www.TLHjournal.com Literary Herald ISSN: 2454-3365
An International Refereed/Peer-reviewed English e-Journal
Impact Factor: 7.825

The Olfactory Architecture of Caste: Stigma and Trauma in *The God of Small Things*

Aditi Sarkar
Assistant Professor
Government General Degree College
Kalna

Abstract

This paper explores the visceral intersection of caste-based discrimination and the olfactory sense within Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Caste discrimination in India is traditionally analysed through economic, political, or spatial frameworks. However, the sensory dimension—specifically the olfactory—serves as a primary site for the enforcement of "untouchability." In Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, the "smell of an Untouchable" is not merely a physical observation but a social construct designed to institutionalize stigma. This paper argues that olfactory discrimination functions as a tool for "othering," creating a sensory barrier that inflicts profound psychological trauma on the oppressed.

Keywords: Caste-discrimination, Stigma, Intergenerational trauma, Olfactory essentialism

Caste is often described as a system of "graded inequality" (Ambedkar), but its most potent enforcement mechanism is the concept of pollution. While physical touch is the most cited boundary, the olfactory medium acts as a precursor to touch; it is a long-range radar for social exclusion. The "smell" of the Paravan (the Untouchable) is a phantom scent, a social fiction constructed by the Touchable classes to justify the marginalization of bodies. This paper explores how Roy uses the sense of smell to map the topography of stigma and the eventual eruption of trauma. Arundhati Roy's Ayemenem is a landscape defined by its smells: the "sickly sweet" scent of rotting jackfruits, the "peppery" air of the spice coast, and the "damp, mossy" odor of the Meenachil River. Yet, beneath these environmental scents lies a more insidious olfactory map—one that dictates the "Love Laws" of a caste-ridden society.

This study employs a phenomenological methodology, focusing on the lived sensory experiences of characters to decode the structural violence of caste. While traditional literary criticism of *The God of Small Things* often prioritizes the visual "gaze" or the "Love Laws" as abstract legalisms, this paper argues that the laws are primarily enforced through olfactory policing. Using Erving Goffman's theory of Stigma, it can be analyzed how social "spoiling" is mapped onto biological odors. Constance Classen's work on the "cultural history of smell" is used to understand how scents are hierarchical—where "pure" scents are associated with power and "pungent" scents with marginalization. Trauma Theory (Caruth and Luckhurst) offers the concept of Olfactory Anchors to explain the characters' inability to escape the past. Because the olfactory bulb is directly linked to the limbic system, we theorize that the "smell of the river" or the "smell of the pickle factory" functions as a biological archive of trauma. This paper adopts Gopal Guru's framework of "caste sensibilities," moving the discussion from economic exclusion to the "aesthetics of exclusion." This allows to examine how the "scent" of Velutha is used to justify his physical eradication.

ErvingGoffman (1963) defines stigma as an attribute that is deeply discrediting, reducing a person from "whole and usual to a tainted, discounted one." In the context of caste, this taint is often described in olfactory terms- Sensory Essentialism: The dominant caste (Touchables) often assigns a permanent, biological "odor" to the Dalit body. This is not a reflection of hygiene but a social fiction meant to justify exclusion. Despite being a skilled carpenter and a "clean" worker at Paradise Pickles & Preserves, Velutha is perpetually haunted by the perceived "smell" of his caste. Vellya Paapen's fear of his own son's "audacity" is rooted in the knowledge that a Paravan's presence is always a sensory transgression. "Mammachi maintained that she could tell a Paravan by his smell. She said that she could smell them from a distance. Even a clean one. She said that they had a particular smell. A Paravan smell." (Roy 257) This quote is the cornerstone of the olfactory stigma argument. The phrase "even a clean one" is critical; it suggests that Mammachi's sensory perception is entirely decoupled from physical hygiene and is instead a manifestation of Brahmanical habitus. By asserting that the "stink" is inherent and immutable, she employs biological essentialism to justify the social "Othering" of Velutha. In your paper, link this to Goffman's theory: the scent is the "mark" that makes the Paravan's "spoiled identity" visible (or rather, audible) to the Touchable nose before a single word is spoken.Velutha smells of Sawdust, Varnish, Woodsmoke- the scent of "creation" is rejected by the caste "nose"; Mammachi reeks of "Eau

de Cologne" and Fish- the scent of class trying to mask the rot of age and blindness.The History House reeks of Dampness, Dust, BloodThe "crypt" where trauma is preserved and re-experienced.Estha (Post-Abuse) carries "Clean" Soap and Silence- the attempt to scrub away the "sticky" stigma of violation. Baby Kochamma spreads Overpowering Florals- a sensory mask for her internal bitterness and "caste-pride."

