

Gender Discrimination and class struggle in Arundhati Roy's "The God Of Small Things"



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Abstract: Even after sixty years of Independence, the Indian society is not free from discrimination on the basis of caste, culture, gender and politics. Our present world offer a lot of opportunities to women, women with having a voice in everyday life the business world as well as political life .In spite of this India is male dominated country where women are often seen as subordinate and inferior to men. Patriarchal males to argue that women need to believe women is confined to the home .They believe women is not strong to "go out" into the world . The paper attempts to explore elements of caste discrimination and throws light on struggle of the women against exploitation in a male dominated conservative society. It also aims at analyzing The God of Small Things as a searing commentary on the caste problems and problems faced by the untouchables in an educated society. It explores the role of politics and politicians and its effect on the common men. The novel closes the gap between the untouchables and the touchable, those who are exploited and those who exploit them and the powerful and powerless. Here in this paper, the maltreatment convened to the characters in Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things is discussed and also tries to understand how irrational social prejudices can ruin lives

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The God of Small Things is a novel written by Arundhati Roy about two-egg twins, Esthappen and Rahel, and the pivotal events surrounding the tragic death-by-drowning of their newly acquainted English cousin Sophie Mol. Set in Kerala, India in the post-colonial era of the 1960's,

the God of Small Things brings forward many themes including those of class and caste antagonism, love-laws, and the expectations surrounding those issues.

This is Roy's first novel which won her the Booker Prize in 1997. Considered to be a part of Indo-Anglian literature, Roy has been fighting against the stereotype of "What does it mean to be Indian." In an interview with Salon.com, Roy replied to this question stating, "I think perhaps that the question we should ask is, "What does it mean to be human?" Roy notes that while people are always asking the question, "What is Indian" or "Who is Indian", rarely would someone ask "What does it mean to be American?... or British?" Roy states that in her writing, like every writer, she is trying to make sense of the world around her. She says, "When I write, I lay down my weapons and give the book to the reader.

Using repetition, Roy artistically explores the themes of the novel. "It's all about design to me." says Roy in an interview with Salon.com. She compares her writing to her training in architecture. "In buildings, there are design motifs that occur again and again, that repeat — patterns, curves." The repetition in the novel enhances the themes and plot of the story while using childish language to bring forward themes that might otherwise be difficult to speak about. The twins themselves are a form of repetition as there are two of them, doubles of each other while at the same time opposites: one male, one female; one shy, one outspoken; one (re)returned, one remains. The journeys that the twins encounter throughout their lifetimes reiterates what happened to them during their childhood.

The characters in the story battle with the expectations of their class and caste all throughout their lives. There are Love-Laws from which no one is exempt and one cannot disassociate oneself from the cultural and religious laws of the community. It is these Love-Laws which dictate the events to come and which cause the demise of many of the characters in the story. Ammu, the twins' mother, is divorced from a cross-cultural, cross-caste marriage which leads to the twins getting chastised by their family and community throughout most of their lives. Velutha, an "untouchable" who works for the family, is loved by both the twins by day and their mother by night. Their love for this man causes his own death and eventually to the death of Ammu

. The novel truthfully explores the predicament of the many women in India who are repeatedly repressed irrespective of their caste, religion or education. Roy in this novel engagingly explores the different kinds of women and how their lives are governed by the many laws that rule women at the personal and public level even to this day. In spite of being from an affluent class, the four women in the novel are deprived and oppressed.

The predominant female character is AmmuIpe who is a modern middle class educated woman who divorces her alcoholic husband when he tries to sell her to another man. She does not passively accept her husband's decision and leaves him. In spite of her education, her condition

is no better than the other women in the society thanks to the “wonderful male chauvinistic society” (Roy 1997, 57).

In fact from her childhood, Ammu’s life is dictated by the patriarchal laws set by her father. While her brother, Chacko is proudly sent abroad for further studies, Ammu is forced to remain at home as a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl. (Roy 1997, 38).

