



## Social Realism in Arundhati Roy's Novel "The God of Small Things"

### KEYWORDS

Paravan , Caste Discrimination, Taboos , Veshya

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**ABSTRACT** Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* can be seen as one of the most powerful novels on a definite social problem, that of the oppression of the down-trodden, also touching upon related problems. It problematizes the oppressive machinery based on caste discrimination and collusion with it of certain political forces. The researcher aims to highlight the social discriminations which the characters suffer throughout the novel. The most bitter attack is carried in the novel against the sham lives lived out by the politicians whose double standards of behaviour and talk are exposed by the author.

Born on November 24, 1961, and brought up in Kerala, Arundhati Roy left home at 16 and lived in a squatters' camp in a small hut within walls of Delhi's Ferozshah Kotla selling empty beer bottles. She joined the Delhi School of Architecture where she met her first husband Gerard Da Cunha. They eked out a living, selling cakes on the beaches of Goa for around seven months. Back in Delhi, she was cast in the role of a tribal bimbo in a film, *Massey Saab*, by Pradeep Krishen, her second husband. Following the publication of her novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997), Roy has come out strongly on several contemporary sociopolitical issues in her subsequent writings: "The End of imagination" (1998), "The Greater common Good" (1999), "The Algebra of Infinite Justice" (2001) and *Power Politics* (2002). *The God of Small Things* won the Booker prize in 1997.

Arundhati Roy is one of the foremost novelists of this tradition, showing exceptional awareness of the social crises and sensitivity to the problems. Arundhati Roy uses a compressed language, a thrifty style to foreground the essential predicament of the socially oppressed. Such is the extraordinary quality of her narrative art. When in Chapter 1 the Kottayam Police inspector Thomas Mathew addresses Ammu, his lecherous gaze expresses his authority making her wince. Here is the brief, naked truth of his coercive behavior:

"He started at Ammu's breasts as he spoke. He said the police knew all they needed to know and that the Kottayam police didn't take statements from Veshyas or their illegitimate children... 'if I were you,' he said, 'I'd go home quietly'. Then he tapped her breasts with his baton Tap, tap ..... (P.8)

Arundhati Roy lays bare the way sex is used by those in authority to cow down the defenceless, an age-old device that has little changed even in a democratic rule. There could be nothing more humiliating than to be called Veshya (Prostitute) for a respectable woman. Another instance where sex is used to show superior authority is the Estha-Orange drink-Lemon drink man episode in chapter 4. The casual manner in which the stall-keeper indulges in it indicates the common practice, but in this very casualness one can see lurking the dark oppressive powers.

Reference to Chako's indulgences with Women workers over looked by the Ayemenem House women as 'Men's Needs' is another similar example which expresses the way sex becomes an expression of certain types of social power, ranging from baton-swinging police officer to a communist sympathiser like Chako to an ordinary cold drink seller. It silences the weak in a way no other physical exercise of power can do.

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shame lives lived out by the politicians whose double standards of behaviour and talk are exposed by the author. Kerala has always been considered as a socially aware state, its awareness level being the highest among all the states of India, with a cent percent literacy rate and a tradition of Marxist politics dominating. Curiously it is also a state where the roots of religious orthodoxy and conservatism go deep and spread over greater part of social life. The rural environment is a significant element, it builds up the lives of the villages at different strata, criss-crossing each other and exerting influences that build up the drama with all its stresses and tensions. Arundhati Roy uses the literacy devices in a suitable manner to create the rural landscape. Her descriptions are not drawn innocently on pastoral

vignettes; they add up to basic framework of value conflicts that are sharply brought under focus by her.

Apart from the straightforward realistic portrayals, there are woven by the author intricate patterns by employing several stylistic devices, of remarkable aesthetic beauty that also helps the reader get into the hidden significance of the picture being presented. These passages of unparalleled verbal beauty sharpen the reader's vision of the essential realities of the lives of village folks.

The lot of the socially deprived, the untouchables, has occupied Indian English writers centrally and remarkable works have been written on the plight of these lowest of the lowly. However in the novel the untouchable protagonist Velutha reaches out in different directions to touch a number of other issues. He is the God of Small Things, in fact the 'inversion of God' as the author herself says. The untouchable represents taboos of all kinds.

Hierarchical structure of power and oppression at various levels in patriarchal societies are explored in the novel. The character of Velutha has been powerfully drawn in terms of his robust physique and in-born talents for making wooden objects. "He was like a little magician". He could make intricate toys - tiny windmills, rattles, minute jewel boxes out of dried palm reeds, he could carve perfect boats out of tapioca stems and figurines on cashew nuts" (P.74). Not only this, he had exceptional talents for many other things. He mended radios, clocks, water pumps. "Mammachi often said that if only he hadn't been a Paravan, he might have become an engineer".

Mammachi is quite clear about how to draw lines, and see that both the Paravans remain behind them. In the factory Velutha's talent as carpenter could hardly be ignored - he was always in demand, ever wanted by the factory for various

jobs which fact was silently resented by the other workers. But here also the caste discrimination is clearly seen:

“To keep the others happy, and since she knew that nobody else would hire him as a carpenter. Mammachi paid velutha less than she would a Touchable carpenter but more than she would a paravan. Mamachi didn't encourage him to enter the house (except when she needed Something mended or installed).She thought that he ought to be grateful that he has allowed on the factory premises at all, and allowed to touch things that touchables touched. She said that it was a big step for a paravan”

Velutha's subjugation is multiple. He is born Paravan, son of a paravan, “ a community in Kerala, subjected to extreme ignominy through ages”. To escape the inhuman humiliations Velutha's forefathers had embraced Christianity. But the Christians themselves had adopted, as a matter of natural form of adaptation, the strict and unavoidable caste-system; thus the paravans had only received the status of “ untouchable Christians with separate church and priest”.

#### REFERENCE

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