



AMMU: A VIVID REFLECTION OF SOCIAL REALISM IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S NOVEL "THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS"

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ABSTRACT

Arundhati Roy is a versatile personality having qualities of both a veteran Author and at the same time a Social activist. She was awarded the prestigious Booker Prize for literature in 1997 for the novel *The God of Small Things* which earned fame for her throughout the world. She has depicted ruthless realities of contemporary social life of India in general and Kerala in particular in her novel. Ammu is one of the central characters in it which is victimized through all the evils rampant in the society. Social realism is reflected in the form of Casteism, Corruption, Capitalism, Androcracy, Industrialism, Untouchability, Gender discrimination etc. Ammu is a vivid and symbolic reflection of social ethos for an average Indian woman. She contains the potential spirit of protest like Velutha and fights till her end.

KEYWORDS : Society, Reality, Evils, Conflict, Sustain

INTRODUCTION:

Arundhati Roy is the Indian social activist and author whose novel *The God of Small Things* won the prestigious Booker Prize for literature in 1997 and earned name and fame throughout the world. She is a versatile writer of Indian sensibility. Though exclusively known for its thematic and stylistic innovations and experimentation on global level, the beauty and strength of the novel *The God of Small Things* lies in the fact that it is undoubtedly rooted in the native soil coloured with Indian contemporary social cultural realities. Roy's compassion for the downtrodden and her indignation towards the exploitation of the frail by the forces of Casteism, Capitalism and Industrialism gave her zest to invest her work with tremendous power and projection for suppression of woman, untouchability, feudalism, and political hypocrisy in a live manner. Ranga Rao in his article "*The Booker of The Year*" rightly observes:

"Roy's book is the only one I can think of among Indian novels in English which can be comprehensively describe as a protest novel. It is all about atrocities against minorities, small thing: children and youth, women and untouchable".¹(p. 13)

Roy views the role of history in an ironic vein. She takes off from where Mulk Raj Anand left in his *Untouchable*. She exquisitely clears the point that conversion to Christianity also failed to relieve the underdog of the society of their misery. The masters changed but the misery continued. If Hindu shunned them as untouchable, Christians too never allowed the converts to share Churches and maintained distance in personal interaction. Exposing their duplicity the novelist writes:

"When the British came to Malabar, a number of Paravan, Pelayes and Pulayas (among them Veluthas' grandfather, Kelan) converted to Christianity and joined the Anglican Church to escape the scourge of untouchability. It did not take them long to realize that they had jumped from the frying pan into the fire. They were made to have separate churches with separate services, and separate priests. They were Christians and therefore casteless. It was like having to sweep away your footprints without broom or worse, not being allowed to leave footprints at all".²(p. 74)

SOCIAL REALISM:

Social realism can broadly be defined as works that present racial and social injustice and economic deprivation through a presentation of characters that are facing such issues. By so doing, social realism protests against such inequalities and injustices. When we consider this in the light of this excellent novel, it is clear that Roy is using social realism to critique a number of different aspects of the contemporary world,

including the caste system that is still having prominent in Indian social structure. *The God of Small Thing* is one of the best examples which represent the socio-political ethos of our society and all those people who are victimized by the forces of history, dead conventions, false pride and respectability, the tyranny of the state and the politics of opportunism and androcentric order. Roy in this novel criticizes through characterization; the system of the gendered oppression and problematizes the association among feminists, liberalists, ideologists, activists and the ideas of 'modernity'. She also portrays a picture of the Marxist political situation in India in general and Kerala in particular.

The life in the novel is divided into two sets of forces, locked in a grim mortal fight. The upper world consists of the burden of history, dead links of tradition, family culture and pride patriarchy and political opportunism... the 'God of Big Things'. The other layer comprises children, insecure women, untouchables, and working people with their struggle for identity and independence, and natural urges and desires...the 'God of Small Thing'. One of the categories of 'Small Thing' Arundhati Roy cares for consists of women.

AMMU: A VIVID REFLECTION OF SOCIAL REALISM:

The setting of the novel is Ayemenem, which now is a part of Kottayam of Kerala in India. *The God of Small Things* portrays a truthful picture of the plight of the Indian women, their great sufferings, care and anxieties, their humble submission, persecution and undeserved humiliation in a male dominating society. It also shows the women's marathon struggle for seeking the sense of 'identity' in totally averse and envious society. The social structure of an average Indian woman is described as full of adverse situations. It can be explicitly seen in some of the women characters like Ammu, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, Rahel and Margarat Kochamma. All these characters have been portrayed very distinctly.

Education in society must be given to both men and women without any gender discrimination. But in the novel the central character Ammu did not get higher education. She became a victim of male- dominated patriarchal society when she was not allowed to pursue her studies. When no suitable marriage proposal came in a responsible time Ammu began to grow desperate. Pappachi, her father agreed to let her spend the summer with a distant aunt who lived in Culcutta. It is there that she met a young man who proposed to her five days after they had met. Ammu accepted the proposal not because she loved him but she wanted to escape from Ayemenem. Then it soon disclosed that she had actually fallen from the frying pan to fire. Disappointment become unbearable when her

husband suspended from job for alcoholism sought to bargain by procuring his beautiful wife for his boss Mr. Hollik, the English manager of the tea estate. Ammu's refusal only aggravated her physical and mental tortures. She had no other alternative but to break off and come back with her twins Estha and Rahel to the very same place from where she tried to run away.

