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Subaltern Expression in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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ABSTRACT

The present research paper is an attempt towards analyzing the character of Velutha in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Velutha, a member of socially marginalized community is presented here as an embodiment of eternal suffering. Women and backward communities in India fall under the category of marginalized who are victimized by the members of patriarchal and castist structure of Indian society. Through her novel, Arundhati Roy has tried to sensitize the members of our society about the inhuman socio-cultural traditions practiced by them. In fact, she has challenged certain common age-old complacently held but dehumanizing social taboos and has shown how the women and untouchables are both treated as impersonal and subjective objects in this social structure; how things are decided for both by the patriarchal ideology of an ancient culture which cultivates the hierarchical snobbery and violence of the 'Touchables' towards the 'Untouchables'.

Key Words: social hierarchy, patriarchy, exploitation.

The present research paper makes an attempt to analyze Velutha's character in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Velutha is a marginal character whose tragic life is echoed throughout the novel and his life and destiny are akin to those of a subaltern whose voice always gets silenced.

I

The bulk of postcolonial New English literature being written across the globe – from Australia to Africa and West India to Asia – since the last few decades, have been generally preoccupied with the problems of the marginalized and the underdog. In India the focus naturally falls

on women and backward classes who represent the case of underdog in this tradition-abiding society, among whom, the untouchable epitomizes the worst form of marginalization.

Arundhati Roy tries to sensitize this society to the cruelty of some of its traditions by artistically challenging certain common age-old complacently held but dehumanizing social taboos. She also shows how the women and untouchables are both treated as impersonal and subjective objects in this social structure; how things are decided for both by the patriarchal ideology of an ancient culture which cultivates the hierarchical snobbery and violence of the 'Touchables' towards the 'Untouchables'.

II

Roy, in her delineation of Velutha's character, rightly brings out the plight of deprived classes in India. Her utmost concern for the plight of Velutha is to make us think seriously about the freedom, rights and social justice of the marginalized classes in India.

Veutha, though living at the mercy of the forces of social hegemony, hierarchically superior to him castewise ventures to break this imposed 'silence' and pays the price. In this sense the novel seems to be the pathetic portrayal of an unfortunate pariah whose tragedy makes the reader to understand the evil side of Indian social structure.

Velutha, the son of a Paravan, – a community in Kerala, subjected to extreme ignominy through ages, forced to live a life of exploitation compounded by unspeakable indignity even to the extent of sweeping off their footprints as they crawled-back so that no Brahmins or Syrian Christians (formerly upper-caste Hindus) got defiled by treading on the same. By embracing Christianity they had only received the status of 'untouchable Christians' with separate church and priest. Though born a Paravan, Velutha is different from the traditional Paravan, like his submissive father or invalid brother who appear reconciled to their 'fate'; Velutha belongs to the new generation that grew up in independent India; he has finished his school, got trained in carpentry in addition to his natural skill in machines, tools and handicraft. He has also joined the State Communist Party assuming it to be a forum of protest (the backdrop of the novel is 1969, i.e., the second term of E.M.S. in Kerala). Yet he is sneered upon by the 'Touchable,' rich and poor alike; while being hated by the touchable unskilled workers in the factory, he is exploited by the 'kind' employed who shrewdly uses the

helplessness of his situation as a detested Paravan.

In this sense the novel seems to be the pathetic portrayal of an unfortunate pariah whose tragedy, engineered by History's henchmen, brings moral ambiguity caused by human crises to the fore.

III

Velutha is adept at carpentry and is exploited by the owners of the Paradise Pickle Factory. He is not allowed into the Syrian Christian family house because of their high caste profile. Velutha's personality is portrayed through a series of words and phrases that signifies 'quietness.' His gait, deportment and language are characterized by a 'quiet' firmness and conviction. Above all, Velutha which means 'White' in Malayalam, stands for purity. However, beneath this thin layer of 'quietness', there lurks a primitive force that brooks no barrier – a fact borne out by his intense and impassioned amour with Ammu, the narrator Rahel's mother.

