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THE UNETHICAL POLITICS IN SIVAKAMI'S *THE GRIP OF CHANGE* AND  
ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS* - A COMPARATIVE AND ANALYTICAL  
STUDY

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**ABSTRACT**

Though the dominant political parties and their ideologies in the society differ from one another in form and name, they are in essence one and the same i.e. contributing to the smooth run of unequal society unhindered. The narratives of the two novels -Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* - are set in two South Indian states, Tamil Nadu and Kerala respectively. Both the novels are socio – political satires that expose the political degeneration, fraudulence and the problems of people. They ridicule the hypocrisy of the so called political leaders. Both these novels illustrate the exploitation, oppression, socio - economic inequalities that exist in the backdrop of exploitative politics.

This Paper focuses upon the comparative study and analysis of the two characters of the hippocratic political leaders in these two novels with an aim of estimating the significance and relevance of their portrayal in the present history of people. The study and analysis of the world outlooks of the authors is also encased in the objective of this research paper. Though politics and literature are different subjects, they are not absolutely contradictory aspects. The relationship between them is dialectical as both politics and literature are interdependent.

In order to achieve the mentioned above, the Dialectical and Historical Materialistic method is employed. If matter is the basis for materialism, matter with motion is the basis for Dialectical Materialism. The Dialectical and Historical Materialistic method, which is also known as Marxist Method of literary criticism propounded by Karl Marx and Frederic Engels, interprets causes behind effects. They employed this method to study and analyze the literary texts at first. It helps the reader /critic rationally make out the relationship between social phenomena and literature.

Key words: unethical politics - social relations and grass - root level politics - socio, political turmoil.

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Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* predominantly deal with the unethical politics. Sivakami translated her Tamil *Pazhaiyana Kazhithalum* and *Asiriyar Kurippu* into English with a title *The Grip of Change* and *Author's Notes*. However the title which appears on the cover page is *The Grip of Change* as *Author's Notes* is just an explanatory notes in which the author defends her ideas she expressed in *The Grip of Change*. Sivakami depicts the social relations and grass - root level politics in two villages in Tamil Nadu in this novel. The narrative of *The God of Small Things* takes place in a provincial town of Kerala. The sequential setting in *The God of Small Things* shifts back and forth from 1969 to 1993. This novel mainly shows the socio-political turmoil that was prevalent during the late years of 1960s. The story of *The Grip of Change* is placed in 1980s while people were beginning to unite on the basis of the castes they belong to as a means to solve their problems. The social matrix in which how the downtrodden are deceived by selfish political leaders is mirrored in these two novels. The writers of the two novels sneer at the unethical politics in their novels, through the characters of Kathamuthu, a contemptuous and condescending leader of Dalits and KNM Pillai, a pseudo Marxist and an egocentric cunning politician. In order to make a comparative study of the unethical politics of these two political leaders, a brief discussion of the most noticeable features of their characterization is essential.

#### **Kathamuthu, in *The Grip of Change***

Sivakami reveals her political views mainly by ridiculing the character of Kathamuthu and upholding the character of Chandran, a union leader of workers. Kathamuthu is an Ex. 'President of Panchayat Union' of Athur. When Kamalam's (Udayar's wife) brothers thrash Thangam cruelly and threaten her to leave the village, Thangam leaves Puliur for Athur and reaches Kathamuthu's house seeking protection and justice. On hearing what had happened, Kathamuthu takes Thangam to the Police Station and makes her complaint against Kamalam and her brothers. When Udayar conspires with the police constables to get Thangam arrested on a false allegation that she had stolen a transistor and two thousand rupees in cash from his house, Kathamuthu spoils his plot but he does not think to fight the corruptive pro-rich state machinery. When the upper caste people set ablaze the huts of Dalits in the 'Cheri' [a street or an adjoining area of a village where the Dalits live in], he demands ten thousand rupees of compensation for each family but in this context also, he does not dare to think of teaching a lesson to the oppressive landlords by mobilizing the victims against the atrocities of feudal lords. Furthermore, he subdues the justifiable rage of the victims. Because his perspective is different. He wants to transform the situation favorable to him. By this time the upper castes had already imposed social eviction on Dalits. No work in their fields is offered to them. Therefore he now decides to discuss this matter tactfully along with the huts-burning issue.

