

**Dialectics of Dalit Depravation: A Study in *Joothan* and *The God of Small Things***

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**Abstract**

The word 'Dalit' has acquired a wide currency in recent times. It is basically used for the people belonging to the lowest strata of society. They were the untouchables in the social set up, leading a life of penury and were worst exploited and oppressed by the upper caste. Om Prakash Valmiki, the great Dalit writer wrote his memoir *Joothan* in 1997. This work echoes the sense of hatred for the downtrodden, the feeling of untouchability, class distinction in the society and the caste-ridden social structure. Valmiki's own bitter experiences have been enumerated in *Joothan*. Arundhati Roy also occupies an important place in the world of women writers. Her magnum opus *The God of Small Things* very well reflects the theme of love and hate, built up by innumerable loops of contrasts or opposites in language and movement of time. The novel desecrates religious faith, denounces communism, lambasts casteism, underestimates family ties and denigrates decency and decorum in professional, public and personal conduct. It highlights violence in all walks of life and glorifies perverted sex, child abuse, homo-sexuality and even incest. The novel centres around the character of Velutha, the innocent victim of callous society and Ammu, the mother of Estha and Rahel. She had married a Dalit Hindu out of love and had got divorced from him, thus violating one of the most deeply rooted taboos in India. Her relationship with Velutha represents the apex of her 'border crossing.' Arundhati Roy through her novel questions the durability and stability of such society which is based on caste and class consciousness. Both the writers, Valmiki on the one hand and Arundhati Roy on the other portray Dalit sentiments in their writings in their own way. The present paper intends to make a comparative study of Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* in the light of Dalit movements and manifestations.

**Key Words :** Dalit consciousness, suppression and humiliation, resistance, subalternity, border crossing

**Introduction:**

The term 'subaltern' is used to denote the entire people that are subordinate in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way. It is the subject position that defines subalternity. Even when it operates in terms of class, age and gender, it is more psychological than physical. The lack and deprivation, loneliness and alienation,

subjugation and subordination, the resignation and silence, the resilience and neglect mark the lives of the subaltern; even when they resist and rise up, they feel bounded and defeated by their subject positions. They have no representatives in the society they live in and so helplessly suffer and get marginal place or no place at

all in the history and culture of which they are the essential part as human beings.

The word 'Dalit' in recent times has acquired a special meaning in the Indian society. The word is used for people who belong to the lowest rung of the social ladder. They are the untouchables in the social set up, leading a life of penury and are worst exploited and oppressed by the upper caste. Moreover, Dalit literature has emerged as literature of negation and rejection, of protest and revolt and hence assertion. On the one hand it is a negation of existing unjust, unequal Indian social order while on the other it has a fervent appeal for the creation of an egalitarian society based on humanism. Dalit literature is being written out of intense, burning experience and consciousness. Indeed, the Dalit writers hit the present caste - based society in order to give a new model of society – a model based on harmony, equality, liberty where a human can live like a human.

Arundhati Roy occupies a unique place among the Dalit writers. In her magnum opus *The God of Small Things*, she pours her soul to raise her voice against the deep-rooted hatred to the outcastes of the Indian society. It is an autobiographical novel. The character of Ammu in the novel represents Mrs. Mary Roy, Arundhati Roy's mother. There are shades of Roy in the way Rahel looks, in her education and in her sense of social isolation. Velutha who stands for 'God' in the novel is the chief protagonist. Velutha which means white in Malayalam is represented in the novel one with black complexion. His relations with Ammu and the circumstances which ultimately lead to

his tragic end can be described as one of the major themes of the novel.

Omprakash Valmiki, a Dalit writer has made revolutionary transformation of Dalit consciousness. His autobiography *Joothan* is a well-known work and is considered a milestone in the field of Dalit writings. It aims at giving expression to Dalit's pain, suffering and self awareness. It was first published in Hindi in 1997 and was later translated into English by Arun Prabha Mukherjee in 2003. In post- independence India, 'Joothan' refers to scraps of food left on a plate, destined for the garbage or animals. The untouchables down the ages have been forced to accept and eat joothan for centuries. Valmiki very categorically remarks about this sort of life. He observes that after working hard day and night, the price of their sweats was just joothan.