The invidious nature of traditional power-relationship and class character in a typical socio-cultural backdrop is latent not only in the delineation of Velutha's character or that of his father's but also in the social milieu of the time. In the caste-ridden and almost bipolar society of Kerala – as there were no buffer castes quite unlike North Indian caste-profile – a number of Paravans, Pelavas and Pulayas got converted to Christianity and joined the Anglican Church to escape the scourge of untouchability but they achieved nothing save disappointment, as they remained Paravans albeit Paravan Christians and came to be called Rice-Christians. Illustrative of this point is author's description:

In Mammachi's time Paravanas
like other untouchables were not

allowed to walk on public roads, 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. (74)

But Velutha stands apart from the others of his class – those crawling untouchable Paravans. His father Vellya paapen fears this about his younger son and mysteriously enough is at a loss to name his fear. The narrator explains this lurking fear in the old Paravans with surrealistic assurance:

Perhaps it was just a lack of hesitation. An unwarranted assurance. In the way he walked. The way he held his head. The quiet way he offered suggestions without being asked. Or the quiet way in which he disregarded suggestions without - appearing to rebel. (76)

This 'quietness' in Velutha, which in fact, is like the quietness of an animal on the prowl, grows powerful when he joins the communist movement. It intensifies further during his four years of stay in Trivandrum. On returning to his village, after his mother's death and brother's accident, he involves himself in the activities of the communist party. However, his 'touchable' fellow workers in the factory and the party workers envy him and his quiet but efficient ways and they plan to obliterate his importance through using his untouchability as a weapon against him. Comrade Pillai, the party activist, even persuades Chacko, the owner of Paradise Pickles, to oust Velutha on the same ground. His conversation with Chacko indicates how

Velutha is viewed by his fellow party members:

Oru kaarayam parayatthey? Comrade Pillai switched to Malayalam and a confiding Conspiratorial voice. 'I'm speaking as a friend, Keto, off the record.' That Paravan (Velutha) is going to cause trouble for you', he said. 'Take it from me....get him a job somewhere else. Send him off. (277-78)

And eventually Comrade Pillai makes it glaringly clear that Velutha might very well be okay as a person but confides to Chacko: '...you see comrade, from the local standpoint these caste issues are very deep-rooted.' And ultimately reveals his mind, 'But frankly speaking comrade change is one thing. Acceptance is another. You should be cautious. Better for him you send him off. (279)

This again is reinforced when Velutha, after bearing the abuses and insults of mammachi, goes to meet Comrade Pillai at his house. The stony indifference of the Communist leader towards Velutha's predicament was too much for him and he at once understood the true chemistry of social mobility. He realized to the core the hollowness of a casteless religion and a classless party. Here Arundhati Roy seems to suggest that a political party supposedly wedded to the cause of the disempowered does, in fact, serves the interests of the powerful. She observes:

Another religion turned against itself. Another edifice constructed by the human mind, decimated by human nature. (287)

Ammu, the narrator Rahel's mother, a divorcee, harbours an intense passion for Velutha. Hers is a liberated mind who transcends the cobwebs of social constraints and she is made to perform as the bridge over the chasm between the Paravan Christians and the touchable Christians. In her day-dreams, she sees herself in the company of a one-armed man symbolically none other than Velutha who is socially handicapped. He is also handicapped in the sense that he too has been striving to possess Ammu in vain. The absence of an arm is also a metaphor for his difference from the 'touchable' persons. Further bewilderment that his dream causes in Ammu's innocent mind is suggestive of the dark nature of her forbidden desire. What is, however, worth noting is that her desire might be forbidden but is indeed elemental one where human beings are not seen as structured species. The novelist observes:

Who was he the one armed man?
Who could he have been? The
God of Lose? The God of Small
Things? The God of Goose
Bumps and sudden Smiles?...
(217)

Velutha, the 'God of small things', is socially handicapped, whereas Ammu's dream figure is physically handicapped.