"He wanted to prevent the spark of violence from getting out of control. He wondered as to how to transform the situation and gain something productive from it. 'What is practical? We will bargain for better compensation for our losses. We will demand to go to work from tomorrow. Let us make sure they pay us better wages. We should make it expensive for them to crush us another time. Remember, we have to live in this village. The village and cheri have to coexist. We can't live as enemies and in fear.'" (p. 65)

Even though Kathamuthu's way of dealing with problems seems beneficial instantly, it ultimately helps the dominant keep Dalits at their feet as a second rate human beings everlastingly as his politics are not aimed at the elimination of class oppression. Kathamuthu says, Dalits are to live in peace not in fear; but how come it is possible to establish true peace so long as an unjustifiable demarcation is there between the village and the Cheri? While the exploitative antagonistic contradictory production relations exist in society, peaceful coexistence of the exploiters and the exploited is impossible. Unless the exploitative production system is abolished, the humane production relations never come into practice. However, Kathamuthu does not bother about all this.

Kathamuthu speaks about a practicable solution i.e. demanding monetary compensation from the atrocious landlords. Had Kathamuthu been a truly committed leader, he would have fought for the self respect of Dalits. He indulges in power politics instead of demanding the imprisonment of Udayar and other culprits in addition to the provision of 'new permanent houses' for the victims.

The writer also seems to have supported this compensatory approach as a form of resistance as she doesn't pass on any sarcastic comments against this kind of settlement in this context. Apparently there are two reasons – Keezhvenmani massacre and the absence of Naxalite Movement in Tamilnadu - behind her deliberate silence at Kathamuthu's compensatory approach. When this is viewed and analyzed in the light of valiant struggles of the downtrodden, this approach seems revisionist in nature. Kathamuthu gradually drags himself to the level of a commission-broker.

"As usual Kathamuthu was busy, running between various government agencies, the police station and the court. Cases were won thanks to his help. He received his share of the spoils of victory." (p.112,)

Kathamuthu Makes Udayar pay ten thousand rupees as compensation to Thangam but that evening itself he expropriates her compensatory money. When she wants to go to the court of law for her husband's share of land, Kathamuthu allows her to stay in his house but one day he forces himself on her and gratifies his lust. Unable to resist Kathamuthu, the only man who can give her protection and shelter, she compromises with the circumstances and settles down in his house as his third wife. In course of time, she wins the case and gets her husband's share of land. Thangam along with her land is now in the possession of Kathamuthu!

Kathamuthu's personal aggrandizement and thirst for power and money continues unhindered. He never hesitates to live off the profits of others. Chandran, a thriving leader of workers is his elder brother's son. Kathamuthu who drove his brother and his brother's son away, a few years ago, from home claiming all property rights over the house they live in is now ready to befriend with Chandran with a view to sharing his [Chandran's] popularity to win the ensuing Legislative Assembly elections. He thinks to 'turn his fortunes' by exploiting Chandran's good fame as a workers' leader and later overpowers Chandran after he becomes an MLA.

Sivakami in some contexts portrays the character of Kathamuthu as a clever leader who works for his fellow men. In some contexts, she scoffs at him. In fact she expresses her disgust in general on the Dalit leaders who do not work for the unity among lower castes, as Kanshiram, the founder president of Bahujan Samaj Party, advocated.

#### **KNM Pillai in *The God of Small Things*:**

Arundhati Roy rebukes hypocrisy and opportunism of a political leader who represents the ideology of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) which exercises enormous influence over the lives of the people in Kerala. She lays bare the selfish and backstabbing politics played by the leaders of the CPI(M), in the guise of Marxism.

Karl Marx and Frederick Engels say, "Communists have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole". Contrary to this as the author depicts in the novel, the political agenda of the CPI (M) is framed in a such manner that its leadership could become treacherous for the mere self interests.

KNM Pillai is a local leader of the CPI (M) of Ayemenem, a small town in Kottayam District. He is an ardent follower of EMS Namboodiripad. He runs a printing Press for his livelihood. He is well - educated too. He makes Marxism a means which will fetch him bright political career. His every action is aimed at personal gains, not for the progress of revolution. Comrade J. Kattu Karan and Comrade Guhan Menon are pushed out of the Party 'as suspected Naxalites'. Till then, Comrade Guhan would be a prospective Party candidate in the by-election. Now, with the expulsion of Guhan, KNM Pillai eyes the Party's candidature of Kottayam constituency.

