

## Understanding Dynamics of Caste in Arundhati Roy's 'The God of Small Things'

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### Abstract

Arundhati Roy is one of India's most renowned and well-known English novelist, essayist, and social activist. She also supports minority cultures and is a political activist, screenwriter, and environmentalist. She advocates for environmental and human rights problems as a social and political activist. Her novel "The God of Small Things" examines the dynamics of caste in the context of Indian society, notably in Kerala. The novel explores how caste affects the lives and destinies of the characters in the story. In *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, casteism, masculinity, class, subalternity, violence, and the battle of women against exploitation in a male-dominated patriarchal society are all explored in a male dominated patriarchal society. This paper seeks to highlight the plight and conundrum of the marginalised with reference to "The God of Small Things". Thus, the purpose and objective of writing this paper is to show how Arundhati Roy rightly puts forth the characters who are victims of violence and exploitation as they are the ones on the margins of society.

**Keywords:** caste, subalternity, violence, exploitation, marginalization

Suzanna Arundhati Roy, one of the most well-known and eminent English author, essayist, and social activist from India, was born on November 24, 1961, in Shillong, Meghalaya. She is an Indian author best known for 'The God of Small Things', which won the Booker Prize. The God of Small Things, Roy's 1997 Booker Prize-winning novel, rose to the top of the best-seller list among the non-expatriate Indian author. Arundhati Roy is also an environmentalist, screen play writer, and a political activist. In addition to being a political activist and screenwriter, Arundhati Roy is an environmentalist. She has bravely and boldly advocated for a better society as a social activist, and she still fights tenaciously and vehemently to make the world a better place.

The setting of Arundhati Roy's debut book, *The God of Small Things*, which won the Booker Prize, has embodied, and manifested her childhood

memories in the small village of Ayemenem in Kerala, India, where she spent her childhood. The subversive and taboo-breaking novel by Roy explores topics such as casteism, masculinity, subalternity, child abuse, rootlessness, male patriarchy, sexuality, exploitation of women, themes of love and loss, broken marriages, family issues, violence, and the fight of women against exploitation in a male-dominated patriarchal society.

The relation between Ammu and Velutha, two of Arundhati Roy's main characters in "The God of Small Things," acts as a potent lens through which the book examines the complexities and ramifications of the Indian caste system. "The God of Small Things" depicts the rigid hierarchy of the caste system, with the Syrian Christians of the higher caste, such as Ammu's family, at the top, followed by the Paravans of the lower caste and the Untouchables, such as

Velutha, at the very bottom. Numerous facets of life, including social relationships and job prospects, are governed by this hierarchy. Discrimination based on caste is a prevalent theme throughout the novel. Characters like Velutha are marginalised and face discrimination due to their caste. Velutha, a Paravan by birth is considered untouchable by the upper-caste society, which ultimately leads to his tragic fate and horrible end. The implications of Ammu's (an upper-caste woman) and Velutha's (a lower-caste man) forbidden love are examined in the book. Arundhati Roy illustrates the tremendous suffering of Ammu and the untouchable Velutha. Their passionate relationship violates rigid societal conventions and ends tragically, underscoring the oppressive nature of caste-based discrimination.

Additionally, 'The God of Small Things' demonstrates the double standards that exist within the caste system. While members of the upper caste, like Baby Kochamma, are quick to impose caste restrictions on others, they often transgress these restrictions when it serves their own interests. The novel exposes the societal taboos that are hidden underneath as well as the unfair and discriminatory treatment of Dalits, the untouchables. Roy reveals the gruesome realities of rigid social classes and creed in this book. By gaining profound insights into the ways in which human desperation and desire manifest themselves within the boundaries of a rigidly established caste-ridden society, she attempts to uncover the historical roots of these realities. As a result, she purposefully raises awareness of social issues like the Indian caste system, violence, etc. in India.<sup>1</sup>