In *The God of Small Things* the saga of suffering and torture starts with the central female character, Ammu accompanying her parents by Ayemenem after her father's retirement. Being deprived of a college education, marriage for her also became a remote possibility as dowry could not be provided for. Hence she had to wait at home and become gradually domesticated. Virginia Woolf sees domestic life as almost exclusively social without any breathing space for women,

The son of my house may be granted freedom to develop his mind, he may have a room of his own, but the daughter is expected to be at everyone's beck and call. (Marder 34)

Indeed, the only reprieve for Ammu in the stifling atmosphere was nuptial tie. She

gives her consent to marry a gentle Hindu Bengali from the tea-estates in Assam. However, the charm of marital bliss soon evaporates and Ammu becomes a victim of her husband's drunken rages. Ultimately she decides to leave her husband and to return to her parents' home. But there also "she had no position at all as she had been divorced. (Roy 45) Ammu's humiliation at the hands of everybody is the consequence of her marriage gone awry. Simone de Beauvoir has rightly observed,

Marriage is not only honourable career; it also permits a woman to keep her social dignity intact and at the same time to find several fulfillment as loved one and mother. (Beauvoir 352)

Ultimately, she is ordered to quit the house as her secret love with the untouchable Velutha has brought ignominy to the family. Ammu's father's and mother's mutual lack of understanding and their unconcern and neglect for their daughter had drifted her to discover her own happiness,

To love by night the man her children loved by day. (Roy 202)

Moreover, the love of divorced daughter of the prestigious family with a Paravan brings disasters in the lives of Ammu, Velutha and the small children. A false case of rape and abduction is framed against the Paravan and he is beaten to death in police custody. The twins are separated and Ammu is left to earn her livelihood. She commits suicide in desperation in a lodge all alone at the age of 31. Her unfortunate children Rahel and Estha suffer a childhood and youth of separation and alienation resulting in Estha's

silent and brooding personality and Rahel's divorce in married life. After 23 years, Estha is Re-returned to Ayemenem and meets Rahel at the old house in an altogether changed scenario. They try to construct their emotional self that had been put to pieces long years back by the dominant forces of the society. Thus the narrative vividly pictures the agony of these subalterns – Rahel-Estha-Ammu and Velutha. They become the victims of traditional and cultural authorities.

Rahel and Estha are the Dalits in terms of Age. They have been assigned subject positions by those social forces who deny them the love and care of their childhood. Rahel is punished to look up 'depravity' in the *Oxford Dictionary* and read aloud its meaning in morning assembly at Nazareth Convent. After Ammu died, Rahel moved from school to school largely ignored by Chacko and Mammachi, "they provided the care (food, clothes, fees) but withdrew the concern" (15). Perhaps they are the best representatives of the subalterns of the Age.

Ammu's father Pappachi thought that college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl though he sent his son to Oxford for an advanced diploma. She was anyhow married but her marriage did not last long and she finally returned to her parents. But in her own house she lives as a subordinate to the wishes of all. Neither father nor mother understands her needs and desires. Ammu thus lives a life of subjugated family member and keeps on instructing harshly and loving sincerely her two small children to save them from the wrath of elders in the family. The same Ammu who used to love her children too

much observes that she should have dumped them in an orphanage the day they were born. This is the voice of Ammu, the gendered subaltern. And this happens only because of the fact that Ammu is treated as a second rate citizen,

Though Ammu, and Rahel Estha are allowed to attend the funeral, they are made to stand separately, not with the rest of the family. Nobody would look at them.(5)

Ammu is ostracized from Sophie's funeral because of her relationship with a 'Paravan'. Indeed, the tragedy in the novel revolves around those individuals who defy societal norms and are therefore punished. Her love for Velutha is the result of her quest of love and tenderness denied to her since her birth as gendered subaltern. However, Ammu's subalternity is not entirely imposed by the man-world; the role of Baby Kochamma, Kochu Maria and above all Mammachi cannot be ignored that usher in Ammu's miserable existence.

Velutha is also a true representative of class subaltern. He is a Paravan, the untouchable. Mammachi does not encourage him to enter the house, though he is allowed on the factory premises and is allowed to touch things that touchables touch. She thinks that it is a big step for a Paravan. He is not liked by the factory workers because of his being a Paravan; it is his ability that has retained him among the touchable workers of the factory. The things come to the worst when one day the love between Velutha and Ammu is disclosed and the former is brutally punished. Mammachi hurts choicest of abuses upon him and spits on his face. He

is beaten to death by the police. Thus the life of the Paravan, Velutha — the black, the untouchable who is guilty of loving Ammu, a lady higher than his class comes to an end. So *The God of Small Things* presents a variety of the subalterns. Rahel-Estha-Ammu Velutha all have been assigned subject positions by the dominate laws of the society. Velutha stands out as the representative of the untouchables in the novel. They are a class of people who are not allowed to walk on the public roads, not allowed to cover their upper bodies and not allowed to carry umbrellas. To add to the humiliation they had to put their hands over their mouths when they spoke to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed. The expression 'bare bodied' gives us enough hint to show that the characters she has introduced is certainly one who belongs to the group of the 'untouchable'.