Ammu constantly challenges the gender discrimination that she faces with little success. She is undoubtedly smarter than her Oxford educated brother, yet she has no social standing. Even though she constantly rebels against the social norms, she cannot escape the society’s fury that views a divorced woman as a social stigma. As Roy tells us:

...a married daughter had no position in her parents’ home. As for a divorced daughter – according to Baby Kochamma, she had no position anywhere at all. And as for a divorced daughter from a love marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochama’s outrage. (Roy 1997, 45)

This is in sharp contrast to her divorced brother Chacko who enjoys all the freedom and even reminds Ammu that “what’s yours is mine and what’s mine is also mine” (Roy 1997, 57). She is treated as an inferior and even made to stand separately at Sophie Mol’s funeral. Roy writes:

Though Ammu, Estha and Rahel were allowed to attend the funeral, they were made to stand separately, not with the rest of the family. Nobody would look at them. (Roy 1997, 5)

Ammu eventually learns to accept the cruel treatment but does nothing to avoid the quarrels and confrontations. In fact she seems to enjoy them. Challenging her brother, the police, her mother, her aunts and others in her society, Ammu tries her best to fulfill her dreams. She also has no rights to any inheritance and is socially and economically very dependent. When she is repeatedly rejected by her family, she seeks refuge in the untouchable carpenter Velutha. The love affair between them causes further problems in Ammu’s life and she is eventually disowned by her family and isolated from her children and dies a lonely woman. Ammu can thus be seen as yet another “untouchable” within the pure “touchable” Syrian community.

The next female character who also challenges the gender roles in her own way is Chacko’s and Ammu’s mother, Mammachi. Physically abused by her husband, Mammachi is a victim of her jealous husband who tortures and traumatizes her. When her violin teacher praises her exceptional talents, her classes come to an end. In the beginning, Mammachi is docile and submissive and suffers the abuse passively. Even when she is practically blind she does not get any support from her husband. We are told that “Every night he beat her with a brass flower vase” (Roy 1997, 47). But this does not stop her from starting her pickle business and becomes a successful entrepreneur.

. In spite of many limitations, Mammachi tries her best to make a positive change and be independent. When it comes to her two kids, we see Mammachi is partial towards her son and treats her daughter as a Patriarch would. When she discovers Ammu’s affair with Velutha she is

intolerant and treats her as an outcaste. Mammachi's patriarchal roles do not take her very far as her son takes away her pickle factory from her. Chacko replaces Pappachi as the patriarch of the house and dominates his mother. Mammachi however does not offer any resistance against Chacko. She succumbs and even encourages the belief that women need to be submissive.

NavomiIpe more popularly known as Baby Kochamma is the other character from the first generation who is happy to play a submissive role. She is the daughter of Reverend John Ipe and falls in love with an Irish priest called Father Mulligan at a young age. In order to be with him, she goes against the family and gets converted to the Roman Catholic faith. When her dream of marrying the priest is not fulfilled she feels like a "wretched Man-less woman" and spends her life causing havoc in the lives of Ammu, Velutha, and Rahel. Roy tells us:

Baby Kochamma resented Ammu, because she saw her quarreling with a fate that she, Baby Kochamma herself, felt she had graciously accepted. The fate of the wretched Man-less woman. The sad, Father Mulligan-less Baby Kochamma. She had managed to persuade herself over the years that her unconsummated love for Father Mulligan had been entirely due to her restraint and her determination to do the right thing. (Roy 1997, 45)

She too is partial to Chacko and is accepting of his "Men's Needs" whereas hates Velutha for being a low caste Hindu. Even though Baby Kochamma does not challenge the gender roles, her unrequited love for the priest causes her to make life altering changes like going against her family and being a celibate in a society that does not respect single women.

Rahel, Ammu's daughter is the character who challenges the norms of gender in the society the most. In her childhood Rahel faces the brunt of being a child from a single mother and is constantly criticized and looked down by her grandmother, aunt and others. She is later rebellious and does not conform to any of the laws that the society lays down for her. When she is eleven she is expelled from the convent where she studied. She is caught several times for her indecent behavior yet it does not deter her from being rebellious. She sets her House mistress's hair-bun on fire, tries smoking, among other misdeeds. Even her incestuous love affair with her twin brother reveals her resistance towards the social norms that had previously wrecked her life. Unlike her mother who is not allowed to pursue her education abroad, she moves to America and is very independent. Rahel is reminiscent of the author with her wild hair, western clothing, and a bohemian lifestyle. Rahel's marriage and later her divorce to the foreigner, Larry McCaslin also reflects that she is in finally in control of her own life.