The central conflict of 'The God of Small Things' concerns the relationship

between a high caste and class Ammu and untouchable Velutha, a Paravan by birth. Ammu's character also emphasises the confluence of caste and gender. She experiences discrimination and prejudice not only for her relationship with Velutha but also because of her gender. Her affection for Velutha highlights the restrictions imposed on women by the caste system and society at large. The novel honestly examines the plight and position of the many women in India and the underprivileged classes, who are time and again suppressed, tamed, and silenced in orthodox and tradition-bound societies. Ammu, the novel's main character was never treated well because she was a girl; she was always viewed as "other" whereas her brother Chacko was loved and cared by all. Soon she gets married, but she doesn't know much about her spouse and there are some aspects about him that she has never been able to understand. Ammu's life has been marred by misery since she was a little child. She was unable to receive affection and support from her spouse even after becoming a mother; in fact, her husband's drinking worsened. One day, Mr. Hollick, Baba's English boss, unexpectedly invited him to his bungalow for a serious conversation. When he got home, he told Ammu that the boss had received complaints about him from both the labour and other assistant managers; as a result, Mr. Hollick had made a suggestion for their improvement that would not only help you and I but also our children's future. The suggestion from Mr. Hollick astounded Ammu. The proposal was to sleep with Mr. Hollick. After this proposal Ammu destroyed. Ammu doesn't want to leave her husband but when his violent outbursts started to affect the kids, she ultimately did. She went back to her parents' house in Ayemenem, where she

was met with hostility by her own parents. Ammu seeks refuge with the untouchable carpenter Velutha, a Paravan by birth, who works in Mammachi's Paradise Pickles and Preserves factory when she is repeatedly suppressed and rejected by her own family. The love affair between high class and a divorced Ammu and a low class, an untouchable Velutha causes further problems in Ammu and Velutha's life.

The protagonists in this novel experience a great deal of unfair treatment due to their caste and culture in a hostile and caste-ridden society, in addition to the inequality, unfairness, and bigotry based on gender. The love affair between Ammu and Velutha has negative social repercussions. Ammu is shunned by her family and the community for defying caste expectations. Velutha, on the other hand, faces far worse consequences. When their relationship is revealed, it sets off a chain of events such as he is wrongly accused and charged with rape, kidnapping, and the murder of Estha and Rahel's cousin and hence it results in Velutha's violent murder by the police. His caste identity plays a significant role in his tragic fate.

Velutha, the *God of Small Things* is a representative of an untouchable, a Dalit or a suppressed. The son of Vellya Paapen was Velutha. Velutha works in Mammachi's Paradise Pickles and Preserves factory and is skilled in carpentry and mechanics. Ammu, the mother of the twins Estha and Rahel, who divorced her husband because for his own personal gain he tried to sell her to his English Boss, was both physically and mentally dissatisfied with him. As a result, she becomes attracted to the untouchable Velutha, and soon the two begin to have physical relationship. The

happy moment of Ammu and Velutha is not accepted by the society and even their parents and in fact, they criticize and punish them. High class Ammu and the innocent Velutha, a lower class Paravan by birth, violate the laws of the caste system and the many restrictions that prevent them from falling in love. They also reject the man-made barriers and customs that were common for India's lower class, the untouchables. Since time immortal, the unfair, biased, and immoral treatment meted out to India's untouchables and low caste people is depressing and heartbreaking as Arundhati Roy demonstrates;

He was called Velutha—which means White in Malayalam—because he was so black. His father, Vellya Pappen, was a Paravan. As a young boy, Velutha would come with Vellya Pappen to the back entrance of the Ayemenem House to deliver the coconuts they had plucked from the trees in the compound. Pappachi would not allow Paravans into the house. Nobody would. They were not allowed to touch anything that Touchables touched. Caste Hindus and Caste Christians. Mammachi told Estha and Rahel that she could remember a time, in her girlhood, when Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan's footprint.<sup>2</sup> (Arundhati Roy, TGOST, 1997:73-74)

In "The God of Small Things," the titles "Dalit" and "Paravan" draw attention to the prejudices and inequities that still

exist in Indian culture because of caste. Due to his caste identification, Velutha, a Paravan and a Dalit, experiences prejudice, oppression, and violence. Everybody cheats and lies to Velutha. He is a prime example of how the oppressed and disadvantaged people suffer greatly as a result of caste stratification because they are merely considered as simple puppets and vote banks for politicians. His character serves as a lens through which the narrative explores the injustices and intricacies of the caste system, a major theme running through the entire book. Arundhati Roy presents the challenges, conundrums, and struggles of the untouchables and the lower castes with care in her writing:

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 had to put their hands over mouth when they spoke, to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed.<sup>3</sup> (Arundhati Roy, TGOST, 1997:73-74)