In *Joothan*, Valmiki has talked about the discrimination they had to face in the school at different points. He says,

During the examinations we could not drink water from the glass when thirsty. To drink water, we had to cup our hands. The peon would pour water from way high up lest our hands touch the glass. (Valmiki 27)

Valmiki was admitted to a primary school on his father's behest. However, he was not allowed to sit on the benches but on the floor away from the upper caste boys, at the back by the door from where he can't see the blackboard well. The students often hurled epithets on him and also beat him casually, turning him into an introvert. Even

the teachers looked for excesses to punish him, so that “he would run away from the school and take up the kind of work for which he was born”(16) Later, a new teacher arrived, who used to thrash him almost daily. One day he asked Valmiki to take a broom and sweep all the rooms and the playground in the school. He had to spend full days sweeping the courtyard. He was bound to be humiliated by the upper caste people. If he came dressed in new clothes they commented, Oye chuhre, dressed in new clothes, if he was dressed in old clothes he was called beggar and that even in abusive terms. His teachers often called him in abusive language,

‘Abey chuhre ke... where are you hiding .... (19)

Seeing him sitting in the corner the headmaster pounced on his neck. The pressure of his finger gradually increased. As a wolf grabs a lamb by the neck, he dragged him out of the class and threw him on the ground. He shouted,

Go sweep the whole playground, otherwise I will shove chillies up your arse and throw you out of school. I picked up the three day old broom then sticks. Tears rolled down my cheeks..... Each pore of my body was submerged in an abyss of anguish. (15)

However, his parents were not like him. Seeing his son sweeping the ground, his father could not control himself and snatched the broom from his hands. He screamed, “Who is that teacher, that progeny of Dronacharya who forced my son to sweep?” (16)

The Headmaster called his father’s name and roared back,

Take him away from here ... the chuhra wants him to educate... Go, go, otherwise I will have your bones broken. (16)

Valmiki’s father could not be deterred from his determination by the Headmaster’s shout and he declared in a louder voice,

I’m leaving now... but ‘this chuhre ka’ will study right here in this school. And not just him but there will be more coming after him. (16)

His father’s courage and fortitude left a deep and decisive mark on Valmiki’s personality. Even his mother was revolutionary by nature. Once she requested Brahmin host, Sukhdev Singh Tyagi for additional food for her children only to be humiliated and told to mind her place, be satisfied with what she already had collected and to get going. Valmiki observes,

That might the mother goddess Durga entered my mother’s eyes. It was for the first time I saw my mother so angry. She emptied the basket right there and asked Sukhdev Singh to pick it up and put inside his house. She further asked him to feed it to the Baratis the next day morning. When he had pounced on her to hit her, she had confronted him like a lioness without being afraid. (21)

Valmiki, being a Dalit, understands fully the pain and suffering of the people of the lower caste. Dr. Sharan Limbale has rightly observed,

Dalits are also quite, gentle, obedient and humblest one of all the creatures and they are not in need of learning about humanity. They have rage and anger in them only for the reason that they have been suppressed by all and have not been provided basic human rights. So their rudeness is very natural. (Limbale 91)

Valmiki was admitted to Middle School, where all the teachers were Tyagis. Most of the students were also Tyagis. He used to narrate the stories to his mother and many a time the characters of Sharatchandra had made them weep together. That was the time when he became interested in Tagore, Premchand, Sharatchandra etc. The work of the Chuhra caste included sweeping the roads, cleaning the cattle barns, getting shit off the floor, disposing off dead animals, working in the field during harvests and performing other physical labour for upper caste people. They were often beaten by the people of the upper caste and also by the police. The people of Valmiki's village were superstitious, too.

With the passage of time Valmiki reached to class XI. He had opted Science as his major subject. He had become somewhat more confident than before. But he had less number of friends, perhaps because of his lower caste. Om Dutta Tyagi was his English teacher. He was more sarcastic in his remarks. He always tried to make him feel about his lower caste. Valmiki at that time felt that he was not a teacher but a casteist illiterate Zamindar. After passing Intermediate he came to Dehradun with one shirt and one trousers. There the majority of the population comprised of bhangi, Jatav

etc. The former liked to be called 'Valmiki' and the latter Jatav. The students in Valmiki's class often made fun of his rustic way of life. In fact he had become accustomed to such comments. But by and by he was gaining confidence and his friends were also increasing. One day he chanced to get one book. *Dr. Ambedkar : Jeevan Parichay* written by Chandrika Prasad Jigyashu. It changed his course of life and in due course he read almost all the books of Ambedkar available in that library. The sense of revolt against the system, lying dormant in him for a long time, got a voice. The word 'Dalit' was included in his dictionary; it was not the substitute of 'Harijan' rather the expression of anger of crores of the untouchables. After sometime he was admitted as apprentice in Ordnance Factory, Dehradun.

