Visting the Corridors of Caste System and Tapping the Suffering of the Untouchables in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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**ABSTRACT**

Caste is the most confused knot of all social problems in India. The division of society into so many castes and sub-castes comes in the way of the unity and integrity of the nation. Casteism is a blind group loyalty towards one’s own caste or sub-caste which does not care for the interests of other castes and their member. It hinders the spirit of democracy. Ambedkar in his works such as *Caste in India* and *Annihilation of Caste* had dealt exhaustively and pointedly with the evils of caste system. Arundhati Roy in *The God Of Small Things* has dealt with the ravages of caste system that have inflicted our society. The superfluous and malice behavior summoned out to the untouchables in India have been an issue of enormous concern. Caste system affects the fibre of society by making people prejudiced. Keeping in view humanity above all, we should be conscious about the dynamics of caste discrimination which should not render us blind.

This paper attempts to reflect the condition of untouchables in southern India through a critical study of Arundhati Roy's Booker’s prize winning novel *The God of Small Things*. Arundhati Roy is an Indian novelist, activist and a world citizen. Roy has bequeathed the problem of Dalits in Indian context. Roy discloses the cavernous gap between the touchables and untouchables; the exploiters and the exploited; and the powerful and the powerless. Roy has bought the astringent legitimacy of untouchability before the world through *The God of Small Things*.

The caste system in India is an important part of Indian tradition and dates back to 1200 B.C. The term "caste" was first used by Portuguese travelers who came to India in the sixteenth century. There are three thousand castes and twenty five thousand subcastes in India, each related to a specific occupation. These different castes fall under four basic Varnas; Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. Arundhati Roy in her novel *The God of Small things* highlights the atrocities against the lower caste, woman and untouchables. Roy projected the political, social and cultural issues which constitute the fibre of Indian life. According to Opler Morris, "Caste is hereditary and endogamous. It regulated social intercourse, is graded in rank, and has an assembly or governing body which regulates its internal affairs".

The novel *The God of Small Things* is a story of "dizygotic" twins, Estha and Rahel, set in a small town; Ayemennem of Kerela. on a fateful day, the story takes a tragic turn when it is revealed that their mother “Ammu”, a divorcee, has an illicit relation with an untouchable, named Velutha. The subsequent events destroyed the family and shattered the childhood of Estha and Rahel. This domestic drama brings the social-political background of Indian society; particularly its caste system which outlaw intercaste relationships and the marginalization of untouchables into the lime light. Roy projects in her novel a constant struggle between the love laws and Indian laws. Roy criticizes the traditional values of a caste ridden, gender biased Keralite community, where "small man the Mombatti"(Roy 88) is under the control of "Big man the Laltain"(Roy 88).

Caste system assigns task to individuals on the basis of social status of the parents and not on the merit of the individual. Ambedkar viewed Varna system as class because an individual is not treated on his or her merit but as class like a member of a Brahmin or shudra or dalit.. Arundhati Roy, a great champion of the cause of Dalit and the deserted woman, points out those unnoticed shades of social problems, which generally escape the eyes of social scientists. The members of untouchable castes are not allowed to mix with the members of lower castes. Roy also throws light on inhumane treatment given to Untouchable in the following lines:

In her girlhood, when paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christian would not defile themselves by accidently stepping into a Paravan's footprint... Paravan's were 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 73-74)

In the novel, Velutha, an untouchable who works in a factory is paid less money for his work because he is an untouchable. Roy in the novel shows how cruel such a system can be. It is a belief that being an untouchable is punishment for having been bad in the former life. By being good and obedient, an untouchable can obtain a higher rebirth. Roy projects about Velutha, “It was not entirely his fault that he lived in a society where a man’s death could be more profitable than his life had ever been” ( Roy 267). In Ayemennem, there are two schools for the two sections of the population. The Tender Buds Nursery school for the untouchables and for the touchables there was the Mother's Milk (a girl's name) School. Untouchables have been subjugated and silenced. Inhuman hatred, exploitation,
subjugation, humiliation, social injustice and violent attack have been inflicted upon them. Ammu, the lover of Velutha, inspite of her high caste suffers at the hands of rigidity of caste system. We can say that defying the caste system is not possible even for the upper caste. Suketa Mehta projects the plight of upper caste, "It is difficult to move down the caste ladder as it is to move up". Ammu faces the hostility of family and law on the grounds of choosing a life partner, who is an untouchable. Ammu realizes that she has been responsible for the death of her lover, Velutha and consequently dies alone in a lodge.