Thus Ammu, Baby Kochamma, Mammachi, and Rahel are the four women in the novel who challenge the typical gender roles that are set for them. They are all smart, highly capable yet trapped in the male-dominated society that decided their roles and duties for them. Even though they are never fully emancipated from their miserable conditions, they are not entirely passive either. Caught between the patriarchal norms and traditional values on one hand, and individuality and independence on the other, these female characters are lost yet try their best to fulfill their aspirations.

Besides discrimination based on their gender, the characters in Roy's *The God of Small Things* also face much discrimination because of their caste and culture. Since times immemorial, the unjust treatment meted out to the low caste and the untouchables in India is pitiable. Roy's novel like Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* dares to explore the deep rooted evil of untouchability. Ammu and the untouchable Velutha dare to break the laws of the caste system. Velutha, a highly efficient carpenter works in Mammachi's Paradise Pickles and Preserves Factory. Velutha emphasizes the many boundaries that were prevalent for the untouchables in India. A Paravan by birth, Velutha faces much discrimination both in his personal and public life. Roy writes:

He was called Velutha—which means White in Malayalam—because he was so black... Pappachi would not allow Paravans into the house. Nobody would. They were not allowed to touch anything that Touchables touched. Caste Hindus and Caste Christians. Mammachi told Estha and Rahel that she could remember a time, in her girlhood, when Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan's footprint. (Roy 1997, 73)

We are also told that:

In Mammachi's time, 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. (Roy 1997, 73)

Roy does not shy away from giving her readers many instances of the pathetic conditions of untouchables even in a Christian community that was expected to rise above the differences in birth and caste. In spite of much advancement in technology and education, the grip hold of caste system has not loosened. Even though Velutha is highly skilled, he is not respected and in fact excluded from the society. The irrational belief of caste system overshadowed all his talents and hard work. He is paid lesser than other workers in spite of being better than them. In fact Mammachi ...thought he ought to be grateful that he was allowed on the factory premises at all, and allowed to touch the thing that Touchables touched. She said that it was a big step for a Paravan (Roy 1997, 77)

Restricted from doing a number of things in society, Velutha's affair with a high class lady is unthinkable and highly offensive. They break age old norms and are punished for it by the society who decides "who should be loved and how. And how much." (Roy 1997, 33) Even Velutha's own father is enraged by his son's audacity to commit such a "sin" and even offers to kill his own son to avoid any scandal. He is wrongly accused of kidnapping the children and punished by the authorities brutally. He is treated in an inhumane manner. When they go to arrest him, "they wake Velutha with their boots." (Roy 1997, 308)

Even though the charge is never proved against Velutha he is victimized by the "touchable" policemen. Roy gives us a ghastly description yet highly possible description of the torment. She writes:

His skull was fractured in three places. His nose and both his cheek bones were smashed, leaving his face pulpy, undefined. The blow to his mouth had split open his upper lip and broken six teeth, three of which were embedded in his lower lip, hideously inverting his beautiful smile. Four of his ribs were splintered; one had pierced his left lung which was what made him bleed from his mouth. The blood on his breathes bright red, fresh and fresh and frothy. His lower intestine was ruptured and hemorrhaged, the blood collected in his abdominal cavity. His spine was damaged in two places; the concussion had paralyzed his right arm and resulted in a loss of control over his bladder and return. Both his knee caps wereshattered (Roy 1997, 310).

After such barbaric treatment, Velutha dies during the night. He is invisible and his death “left no foot prints in sand, no ripples in water. No image in mirrors” (Roy 1997, 265). His body is discarded in a pauper’s pit and Ammu is left behind to feel remorse and later she too dies a lonely death at the “viable die-able” age of 31. Both of them suffer terribly for transgressing the love laws that were written for them. It is not only Ammu and Velutha who suffer due to the society’s senseless laws but even the twins Rahel and Estha are caught in the complex web of caste and politics. Even though Velutha offers companionship and love, something that was denied to Ammu, Rahel, and Estha, he is punished brutally.

The God of Small Things is a novel not to be taken lightly. It is a novel that pushes issues that have been eluded throughout most of history and have even led to obscenity charges against Roy in Kerala, where the story takes place, for the controversial nature of the story. Weaving through the playful childish language of the twins and a mixture of Malayalam and English Roy paints a vivid picture of life in rural India where everyday life is combined with class struggles and the battles people face with the Love-Laws. All in all a great novel and a worthwhile read with excellent character development and an intricate plotline.

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