One day Omprakash met Kamla, the daughter of Girwar, who was a trainee in IIT. She asked him for a lift upto IIT and sat on the carrier of his cycle. But that small event became a big event. And he was told that it was a big crime. After one year training, he was sent to Jabalpur for higher training. There he met some trainees who were Marxists in their thinking and temperament. He had started composing poems also. He had formed a theatre group and gave some shows too in the auditorium of the institution. He read Rajendra Yadav's *Sara Aakash* several times. He also got himself associated with literary activities of Jabalpur. In July 1970 he joined Ordnance Factory Training Institute, Ambarnath (Mumbai). He was very happy to see the rich library of the institution. He came in contact with the Kulkarni family especially

Savita Kulkarni. He received much love and affection from that family. But when one day he told Savita his caste she was shocked and she started crying. And that was the last meeting between them. In December 1973 he was married to Chanda, the younger sister of Swarnlata Bhabhi. His parents had died in course of time. He was very much influenced by Buddha's thought of human freedom. He had fully associated himself with Dalit movement. In Maharashtra Dalit Panther had given a new form to Dalit movement.

The Dalits were being tortured in government and semi government offices. Those Dalits who had got education, were facing identity crisis. In order to get rid of this problem they started improving their 'Gotra' a bit, thus 'Chandril' or 'Chanchal' from Chinaliye, 'Saudai' from Saude etc. His mother's gotra was 'Kesle' which was renamed as 'Keswal'. Indeed, the pain of identity is the outcome of the reaction against inhumanity of casteism. They also want to be included in the mainstream of the society but the so-called forward class always considers them as downtrodden and inferior to them. Their intelligence and capability are always doubted. The writers, the scholars and the workers associated with Dalit movement are continuously struggling with themselves. People are not ready to acknowledge their association with the people of the lower strata of society.

Thus we can say that Omprakash Valmiki through his personal life's history tried to give dignity, courage and confidence to the Dalits. Since God has created every human being equal, the so-called upper caste has no right to humiliate and hurt physically the

lower caste people. Valmiki's masterpiece *Joothan* is a saga of the pain, suffering and humiliation of the Dalit class in general and those of Omprakash Valmiki in particular. Velutha in *The God of Small Things* and Omprakash Valmiki in *Joothan* both are the victims of the society. The latter got education in rural and urban surrounding and ultimately joined the Ordnance Factory, whereas the former was educated in the untouchable's school. According to Mammachi if only he had not been a Paravan he might have become an engineer. (Roy 75)

Velutha and Omprakash both became victims of physical torture. After Sophie Mol's death the police went to Velutha's house and falsely charging him of the incident beat him brutally :

Boot on bone. On teeth. The muffled grunt when a stomach is kicked. The muted crunch of skull on cement. The gurgle of blood on a man's breath when his lung is torn by the jagged end of a broken rib. (308)

Omprakash Valmiki also suffers humiliation and beating at the hands of the upper caste people. But there is a difference, the former even when knows that his end is imminent he, though a rebel throughout continues to remain a Gandhian, an apostle of non-violence whereas the latter always tries to raise the voice of protest at the treatment meted out to him. However, the sense of anger is very much there in both of them.

The caste system in India is so strong that the lower caste untouchables are not allowed to enter the houses of upper caste people.

Kochamma told Rahel's grandmother, Mammachi :

How could she stand the smell?  
Haven't it noticed? They have a particular smell, these paravans. (308)

This remark very well sums up the uppercaste's attitude towards the untouchables. In *Joothan* Valmiki also has the same type of experience. The people around him behave quite normally with him, but the moment they come to know about his low birth, their attitude changes and he is hated like anything.

Moreover, the Dalits and the downtrodden are leading miserable life in the modern times. Though both the works have been written at the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century, yet the life of Velutha on the one hand and that of Omprakash on the other was no better than the life of Bakha of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* who was the creation of pre independence period. The reality about the Dalits has been presented with utmost sincerity and honesty. Even after sixty nine years of independence the status of Dalits in Indian society is as miserable as it was in the early times. Today we are progressing day by day but we have not changed our mindset. We simply discuss the problems and conditions of the Dalits but all those

discussions end in nothingness and we do not come to any solution to their problems. Since centuries the Dalits have been denied and largely ignored by the society.

The Dalit writers in general and Arundhati Roy and Omprakash Valmiki in particular have successfully depicted Dalit consciousness – Dalit agony, assertion, resistance, anger, protest, mobilization, dalit experiences in their writings. They do not look at the subject from a distance, rather they become very much a part of it. That is why there is no universal appeal in the dalit writings. In other words, we can say that they fail to infuse the universal spirit in their experiences used for their art. Limbale, the great Dalit writer says:

My father is a savarna; my mother is an untouchable; my grandfather is a Mohammedan ... I am the son of a kept of a village Headman. I do not know who I am. (Limbale 139)

Indeed, it is a fact that the Dalit writers need to view the dalit consciousness objectively. They need to respond to the past with patience in order to change the degenerated system of society. It is the mindset of the people which requires to be changed for the upliftment of the downtrodden.

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