Roy famously writes that the "Love Laws" dictate "who should be loved, and how. And how much." These laws are not just legal or social; they are sensory. The tragedy of the novel begins when Ammu, a Touchable woman, recognizes the humanity of Velutha. Their physical union is the ultimate breach of the olfactory barrier. When they meet by the river, the scents of "mangosteens" and "woodsmoke" replace the "smell of caste." However, the society's reaction to their affair is framed as a response to pollution. When Vellya Paapen, Velutha's father, discovers the affair, his reaction is one of olfactory shame. He offers to "kill his son with his own hands" because the "smell" of the transgression has tainted his entire lineage. Here, stigma is contagious. The "smell" of the Untouchable has now "rubbed off" on the Touchable family, necessitating a violent "cleansing." The "Paradise Pickles & Preserves" factory serves as a central metaphor for the preservation of social hierarchies. The factory is filled with the smells of "turmeric, vinegar, and salt"; preservatives. "The air in the factory was heavy with the smell of turmeric and vinegar. It was the smell of things that were dead and had been made to look alive. Pickled. Preserved." (Roy 162) Roy explicitly links preservation with death. This "sickly-sweet" atmosphere is the sensory manifestation of a society that refuses to evolve. To "pickle" is to arrest the natural process of decay—just as the Ipe family tries to arrest the "decay" of the caste system. The trauma is that the characters are forced to live inside this "jar," breathing the preservatives of a stagnant history. Roy suggests that the community of Ayemenem is similarly trying to "preserve" a stagnant social order. The "Illegal" Banana Jam which cannot be sold because it is neither jam nor jell, represents the characters who do not fit into the rigid caste/class categories—like the twins, Rahel and Estha, or Velutha.

Using Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, the smells in Ayemenem are not static odors but is a traumatic trigger. Trauma is "unclaimed" because it cannot be verbalized; instead, it returns

through the body. For Estha and Rahel, the "sickly-sweet" smell of the pickle factory and the "blood-metal" smell of the History House are the languages through which their suppressed history speaks. Trauma, according to Cathy Caruth, is "the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event that is not fully grasped as it occurs." "The History House. With cool stone floors and dim light and the smell of old books and dust. And the smell of the river. And the smell of the police. Khaki. Sweat. And the smell of a trapped animal." (Roy 306) The "Keepers of the Heart of Darkness" (the police) do not just arrest Velutha; they attempt to "exterminate" the smell of his rebellion. When the police beat Velutha, the sensory description focuses on the smell of "sweat and khaki." They represent the "Big Things" that crush the "Small Things" (like Velutha's life).The trauma of this event is imprinted on the twins, Rahel and Estha, through olfactory cues: The Meenachil River, once a place of play, becomes associated with the "smell of death" and "dampness", the "smell of blood" on the stone floor is the olfactory signature of the "Love Laws" being re-enforced. Years later, when Rahel returns to the History House, it "smells of dust and old books," but beneath that is the lingering "smell of a trapped animal." This is the olfactory ghost of Velutha. The house "smells of age." In trauma theory, a "crypt" is a psychic space where a secret is buried. The History House is the literal crypt of Ayemenem. It holds the "secret" of Velutha's murder and Ammu's disgrace. The olfactory medium here functions as a Miasma. The air in the History House is "heavy" and "unbreathable." This reflects the psychological state of the characters who are trapped by their history. They cannot breathe freely because the air is saturated with the "stink" of unacknowledged crimes.

One of the most profound instances of olfactory trauma occurs with Estha at Abhilash Talkies, "Orangedrink Lemondrink" Incident. "He could feel the man's hand on him. A cold, sticky, white-man's hand. The smell of the Orangedrink. The smell of the Lemondrink. The smell of the man. The smell of his own fear." (Roy 104) This passage illustrates the olfactory anchor in trauma. Roy collapses the distance between the external stimulus (the drink) and the internal violation (the hand). The repetition of "The smell of..." mimics the intrusive nature of traumatic memory. For Estha, the "sweetness" of the drink is forever poisoned by the "stigma" of the act. This quote supports your argument that trauma in Ayemenem is not just an event but a sensory "pollution" that the victim carries, much like the perceived pollution of caste. The "sweet, sticky" smell of the carbonated drinks and the "smell of the man's hand" create a sensory map of abuse. Estha feels he has been "polluted" by the man's

touch. This mirrors the caste logic: the victim is the one who carries the "stink" of the crime.Estha's subsequent silence is a refusal to breathe the same air as his abusers. His trauma is stored in his olfactory memory, making the world of Ayemenem unbreathable. Estha is forced to hold the man's penis while drinking the sweet orange drink. The juxtaposition of the "sweet" drink and the "stinking" act creates a sensory dissonance that shatters Estha's psyche. After the incident, Estha becomes obsessed with washing. He is trying to scrub away a scent that is no longer on his skin, but in his mind. This is the "internalized stigma" of the victim.

