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THE PLIGHT OF A LACERATED SELF IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S
THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

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ABSTRACT

Untouchability is one of the greatest social evils our country has witnessed since time immemorial. This paper addresses the tragedy of a Dalit voice as a victim of the agents of oppression prevalent in socio-cultural reality of Indian society. It intends to reawaken the crude realities that the 'voices' are silenced by the strong impositions of the society and any oppressed who dares to break the 'silence' is perished in the fire of either religion, tradition, destiny or caste system. 'Velutha' in Arundhati Roy's "The God of Small Things" is one such lacerated voice who lives at the mercy of the forces of hegemony and caste hierarchy. In the process of breaking this imposed 'silence' Velutha suffers uncountable agonies of segregation and subjugation. Velutha the untouchable Paravan meets his death with the inhuman treatment of the society which is neither repented nor resented by anyone. This paper is not just a literary work about the untouchable Velutha but a pathetic portrayal of subaltern voice predicaments in general at the backdrop of invidious nature of traditional power-relationship and caste system.

Keywords: Untouchability, Subaltern voice, Marginalisation, Caste hierarchy, societal attitude

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"Art properly so called is no recreation; it cannot be learned at spare moments, nor pursued when we have nothing better to do. It is no handiwork for drawing room tables, no relief of the ennui of boudoir; it must be understood and taken seriously, or not at all."

-Ruskin

In the review of *Asian Age*, 'Roy handles the shifting surfaces of past and present with extraordinary fineness and delicacy, producing a controlled, intricate narrative structure through which the themes of love, spite, betrayal, hatred and guilt run like a spider's web. A remarkable achievement...' In the review of *Independent*, 'The novel is an ancient drama played out against an unmistakably modern backdrop. It turns the clash of tongues and histories in Kerala into the motor of its comedy, its lyricism and its fine intelligence. And in doing so, it makes the remarkable Arundhati Roy a fitting standard bearer for the immensely rich literature of India today.'

The God of Small Things, the prestigious Booker Prize awarded novel in the year 1997 by Arundhati Roy not only showcases her original and new style but also reawakens the social consciousness. It represents the antinomy between 'Big man the Lantern' and the 'Small man the Mombati'. Here Small signifies the individual, the vulnerable, the victim in the hands of the exploiter and Big signifies the powerful forces which could be tradition, caste or society and the people who represent them. The lantern is well protected with a glass against any strong wind. But the Mombati has no protection and support and can easily be blown out. Through these fine connotations this literary portrayal arouses one's sense of pity towards the mombatis- the downtrodden, the dalits, the marginalised.

Velutha is a man with purity and simplicity, a man who has nothing to do with decency, decorum and etiquette. His language and deportment are characterised by a 'quiet' firmness and conviction. His name Velutha means white that stands for purity in Malayalam while the complexion of his body is black. In Indian context, the skin complexion plays a significant role, as an index to one's caste status. A fair complexion is generally equated with a high caste. Velutha is a Paravan by caste, the lowest in the caste hierarchy and actually an untouchable. When Velutha goes to his master's house with his father to deliver the coconuts plucked from the trees, they are not allowed to step in as they would pollute everything. This showcases the tragedy of the subaltern voice at the backdrop of invidious nature of traditional power-relationship and class structure of the society.

"When paravans were expected to crawl backward with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmin and Christians wouldn't defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a paravan's footprint. In Mammachi's time, paravans, like other untouchables were not allowed to walk on public roads, not allowed to cover their upper bodies, not allowed to carry umbrellas. They have to put their hands over their mouths when they spoke to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed." (73-74)

Thus untouchability is that social disease which creates contagion in our social structure.

Though Velutha is an untouchable, an outcast, he is gifted with many virtues and potentials. He is an excellent mechanic and a skilled craftsman. For his efficiency he is employed in his master's factory. He stands apart from others of his class and is also educated. He knows how to make intricate toys, tiny wind mills, rattles, minute jewel boxes out of tapioca stems. He knows more about the machines than anyone in the factory. He has his own set of tools and a distinctly 'German design sensibility'.

In spite of all these significant virtues Velutha does not receive any sort of respect or proper treatment neither from the society nor his father who is strongly dead against any type of education or advance knowledge in a Paravan. A sense of unpleasantness is grown between Velutha and his father. In the factory also the fellow workers are not so happy to see him because of castism. Velutha makes himself involved in the activities of the communist party. Here also his touchable party workers envy him of his efficient ways and try to plot against him using the weapon of untouchability. In order to make them happy

Velutha is paid less than the touchable workers. Discrimination on the basis of class, complexion or caste hierarchy is an inhuman sin. The similar plight takes place in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) which shows a day in the life of Bakha, a sweeper who has suffered the unpalatable remarks from the society and is miserably abused by others just because he cleans the latrines and in the eyes of the society it is a degenerated piece of work.

