



EXPLORING SOCIAL ISSUES IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S 'THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS'

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ABSTRACT:

The present research paper is an attempt to study some major social issues in Arundhati Roy's 'The God of Small Things'. Arundhati Roy is one of the foremost Indian English Novelist, showing significant awareness of the social issues and sensitivity to the problem. In her masterpiece novel 'The God of Small Things' she explores social concerns like untouchability caste segregation and exploitation of women in the male-dominated society. The novel deals with the life of untouchables and women as a subaltern facing various problems by the higher class as well as male patriarchy. Velutha, the untouchable young man transgresses the established norms of society by engaging in a love affair with a woman of high cast. The result of this transgression is the tragic death of Velutha by the hands up Kerala state police. It also shows that the untouchable gets severe punishment despite of not committing any crime. The novel also focuses on Ammu who is betrayed by her husband and humiliated in her parents' home, falls in love with the untouchable and finally dies in a hotel's dirty room. Arundhati Roy reflects the social issues of caste and gender discrimination by skilfully portraying the characters of Velutha and Ammu who struggle for their survival in the oppressive society.

Keywords: *Untouchable, Caste System, Oppression, Gender inequality, Women, Society.*

INTRODUCTION :

Arundhati Roy is a renowned post-colonial Indian English novelist to have won The Booker Prize for her masterpiece Novel, 'The God of Small Things' which was published in the year 1977. It is her debut novel and deals with the story of a Syrian Christian family from Kerala, exploring the themes of social discrimination, class system, cultural tensions, exploitations of women, forbidden love, betrayal, childhood trauma, political corruption etc. Arundhati Roy is deeply involved particularly those concerning socially marginalised people. The novel deals with the story of an untouchable character Velutha, who has been since a long time exploited by the upper cast people, simply because he belongs to the so-called lower caste. In 'The God of Small Things' Arundhati Roy skilfully articulate the pain and sufferings of the marginalised and down trodden people in the contemporary Indian society. The novel is set in

Ayemenem, a small town of Kerala state and revolves around a Syrian Christian family. The novel has an autobiographical touch as the main characters Ammu and Rahel are modelled after author's mother and the author respectively. These two characters embody women's struggle for female freedom and autonomy. The novel explores the hierarchical structure of power and oppression at various levels in the patriarchal society. Velutha's character is beautifully portrayed in terms of his robust physique and skills as a carpenter with an engineer's mind. Though Velutha is a multi-talented person, he could not leave impression on the sand of time as he is untouchable. His inborn talent does not get any recognition because of his lower caste background. Mammachi rehired Velutha as the carpenter in her factory and put him in charge of general maintenance. As a result of this, other touchable factory workers get annoyed.

Mammachi paid him less than she would pay a touchable carpenter. He was not allowed to enter Mammachi's house except she needed something to be repaired. The caste system was crueller in Velutha's father's times. Velutha was living a deeply frustrated life as he was receiving humiliation despite of his exceptional talents and skills. But his meeting with Ammu makes his life worth living. He had known her as a girl a year ago but now she was a mother of twins. Velutha and Ammu gets attracted to each other as both of them were the victims of exploitation and humiliation. They fall in love with each other. They were well aware of the fact that their end would be brutal after crossing the boundaries of the caste system. Untouchables could not even touch women of high cast and they were having a love affair that could cost their lives. They spend time with each other on the banks of Meenachal river. Tragedy happens when Sophie Mol dies and Velutha is accused for her death and he is killed by the Kerala state police. Velutha could never co-exist peacefully with the touchable community as the stigma of untouchability was attached to him. Arundhati Roy has created a powerful character in Velutha. He is a commentary on the age-old orthodox prejudices and values that perpetuate the unjust caste system, denying the basic joys and comforts of life to untouchables. The cast system is one of the central issues in the novel and it is represented to the forbidden love between Ammu, a Syrian Christian woman from high cast and Velutha a Paravan (untouchable). Their love affair challenges societal boundaries and Velutha's tragic death proves how the caste system continuous to control the freedom of the marginalised people.

