needs to be accepted.

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