“Two local Party members, comrade J. Kattu Karan and Comrade Guhan Menon had been expelled from the Party as suspected Naxalites...” - (p. 119, *The God of Small Things*, Penguin Books, 1997)

One day when Chacko, the owner of ‘Paradise Pickles and Preserves’ visits his house only to get his factory labels printed, he makes use of this – the visit of an owner of a factory - to impress the local people and Party workers. He wants to be seen in his chosen constituency as a man of great influence having good relations with the dominant people like Chacko.

Arundhati Roy scorns at the petty-bourgeois politicians and their cheap tricks to achieve popularity through the character of KNM Pillai. Instead of working with commitment for the masses and winning their hearts, and getting elected as their leader, KNM Pillai chooses to play tricks to grab power. These sneaky tactics are entirely against Marxism. His thoughts are treacherous and cunning. He is not a Marxist in practice. He establishes good rapport with Chacko and at the same time he wants to ‘bring in’ a worker’s union, not for worker’s sake but for the sake of his political gains. “To bring in a new labour union, however small, in what he hoped would be his future constituency, would be an excellent beginning for a journey to the legislative Assembly” - (p 120) But it is known to everybody that the factory is wading through a lot of constraints. “... if the stakes were raised ... the factory, already steeped in debt, would be in trouble.” - (p 120)

KNM Pillai makes rhetoric speeches besides wicked plans. In the evenings, after the factory shift is over, he intercepts the workers of ‘Paradise Pickles’ and drives them into his printing press. In his ‘high and unpleasant’ voice, he urges them onto revolution with his speeches of a clever mix of relevant local issues and ‘Maoist rhetoric’.

“People of the world, ... be courageous, dare to fight, defy difficulties and advance wave upon wave ... you must demand what is rightfully yours. Yearly bonus. Provident fund. Accident insurance.” - (p 120)

However he never comes out openly against Chacko. Pillai never refers to him by name, in his speeches, but he always refers him as, ‘the management’. He does not like to damage his own private business dealing with Chacko. His contract for printing the labels of Chacko’s factory gives him an income that he badly needs and so he always cleverly makes distinction between Chacko, the client and Chacko, the management.

He discloses his wickedness in another context. When his Party member Velutha’s life is in danger, he does not try to rescue him. He deliberately ignores the genuine explanation of Velutha and finds fault with him. “You should know that Party was not constituted to support worker’s indiscipline in their private life.” - (p 287). In fact Velutha does not commit any crime. It is with the consent of Ammu who sincerely loves him, he establishes a physical liaison. The malicious intention behind the escapist act of KNM Pillai is to eliminate his potential political rival in the ensuing by-elections. Because the only obstacle in his road to attain political power is Velutha, an only card-holding member of the Party, and this is quite worrisome.

He knows that all the other touchable workers in the factory resent Velutha who is a paravan [a Dalit] but an exceptionally talented worker. And his removal from the Party would endear him to the touchable workers. So Pillai ‘steps carefully around this wrinkle, waiting for a suitable opportunity to iron it out’. He waits for an opportunity to eliminate the obstacle in his road to Legislative Assembly and it knocks at his door when Baby Kochamma files a complaint in the Police Station on Velutha, accusing him of being a molester, an abductor and a murderer of Sophie Mol. When the Inspector Thomas calls KNM Pillai and enquires about Velutha, he wickedly does not tell him that Velutha is a member of the Party. He knows well that Velutha’s life is in danger. In this context, Roy discloses the secret socio – political ideological understanding between Bourgeois political parties like Congress Party and the Parliamentary Left Parties, through the characters of ‘Inspector Thomas’ who is a congress man at heart and KNM Pillai, the local leader of the CPI (M). In fact, the cadre of

the CPI (M) were alleged to have joined hands with the ruling class parties to suppress the Naxalites in the early years after the upsurge Naxalbari movement. It is this historical truth that is reflected in the novel through these two characters. In another way, this shows, how state - machinery is deployed against the down trodden by the oppressors in an unequal society.