In theorizing trauma, scholars often distinguish between dissociation (Estha) and hyper-vigilance (Rahel). Roy uses the olfactory medium to ground these psychological states in the material reality of Ayemenem. If Estha's reaction to trauma is to stop the intake of the world (silence and scrubbing), Rahel's reaction is to inhabit the "smell of the wreckage." Returning to Ayemenem after years in America, Rahel does not find a "new" world; she finds a world where the scents of 1969 have been layered over like sediment.Visually, Ayemenem has changed—new buildings, more plastic, the "encroaching" town. However, Rahel's trauma is triggered because the olfactory profile remains the same. The "smell of the river" (the Meenachil) is no longer just water; to Rahel, it is the smell of the "History House" and the "Love Laws." Unlike Mammachi, who uses smell to exclude, Rahel uses it to remember. When she enters the decaying History House, she doesn't recoil from the "stale" air. She recognizes it as the only honest thing left. The "dust and old books" are the physical remains of a suppressed narrative. Estha's trauma, rooted in the "sticky" encounter with the Orangedrink Lemondrink man, results in a state of sensory avoidance. Estha's constant washing of his clothes is a symbolic attempt to remove the "stigma of the Paravan" that his family has projected onto his relationship with Velutha, as well as the "stigma of the victim" from the cinema hall.

The river is described as having a "thin, green smell," a scent of life that is indifferent to the "khaki" scent of the police or the "eau de cologne" of the Syrian Christians. Unlike the factory, which metaphors the violent enforcement of stasis—trying to "freeze" or "bottle" ,which seeks to preserve fruit in a state of perpetual artificiality, the river operates on a cycle of natural rot and renewal. In trauma theory, the river can be seen as the. It carries the "debris" of Ayemenem—the plastic bags, the dead animals, and the secrets of the History

House. For Rahel and Estha, the river is the site of their greatest trauma (the death of Sophie Mol) and their greatest connection to Velutha. The olfactory shift from the "sweetness" of the factory to the "fishy, muddy" scent of the river marks the transition from the curated lies of the family to the brutal truths of history. When Ammu crosses the river to meet Velutha, she is performing a Crossing the Olfactory Rubicon , a "sensory migration." When they lie together, they "breathe the same air." She leaves behind the "stale air" of her ancestral home for the "wild, peppery" air of the riverbank. This crossing is a rejection of the stigma that defines the "Touchable" side of the river as pure and the "Untouchable" side as polluted. "The river smelled of fish and mud and woodsmoke. It didn't know about the Love Laws. It didn't care about who should be loved, or how. It just was. Fluid. Changing." (Roy 338) This quote provides the counterpoint to the factory. The "fish and mud" are honest, natural scents that contrast with the "turmeric and vinegar" of the factory. By stating the river "didn't know about the Love Laws," Roy suggests that olfactory fluidity is a form of resistance. When Ammu and Velutha meet by the river, they are inhabiting a sensory space that is temporarily free from the stigma of the "Big Things."

However, the river eventually becomes a site of "olfactory betrayal." After Sophie Mol's drowning, the river's scent changes for the twins; it becomes associated with the "smell of wet skin and panic." The fluid history they hoped for is "dammed" by the tragedy, and the river itself becomes a highway for the "History House" to exert its violent will. The interplay between the Pickle Factory (Stasis/Stigma) and the Meenachil River (Fluidity/Trauma) reveals the core of Roy's critique. Caste is not just a law written in books; it is a "biological tax" levied on the breath of the oppressed. Velutha is the "God of Small Things" precisely because he inhabits the world of scents that are too small for the "Big Things" to notice—until they do. When the state "scents" his rebellion, they don't just kill him; they attempt to "deodorize" the history he represents. The trauma that Rahel and Estha carry is the realization that in Ayemenem, the "sweetness" of the pickle is always bought with the "blood-metal" smell of the History House.

The olfactory medium in *The God of Small Things* serves as the ultimate indictment of a society that polices humanity through the breath. By synthesizing the "pickled" stasis of the

Ipe household with the "fluid" trauma of the Meenachil River, Arundhati Roy demonstrates that caste discrimination is not merely a social construct but a sensory habitus. The stigma attached to Velutha is not a reflection of his personhood but a "smell" projected by a Touchable class desperate to preserve its own perceived purity. This projection creates a permanent state of trauma for the "Small Things"—Rahel, Estha, and Ammu—who find themselves trapped in an atmosphere where memory and scent are indistinguishable. As the "History House" eventually decays and the "Paradise Pickles" factory fades into obsolescence, the "Love Laws" remain anchored in the sensory psyche of the community. Roy's narrative suggests that to dismantle caste, one must go beyond legal reform or economic redistribution; one must confront the very "airs" we breathe. The tragedy of Ayemenem is a testament to the fact that while laws can be repealed, the "smell" of trauma—preserved in the vinegar of prejudice and the blood of the riverbank—persists as a haunting, atmospheric presence that continues to dictate who may be loved, and how much.

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