At another level the fantasy love making scene, which has raised such a hue and cry in literary circles, also throws ample light on the pitiable position of Velutha who lacks freedom to parade his love openly and accept it like a normal touchable person. Both Velutha and Ammu spend the nights in the deserted house of Kari Saipu on the other side of the river. As they fulfill their quest for love, they laugh at small things, like the devout praying, mantis, the pair of small fish which bites Velutha in the stream, the clumsy caterpillars and the helpless

beetles. Velutha's 'smallness' in the hierarchical setup is suggested by employing such natural and meek witnesses to his love-making. His repetition of the word 'Naalye' (tomorrow) in his laconic conversation with his 'Ammukutty' during their nocturnal meeting is symbolic of his life that is punctuated with imposed 'silence' and, marked by a yearning for independence and assimilation with the hierarchically superior 'touchables' so that he may emerge as "mixable mix" breaking all barriers in the not-too-distant future.

Chance also plays its conspicuous role in the conspiracy of the socio-political situation to accelerate the fate of Velutha. The accidental death of Sophie Mol and supposed abduction of Rahel and Estha provide ample opportunity to Baby Kochamma to take revenge on Velutha for her earlier humiliation at his hands. She reports the concocted matter to Inspector Thomas Mathew who helps her to fabricate a case implicating Velutha in the alleged abduction of the two children and the death of Sophie. Thus Velutha's onward march to move to the centre gets completely blocked. He is forced to remain marginalized by hostile socio-cultural forces. For no fault of his, he is rendered a victim of the brutality of 'touchable' policemen. His 'subaltern' voice is choked in his throat. Novelist's anguish is more than evident when she describes the inhuman treatment meted out to him by the brutal policemen whom she considers history's henchmen:

History in live performance.....

If they hurt Velutha more than they intended to it was only because any kinship, any

connection between themselves and him, any implication that if nothing else at least biologically he was a fellow creature—had been severed long ago.... (309)

The innocent Velutha is beaten to the point of death by the merciless police force that bear grudge against him for keeping illicit relationship with Ammu. Velutha's tragedy is that by on one, on no plank is he considered on par with a normal human being. His tragic waste is repented by none, resented by none. The novelist sums up:

Their (policemen's) work, abandoned by God and History, by Marx, by Man, by woman and (in the hours to come) by children, lay folded on the floor. He was semi-conscious, but wasn't moving. (310)

What is significant about all this is that Velutha is never given a chance to break his 'silence' regarding the crime in which he is implicated. Another tragic factor is the cruel indifference of elitist society towards his peril as the children – Rahel and Estha – are also enshrined and coaxed into establishing Velutha's crime. Velutha's suffering and gruesome death is resented by neither the Communist Party nor the Church and throughout the novel the anxiety for such socio-cosmic disparity is echoed - 'who

wept at his death? What was lost in his death?'

IV

Velutha suffers death because of his conviction that society can be revolutionized through liberal socialization aimed at obliterating traditional caste differences. But he does not succeed in his revolt, as he instinctively responds to the demands of his heart. Moreover, he does not have even a remote realization of the fact that 'subalternity' is a socio-cultural issue whose roots are very deep and history and politics join hands to dig through only the top-soil in order to mitigate the abuses of it. *The God of Small Things* may not have an 'ideological centrality' of protest novel or a Dalit novel; there may be absence of any 'ideological positioning' vis-a-vis Dalits in the novel, but it remains a humane attempt to understand the strangeness of 'subalternity' in socio-cultural context. Arundhati Roy may not have a professed ideology to attack the established structures of belief with, as great writers do not have it, but her concern for Velutha's tragedy remains the substance of her novel. And the novel has to be understood as a fictional account of the perils lying in wait for those who venture in their attempt to understand the complex configuration of this socio-cultural chasm and break the imposed silence to leap towards the centre.

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