Velutha transgresses the established norms of society by having an affair with a woman from high caste. Despite the fact that Velutha is a highly talented person, yet what he gets in his life is social exclusion. He fails to understand why his father Vellya Paapen scolds him for his love affair with Ammu, a high status woman; and is against this social discrimination. On hearing about this love affair, Baby Kochamma conspires with the inspector and Velutha is put behind the bars and he is severely beaten. Roy also describes the policeman violent actions against an untouchable as being done out of fear; "civilizations fear of nature, man's fear of women, power's fear of powerless"(Roy 292). The division between the touchable and untouchable is so ingrained that Velutha is seen as a non-human. The ultimate outcome of this love is tragic death of an untouchable. Roy describes the death of Velutha, "He left no footprints in sand, no ripples in water, no image in mirrors"(Roy 265). Velutha's dead body was discarded in a pauper's pit where the police dump their waste.Caste system not only dictates one's occupation but dietary habits and interaction with members of other castes as well. The jobs considered polluting and impure are reserved for dalits such as removing human waste, dragging away and skinning carcasses, tanning leather and making shoes.

Roy's portrayal of the plight of untouchable is very near to that of Mulkh Raj Anand. His characters too fight for the existence in society. Inspite of all the great virtues in Velutha, he does not get congenial treatment in society, only because he belongs to lower caste. In such congenial times, Religion conversions become common when the lower strata embrace other religions in order to get social status. Ambedkar in this context has stated, "It is not possible to break caste without annihilating the religious notions on which it is founded"(Writings and Speeches 74). Velutha whose grandfather embraced christianity and joined the Anglican church to avoid the stain of untouchability; remains to be an untouchable in so called casteless Christian community. Even these conversions fail to provide esteemed status. Roy points;

When the British came to Malabar, a number of Paravans... 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 fire, they were made to have separate churches, with separate services, and separate priests. After Independence they found they were not titled to any Government benefits like job reservation or bank loans at low interest rates, because officially, on paper, they were christians and therefore castless (Roy 74).

Although The God of Small Things takes place in 1969, the caste system is still present in India, especially in rural areas. Caste also imposes many restrictions on women; for example, on education, on participation in religious discussions, on participation in politics, and so forth. Government programmes and quotas have tried to raise the living standards of untouchables by reserving places in the legislature, government jobs, and schools. Roy has justly put the issue when she says, "Change is one thing. Acceptance is another"(Roy 279).

Roy tries to raise awareness about this social system that has haunted the Indian society for decades and which continues till today. We are left wondering if the caste system will ever be abolished and how many invisible Veluthas will it take to realize that we are humans first irrespective of our caste and culture. Roy thus moves the story about the Indian caste system, the role of communism in Kerela, and the love laws that govern the characters serve to remind us of many changes that need to be brought. Roy has aptly commented on the barbarous treatment of the untouchables by the elite people, "Fifty years after independence , India is still struggling with the legacy of colonialism, still flinching from the cultural insult...we are still caught up in the business of "disproving" the white worlds definition of us"(Roy 73-74).

Caste does not result in prosperity, it has only degraded the spirit of democracy. From time to time, social reformers and thinkers have tried to eradicate this evil but it is a deep rooted problem. The caste system cannot be eradicated without changing the mindset of the people. Illiteracy and ignorance are the forces behind this discrimination, which makes people conservative and superstitious. Hence they don't accept the social change. The key to this problem lies in the creation of a strong public opinion against it. Educated youth, scholars, thinkers should come ahead to fight this social evil. Casteism is like a cataract that blocks our vision regarding progress of all and ingrains in our mind the seeds of hatred and biasness. We can see that untouchability is still being practised in Indian society. Arundhati Roy did a commendable job by exposing the hypocrisy of society which is caste ridden.

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