“The two men had exchanged numbers not words. No explanation seemed necessary. They were not friends, Comrade Pillai and Inspector Thomas Mathew, and they didn’t trust each other. But they understood each other perfectly. They were both men whom childhood abandoned without a trace. Men without curiosity. Without doubt. Both in their own way truly, terrifyingly adult. They looked out at the world and never wondered how it worked, because they knew. They worked it. They were mechanics who serviced different parts of the same machine.” (p. 262)

Later Velutha is caught and crushed to death by the policemen. However Pillai never laments upon his part in the killing of Velutha, a sincere Party worker. “Though his part in the whole thing had by no means been a small one, Comrade Pillai didn’t hold himself in any way personally responsible for what had happened. He dismissed the whole business as the Inevitable Consequence of Necessary Politics.” - (p 14)

KNM Pillai does not hesitate to suppress others for his political gains. Had Comrade Pillai revealed the fact, Velutha would not have been killed in the ghastly fake encounter of the police and his beloved Ammu would not have died pathetically.

#### **A Comparison Between the Two Characters**

If the means of production are in the hands of a few, the society is mainly split up into two classes - exploiters and the exploited. Politics in these societies are controlled and directed by the dominant [feudal lords, bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie]. They subjugate the latter in order to safeguard their class interests. Many political parties in India are unofficially owned like individual property by a few families! Though all are equal by birth and law, the state - machinery stands in support of the powerful. This is the reason why, cases will not be filed and culprits will not be put behind the bars, (unless the authorities are pressured by democratic forces) when the huts and hamlets of Dalits are set ablaze and when the innocent people like Velutha are killed in fake encounters. Even if the cases are filed, in several contexts, the culprits with their riches and political hegemony easily escape from the sentences of the courts.

KNM Pillai wears the mask of communism whereas Kathamuthu hates the same. However the ultimate aims of the both of them are one and the same i.e. getting elected as MLAs. Even though Kathamuthu does not belong to any political party, he plays the same tricks as other popular politicians always do. He demands monetary compensation when the huts in the Cheri are set ablaze and when Thangam is beaten by the brothers-in-law of Udayar. These atrocities on Dalits are taken for granted even by the Dalit leader, Kathamuthu!

Monetary compensation cannot assure secured lives for the down trodden. It might give some relief but cannot assure them peace as caste Chauvinism does not fear cost, when it determines to sink the Dalits in the ‘River of Blood’. The blood thirst of the oppressive class can be curbed only by class struggles but Kathamuthu does not dare to think of class struggles while the pseudo Marxist K N M Pillai betrays his dalit cadre.

Karl Marx and Frederic Engels stated ‘The proletariat have nothing to lose but their chains’. Kathamuthu and KNM Pillai are not workers. Based on their occupations, they can be classified as petty - bourgeois business men. They have so much --land, house, printing press etc.,-- to lose. Therefore they cannot fight and lead class struggles and cannot endeavour to bring in better change in the society. This social reality is reflected in these novels.

Kathamuthu always yells at the people who come near him for help but assists them and gets his commission whereas Pillai speaks cleverly and lectures on revolution but does nothing for anybody. Kathamuthu is a harsh husband and an inconsiderate father whereas KNM Pillai is a beloved husband and a wise father.

### **The Dialectical Relationship Between Society and Literature**

Lenin says that politics begin where people live in. Politics are inseparable from the social life of man. Nothing in nature remains unchanged. Human society is also a part of nature. Hence, social relations, culture, politics etc. also undergo change. The ideals and the direction in which the contemporary politics move on also change over time. Politics in any society move on in compliance with the existing mode of production system. This relationship is reflected in literature.

Various literary genres surface the society with the emergence of contemporary socio – economic needs and demands [in the various forms of movements], and in turn the literary texts influence the society. They sometimes radically bring in major change in the socio-political sphere in the society. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel shook the then American society and ushered in discussions and debates on slavery. When civil war started in 1861, President Abraham Lincoln commented that the civil war, in fact, started with the novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*! Indira Parthasarathy’s *The River of Blood* sensitized the people about the Keezhvenmani massacre of the Dalits that took place in 1968 and his novel ushered in discussions and agitations.

Visibly, there is a considerable impact of the historical incidents and contexts on the psyche of the writers of these novels. In Keezhvenmani, when the Dalits who were the agricultural labourers took up a struggle for hike in their wages, the landlords of the region could not tolerate this struggle of the underdogs. One night, they attacked the Dalits and threw them into thatched huts and set fire to them. Forty four Dalits were killed in this massacre. Though a huge number of people were killed in this massacre, the media have not given due importance to this incident. It was known to the public in the other parts of India only after the publication of Indira Parthasarathy’s *Kuruthi Punal* (1975) that was translated into English titled *The River of Blood* in the late 1970s.