Tragedy befalls Velutha to the peak when he comes in contact with Ammu, a divorcee with two kids discarded by the family and the society, nobody to take care of them. Velutha takes interest in teaching the kids boating, fishing, swimming and Ammu takes delight to see his pure concern and involvement in her kids. An intense passion of love develops between the both, Velutha the untouchable and Ammu the touchable which is dead against the attitude of Marxism and Socialism. Both of them have forgotten the ban "who should be loved, and how and how much." (17) According to this the untouchables are not allowed to love or marry upper caste women. An untouchable's affair with a touchable woman is not granted in rural India in any community. Even no untouchables would dare to do so as they know its tragic consequences. But Velutha develops a sense of love for Ammu and even the same passion is found in Ammu for Velutha.

"Clouded eyes held clouded eyes in a steady gaze and a luminous woman opened herself to a luminous man. She was as wide and deep as a river in spate. He sailed on her waters. She could feel him moving deeper and deeper into her. Frantic. Frenzied. Asking to be let in further. Further stopped only by the shape of her. The shape of him. And when he was refused, when he had touched the deepest depths of her, with a sobbing, shuddering sigh, he drowned." (p.337)

Velutha becomes a miserable victim of its punishment in the police custody. He is arrested with a false allegation of rape and abduction. He tries a lot but does not get any help or support from anyone. In spite of being a loyal and devoted party worker he fails to get any help from his party which stands for Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. Being a sincere, hardworking and honest factory worker he does not get support either from his master or co-workers.

Velutha is beaten mercilessly and brutally by the touchable policemen although his crime is not proved. He is not given a chance to speak. When Ammu comes to the police station to give a clear picture of everything and make Velutha free from guilt, she is ill treated by the touchable policemen with vulgar words and gestures. She is being addressed as a prostitute and her children illegitimate. How long can an untouchable man sustain against the touchable powerful forces of the society. Ultimately the mombati is blown out. Velutha dies and Ammu's family is scattered.

The title of the novel, *The God of Small Things* can be interpreted in a number of ways. The small things could be referred to the world of small creatures or insects for which man is considered as God. In a larger canvas of the universe which consists of only small things, Almighty could be considered as God. While looking at a reference to the life of Velutha, one gets the impression of a virtuous man having all potentials and good will for others who could be considered as God, a 'Holy Ghost'.

Strangely, the person that Margaret Kochamma never thought about was Velutha. Of him she had no memory at all not even what he looked like.

Perhaps this was because she never really knew him, nor even heard what happened to him.

The God of Loss.

The God of Small Things.

He left no footprints in sand, no ripples in water, no image in mirrors. (p.264-265)

Thus, Velutha is transformed into a supernatural being in the history of creation and mankind.

Untouchability is a century's old, deeply rooted orthodox society's inhuman belief. According to the superstition, "a touchable would defile if he would touch an untouchable." It is very penetrating to accept the fact though the Indian spirituality depicted in the Vedas, Upanishads and Purans have emphasised on "Human equality, Enlightenment, love and kindness not only to human beings but to every living creature, this piece of spirituality remained untouchable by the Society. It is such a social evil that is a disgrace to the humanity.

At the end of the 20th century when the whole world is talking about growth, prosperity, globalisation, peace and brotherhood, the wings of untouchability has stretched to its full length in the democratic secular India. The deeply rooted hate, prejudice and discrimination towards untouchables are still practised. Though many laws are amended in the constitution, they are only on paper. Though many political parties raised their voice against this crime, everything is for the namesake. They use the arrow of untouchability not for the upliftment of the downtrodden but as a ladder for their own political growth and glory.

Before drawing a concrete margin in the mental framework between the touchable and the untouchable let one perceive them as an independent individual, a wonderful creation of God, to have come to this world in the pursue of his dreams, ambitions, making the best use of the potentials and entitled to complete liberty of expression. But it has been found again and again that in case of touchables these are quite achievable but for an untouchable it remains only as a dream. If any untouchable tries to make his dream come true, he like Velutha becomes a victim in the cruel hands of the orthodox society, narrow outlook, and dirty politics. The hatred towards untouchables cannot be removed unless the society accepts them as the fellow human beings.

Thus *The God of Small Things* has effectively portrayed the class antagonism and exploitations, the prejudice, discrimination and injustice towards the oppressed, untouchables and the trials and tribulations the women have to suffer in the society at the backdrop of patriarchal attitude and caste-ridden societal structure. In one of her interviews Arundhati Roy rightly holds the view:

"Fiction for me has been a way of trying to make sense of the world as I know it. It is located very close to me this book. It is located in the village I grew up in. If I had to put it very simply, it is about trying to make the connections between the smallest of things and the biggest ones and to see how they fit together."

It is all about the attitude and prevailing stereotypes towards our fellow human beings in our society. God never made any difference while creating man, between rich and poor, between dark and fair, between low and high caste, between able and disabled. It is man who committed the sin. If at all one pleads for any change in the society it has to start with a change in every individual attitude.

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