Ammu was an unwanted entity at Ayemenem now. Besides, at the familiar level she did not receive any sympathy at all. And to her mother, her children were a nuisance. In brief at age of twenty four her life came to a standstill, nothing to hope for, nothing to happen, only to spend the long uneventful days languidly one after another, and her rebellious spirit only made her more and more miserable as the days went by. At her home with her family and society, she became virtually "untouchable".

The critical situation begins when Ammu comes in contact with Velutha, a Paravan of untouchable caste. Ammu loves Velutha from a very childhood but not so much for his exceptional talents but for his fiery spirit of protest. On her return to Ayemenem, one day she saw "Velutha marching with a red flag, in a white shirt mundu with angry veins in his neck". (p. 71) And it's strange to think that why is it so that Ammu is drawn towards the fiery spirit of Velutha? Perhaps she wanted to identify her emotion of revolt with that of Velutha. "She loved Velutha heart and soul for his indomitable spirit of protest which she also nursed in her heart. Moreover, while Velutha had held her daughter in his arms, she felt that he is only the giver of gifts, but she has also many gifts to give him. The gift was "her brownness against his blackness, her softness against his hardness and her nut brown breast against his smooth ebony chest". (p. 335) This personal relationship between Ammu and Velutha leads them into illicit sexual relation. Roy writes,

Ammu put out her tongue tasted it, in the hollow of his throat, on the lobe of his ear. She pulled his head down towards her and kissed his mouth". (p. 335)

But this happy moment didn't last long. One day Pappen, Velutha's father, secretly saws their illicit lovemaking and informed it to Baby Kochamma. Consequently, Ammu was locked in a room and Velutha is banished. In her rage, Ammu blames the twins for her misfortune and calls them "millstones around her neck". (p. 253) Being neglected, Rahel and Estha decide to run away. Their cousin, Sophie also joins them. During the night, as they try to reach an abandoned house across the river, their boat capsizes and Sophie drowns. When Margaret and Chacko return from a trip, they see Sophie's body laid out on the sofa.

At this juncture, Mammachi, her mother thought;

She (Ammu) had defiled generations of breeding (The Little Blessed One, blessed personally by the Patriarch of Antioch, an Imperial Entomologist, and a Rhodes Scholar from Oxford) and brought the family to its knees. For generation to come, forever now people would point at them at weddings and funerals. At even baptism and birthday parties. (p. 258)

Another sordid social reality is delineated in Ammu's confrontation with Police Inspector. After Sophie's death, Ammu is summoned to the police station with her twins for further investigation of the case. The Police Inspector behaves in an indecent manner and taps Ammu's breasts repeatedly with his baton.

Behind him there was a red and blue board which said...

Politeness
Obedience
Loyalty

Intelligence
Courtesy
Efficiency (p. 8)

What a gap between words and deeds? The novel reflects the contemporary crux with its dehumanizing attitudes from various Government and Social institutions. The novelist is certainly raising a voice of protest against the ugly forces of social vested interests.

As there was no support from anyone, Ammu left the big Ayemenem house, and "died in a grimy room in the Bharat Lodge in Alleppey, where she had gone for a job interview as someone's secretary. She died alone". (p. 161) Ammu is such an unfortunate woman that even her last rite is not done properly with traditional rituals.

Archana Bhattacharjee rightly remarks:

Ammu is an entirely tragic character tortured and abused by the police, family and politics. Ammu's character presents the picture of the average women in the present day social set-up. If we minutely dive deep into her character, we detect three important features. First she is a lady of chastity and purity. It is this virtue which makes her divorce her husband. Secondly, she has a great capacity to endure sufferings upon sufferings. Thirdly she believes in the theory of etiquette and manner, decorum and decency. She never harbors any grudge in her heart against anybody.³ (p. 70)

Through the character of Ammu, Arundhati Roy tries to expose the hypocritical moral code of society, which makes a great difference between men and women. Ammu challenges the androcentric notions of society when she avoids the surname after her divorce. Estha and Rahel have no surname because Ammu considers it apt to revert to her maiden name, though she feels that choosing between her husband's name and her father's name does not give a woman much of a choice.

CONCLUSION:

The God of Small Things is undoubtedly a superb document of social ethos. Through its character, events and incidents, Arundhati Roy has depicted so many social realities. The realities which are deeply rooted in the heart of the society, the realities which are open and in front of everyone's eyes, which nobody is willing to accept. Arundhati Roy has depicted the seamy side of the society in this novel and tends to purge the evils of society such as gender bias, untouchability, capitalism and corruption in political and social levels. Arundhati Roy defines Indian values, Indian culture and Indian society which collectively stand for ethos with its beauty and ugliness through *The God of Small Things*. The novel is deeply rooted in the socio-cultural ethos of Indian soil and hence it gives identity and authenticity to her novel.

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