Arundhati Roy has exposed patriarchal domination through the struggle of female characters in the novel. As a divorced woman, Ammu faces humiliation and alienation in the male dominated orthodox society. The

unfulfilled life of baby Kochamma also represents the suppression of female desires. The male dominated society marginalizes women who defy social expectations. The novel clearly reveals that women are the victims of both familial and societal control. Ammu, a mother of Rahel and Estha is a symbol of women oppression in the patriarchal society. She suffers mentally, physically and sexually. She emerges as a sad and much wronged character in the novel who wants to have her own way in life but is mercilessly suppressed. Since early childhood, she had been a mute witness of Pappachi's violence against Mammachi. Arundhati Roy has portrayed the character of Pappachi as a sadist who delighted in inflicting mental agonies on his wife. When Mammachi received beatings from Pappachi, Ammu was a small girl. Sometimes, Pappachi would beat Ammu, the little girl with iron-topped riding crop. Thus, Ammu had witness brutalising masculine power from the early years of her life. At the age of eighteen, Ammu decides to leave her home against the wishes of the entire family. She goes to Calcutta on some pretext and gets married to a man who is an Assistant Manager of a Tea Estate. But this marriage proved to be a wrong decision in her life as her husband was alcoholic and self-centred. He wants to push Ammu into the arms of his boss for the shake for promotion. Ammu breaks her disastrous marriage and returns back to her parents' home. She gives birth to the twins- Rahel and Estha. But her life becomes more difficult, as a divorced woman has no place and respect in the traditional Indian family. Ammu was neglected, ignored and humiliated at her parents' home. Ammu bears everything with patience. Then she meets Velutha and gets attracted to him. She doesn't care about his being an untouchable. Velutha was an attractive man and he was fond of her children. They engaged in a relationship and were leading a happy life after a lifelong humiliating phase of

their life. This act shows that she rises above the drawn lines and rebels against the social oppression. Her love for her children is unwavering. After Velutha's miserable death. She once again leads a miserable life. She is exiled from home and seeks jobs in anonymous places. She fights bravely against the circumstances but tired, exhausted and defeated, she is found dead in a hotel's room. Even the church refuses to give her burial and this is the ultimate humiliation of Ammu, a woman with courage and strong will. She produced a commendable fight till her last breath.

Thus, the sufferings of Velutha and Ammu throughout the novel clearly shows that the untouchables and women are the victims of rigid caste system and gender discrimination which is prevalent in the Indian society. Roy's novel also explores Childhood trauma as a social issue. The twins-Rahel and Estha, bear the scars of a traumatic childhood experiences which reverberates through their adult lives. Arundhati Roy has effectively depicted child abuse as a commentary on how innocence is often destroyed by the cruelty and neglect of the adult world. The novel also explores the issues of political corruption and social hypocrisy in the postcolonial India. The state police who are expected to be the protectors of the innocent and weak, act as an instrument of caste oppression. The powerful people misuse their political power to oppress lower caste people. Marxist ideology is

used for personal gain by people like Comrade Pillai who joins hands with the cruel oppressors of the untouchable Velutha.

CONCLUSION:

To conclude, we can say that Arundhati Roy's 'The God of Small Things' is essentially a story of those men and women who have been relegated to the margins of society. Velutha and Ammu had to pay a heavy price for being born either as an untouchable or a woman. Velutha as an untouchable, face insurmountable barriers due to the caste system in the traditional Indian society. Similarly, Ammu as a woman struggles against the patriarchal system that limit her choices and freedom. The novel critique the oppressive structures like age-old caste system and male hierarchy by exposing their devastating impact on individual's freedom and self-expression. It also deals with childhood trauma and political corruption in the post modern Indian Society.

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