The absence of Naxalite movement in Tamil Nadu is another reason for Sivakami’s inclination to the monetary compensation approach. The counter violent agitation seemed impracticable for the weakest after this bloodbath and this perception was prevalent in the society even during the 1980’s when Sivakami wrote this novel in Tamil. The writer’s deliberate silence at Kathamuthu’s monetary compensation approach of solving problems is due to this socio - political environment. In Marxist understanding, ‘ideas sprout from social practice’. Here, the writer’s idea of monetary compensation which is a form of resistance originated from her observation of the stoical socio political environment in Tamil Nadu.

Arundhati Roy published her novel *The God of Small Things* in 1997. The decade of 1990s witnessed two major historical events – the downfall of the USSR and the beginning of the process of Globalization. The pro-imperialist forces, with the help of the corporate media propagandized that socialism was an illusion showing the collapse of the USSR as an example during this period.

N. Venugopal, the eminent writer, critic and editor of *Veekshanam* monthly magazine in Telugu comments: “The post-modernist outlook was being extolled and propagated by the exploitative and oppressive forces in India and the world when *The God of Small Things* was published in 1990s”. Roy’s criticism of revisionist politics of the CPI (M) was unduly attributed to the scientific socialism of Karl Marx by the prejudiced literary and non-literary critics in this socio–economic-political atmosphere. Of course, she also unjustifiably comments in a context that Marxism too has become a tool of oppression when KNM Pillai refuses to protect Velutha.

### **The Significance of these Novels in the Present History**

A new change --a humanely civilized change-- is the need of the hour in India which has been remained a caste-ridden class society for the ages. In order to strengthen democracy, people

should be made conscious of the root cause of the evils that persist in the society where exploitation of 'man by man' is taken for granted. The progressive literature, which aims at bringing in good social change, serves this purpose. The primary duty of a writer is just not only to make the readers conscious of the problems, but also to impel them to bring in good change in the society. It is with this perception, we can correctly review the outlooks of the authours. Even though Arundhati Roy sympathizes with the revolutionary forces, her novel which depicts the historical events i.e. socio – economic, political and religious problems of the day does not impel the readers to create a new history. Sivakami supports a relatively progressive right wing Dalit political ideology while depicting the problems of the Dalits.

Arundhati Roy does not suggest any alternative political ideology whereas Sivakami has drifted herself towards the ideology which is similar to that of Kanshiram. She seeks unity among Dalits and the lower castes. Sivakami herself mentions in her *Author's Notes* as:

"Karl Marx had said 'Workers of the world unite.' The Vanniyars and Dalits are the workers in this society. If they are united then the ensuing revolution would overturn the country." (p. 156, *The Grip Of Change and Author's Notes*)

The unity between Vanniyars and Dalits is the unity between Backward Castes and Scheduled Castes. This unity, if possible, might fetch them political power but the exploitation and oppression would not vanish from society. Because, unless the productive forces like land, machinery, natural resources etc., are nationalized and brought under peoples' collective authority, the exploitative production relations cannot be replaced by humane social relations. That means, so long as the productive forces are not liberated from feudal lords and big bourgeoisie, the emancipation of the working class, which mainly comprises the Dalits and the lower caste people, from exploitation and repression is not possible. However neither Sivakami nor Arundhati Roy does not try to view the social reality from this perspective. They seem to have escaped from this social responsibility as writers (of course, Arundhati Roy after her debut novel embarked upon the campaign against imperialism). Consequently, the two novels have lacked the genre of socialist realism which powerfully makes the readers conscious of their progressive social responsibility.

The social problems, illustrated in their novels, are the inevitable consequences of the contemporary exploitative production system. But, they depict them as the ones that are originated from the aspects of the superstructure such as casteism, male – chauvinism, politics, morality, police, courts etc., of the society, avoiding the discussion of the exploitative economic base [the system of production]. The cause and effect relationship between the semi - feudal, bourgeois production system and the exploitative production relations in the society are found missing in these novels. Marx urges the people to change the world. Literature can bring in such a change if it is aimed at the elimination of exploitation and oppression in the society. The mere reflection of society in literature does not contribute to societal progress. However Sivakami and Arundhati Roy do not make such attempts in these novels. Both the novels have not contributed to fuel the anti - feudal and anti - capitalist movements. Hence the oppressed have nothing to find any source of inspiration from these two novels. However, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* help the people understand to some extent the essence of the unethical politics that were prevalent during 1960s and 1980s in the two South Indian states.

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