From the above quotation it is quite apparent that despite significant advancements in technology and education, the caste system's stronghold has not been eased. The low class and an untouchable Being a very talented carpenter with exceptional mechanical talents, the low class and untouchable Velutha is not cherished, revered, loved, or respected; in fact, he is shunned and excluded from society. The hiring of Velutha angered other Touchable factory workers, who felt that *Paravans were*

*not meant to be carpenters*. Simply to keep other Touchables happy;

Mammachi paid Velutha less than she would a Touchable carpenter but more than should would a Paravan. Mammachi didn't encourage him to enter the house. She thought that he ought to be grateful that he was allowed on the factory premises at all, and allowed to touch things that Touchables touched. She said it was a big step for a Paravan.<sup>4</sup> (Arundhati Roy, TGOST, 1997:77)

Politics and social status influence the untouchable Velutha's life. Even the most fundamental and universal human rights are denied to him. In the rigidly traditional, orthodox, and highly stratified Indian culture, the innocent Velutha endures the harshest forms of tyranny and marginalisation. The police are quite merciless and cruel in how they punish him. The police officials treat Velutha in an extremely cruel and barbaric manner simply because he is an untouchable, a member of a lower social class, and a Paravan by birth;

They wake Velutha with their boots. Estha and Rahel woke to the shout of sleep surprised by shattered kneecaps. Screams died in them and floated belly up, like dead fish, covering on the floor, rocking between dread and disbelief.<sup>5</sup> (Arundhati Roy, TGOST, 1997:308)

Even though the accusation against the innocent Velutha was never proven, the Touchable policeman nonetheless hurt, wounded, and injured him because he is an Untouchable, a member of a lower social class, and a

Paravan by birth. The abuse that the innocent Velutha received from the police is horrifyingly and abhorrently depicted by Arundhati Roy;

His skull was fractured in three places. His nose and both his cheekbones were smashed, leaving his face pulpy, undefined. The blow to his mouth had split open his upper lip and broken six teeth, three of which were embedded in his lower lip, hideously inverting his beautiful smile. Four of his ribs were splintered; one had pierced his left lung which was what made him bleed from his mouth. The blood on his breathe bright red. Fresh. Frothy. His lower intestine was ruptured and haemorrhaged, the blood collected in his abdominal cavity. His spine was damaged in two places, the concussion had paralysed his right arm and resulted in a loss of control over his bladder and rectum. Both his knee caps were shattered...One of them flicked at his penis with his stick. 'Come on, show us your special secret. Show us how big it gets when you blow it up.' Then he lifted his boot (with millipedes curled into its sole) and brought it down with a soft thud. They locked his arms across his back.<sup>6</sup>(Arundhati Roy, TGOST, 1997:310)

As a result of this terrible treatment, the untouchable Velutha passes away in the middle of the night. He is undetectable, leaving no footprints;

The God of Loss.

The God of Small Things.

He left no footprints in sand, no ripple in water, no image in mirrors.<sup>7</sup>(Arundhati Roy, TGOST, 1997:265)

Arundhati Roy's book, "The God of Small Things," aims to illustrate how distinctions in caste, class, gender, and race—all of which have an impact on the lives of children and interpersonal relationships—are imposed by Indian society on its citizens. She tries to promote the respect of mutual human values, which is crucial to enhancing and raising living standards in an economy. Arundhati Roy exposes and highlights the numerous flaws and misfortunes of the caste- and gender-based Indian society through the portrayal of Velutha, who is betrayed and ultimately falls victim to them. She desires at making positive changes by speaking out against societal injustices and wrongs.<sup>8</sup>Arundhati Roy's goal of abolishing social evils in society is made understandable by the ugly nature of society, the social evils of classism and the Indian caste system, as well as the predicament, dilemma, and plight of the characters like Ammu and the untouchable Velutha. Through this novel we see that untouchability is still being practiced in Indians society.

In the setting of Indian society, notably in Kerala, Arundhati Roy's book "The God of Small Things" examines caste dynamics. The novel explores how caste affects the lives and fates of the story's characters. Caste is a deeply ingrained social system in India. In "The God of Small Things," Arundhati Roy delves into the complexity and iniquities of the Indian caste system through a beautiful story.<sup>9</sup>She illuminates the persistent effects of caste on people and society at large through the lives of her characters and their



relationships, creating a vivid portrait of a pervasive social problem. Characters like Ammu and Velutha, who experience adversity, suffering, pain, and torment,

make it clear how urgent it is for us to alter our attitudes and behaviours and to treat everyone equally.

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