International Journal of Advanced Research,
Vol. 5 Issue. 3 pp. 31- 34
ISSN 2278-7275

THE GOD OF LOSS: REPRESENTATION OF THE PARAVANS IN THE NOVEL *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS* BY ARUNDHATI ROY

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ABSTRACT

Arundhati Roy, the winner of Booker prize for her novel The God of Small Things, follows Mulk Raj Anand's tradition of attacking degenerating aspects of Indian social systems. Roy's compassion for the underdog and her indignation of the exploitation of the weak by the forces of caste system, capitalism and industrialization invest her work with tremendous power. Untouchability has been the greatest hampering process which has always been a blood sucking leech to the Indian society. Untouchability, a great impediment to the marginalized or the dalit sections of the society, has shown how much deprivations these societies undergo. The God of Small Things is an attempt to bring into focus the deep roots of casteism, which has stifled healthy growth of considerable sections of Indian society. Though the ban of untouchability preached in the past, even today it strictly practices in the rural India. This article aims at exploring the condition of dalits and the deep rooted untouchability presented in the novel The God of Small Things.

Introduction

The God of Small Things can be considered as a sharp satire on Kerala society in the 1960s. Thus the novel reveals the confrontation between the haves and have nots, between the mighty and the weak, the 'Big man, the Laltain' and 'Small man, the Mombatti', between 'the God of big things' and 'the God of small things'. It represents all those people who are victimized by the forces of history, dead convention, false pride and respectability, the tyranny of the state, the politics of opportunities and androcentric order. The life in the novel is divided into two sets of forces, locked in a grim mortal fight. The upper world consists of the burden of history, dead limbs of tradition, family culture, pride and patriarchy and political opportunism- 'the God of Big Things'. The other layer comprises of children, insecure women, untouchables and working people with their struggle for identity and independence and natural urges and desire- 'the God of Small Things'.

Roy takes off from where Mulk Raj Anand left in his *Untouchable*. Anand suggested conversion to Christianity as one of the three alternatives for untouchables to free themselves from the scourge of Hindu orthodoxy. She successfully drives home the point that conversion to Christianity also failed to relieve the underdogs of the society from their misery. The novelist privileges the marginalized in her attempt to idealize Velutha, a despised Paravan. Attached to the Ayemenem household of a highly revered Christian family, Velutha is a convert. His father

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Vellya Pappen, was a toddy tapper and worked as a servant in the Ayemenem household. Velutha who used to accompany his father to the house, find a job in the pickle factory of Mammachi, the Ayemenem land lady, on the strength of his his personal skill and ability. Even as a child Velutha displayed his exceptional skill at building highly functional as well as decorative items by using locally available natural raw material. He would make "intricate toys, tiny windmills, rattles, minute jewel boxes out of dried palm reeds: he could carve perfect boats out of tapioca stems and figures on cashew nuts" (73). But being a victim of untouchability and caste system Velutha never got opportunity for further development and recognition he deserves:

> Mammachi rehired Velutha as the factory carpenter and put him in charge of general maintenance. It caused a great deal of resentment among the other touchable factory workers, because according to them, Paravans not meant to be carpenters. And certainly, prodigal Paravans were not meant to be rehired" (77).

Apart from his carpentry skills, Velutha had a way with machines, he mended radios, clocks and water pumps. He looked after the plumping and all the electrical gadgets in the house. But he was always marginalized by the society, even in his love affair with his dearest Ammukkutty. Ammu, the upper caste woman, has a doomed sexual encounter with the untouchable Velutha towards the end of the story, violating love laws that lay down "who should be loved and how. And how much" (33). The word Velutha in Malayalam means white. On the contrary, however, we know that he is ebony skinned. But he is certainly apotheosized by the author. Being an accomplished carpenter, Velutha makes little wonders in carved wood and thus is *The God of Small Things*, the titular hero of the novel. Thus he is:

> The God of Loss
> The God of Small Things
> Naked but for his nail varnish (290).

The indivious nature of traditional power-relationship and class character in a typical socio-cultural backdrop is latent is not only in the delineation of Velutha's character, but also in the social milieu of the time. The class ridden and almost bipolar society of Kerala, as there were no buffer castes quiet unlike North-Indian caste-profile, a number of Paravans, Pelavas and Pulayas converted to Christianity and joined the Anglican Church to escape from the scourge of untouchability. As an added incentive, they were given a little food and money and they came to be called as Rice Christians. They were made to have separate priests. In fact, they achieved nothing despite of disappointment as they remained Paravans albeit Paravan Christians. The innocent Velutha is beaten to the point of death by the merciless police force who bear grudge against him for keeping illicit relationship with Ammu. Mammachi's condonement rather

complicity in facilitating her son Chacko's sexual relationship with various low caste women which she justifies as being men's needs contrasts sharply with her revulsion on learning about her daughter's affair with Velutha. Baby Kochamma, Ammu's father's schemy sister, was fascinated towards Father Mulligan, a handsome Irish monk, has cunningly rejected the affair between Ammu and her dalit lover by saying that:

> How could she stand by the smells, haven't you noticed, they have a particular smell? These Paravans? (78).

Velutha was known and familiar to the family and develops a loving and even father like relation with the youngsters Rahel and Estha, but he is a dalit servant, he is assigned "outsider" status to the house and the family designation:

> Pappachi would not allow Paravans into the house. Nobody would. They were not allowed to touch anything the touchables touched. Caste Hindus and caste Christians (73).

Velutha offers what is denied to Ammu, Estha and Rahel in society and family. Baby Kochamma destroys Velutha during the incident of Sophie Mol's death, only because he belongs to the Paravan community. Although she knew the fact that Velutha was not responsible for Sophie Mol's death, she had filed F.I.R against the innocent young. Still the crime was not proved, the touchable police had brutally treated the accused untouchable as a murderer. Baby Kochamma was also successful in making numb both Rahel and Estha, the twin children of Ammu, while the barbaric police operation going on against Velutha. But the memory of a lie haunts Estha all his life that he decides not to utter any other word after that. The policemen wanted to know whether Velutha had kidnapped the children. Baby Kochamma had impressed upon him that if he did not lie, Ammu would rot in jail for the rest of her life. So Estha lied. That was the end of his childhood and the end of his innocence and of speech. " Childhood tip toed out, silence slid in like a bolt".

Velutha's low birth coupled with his political affiliation renders him disabled like the one-armed God of Ammu's dream. Neither his personal talent nor his political affinity rescued him. The image of the physically disabled god serves as the central image of the story. Veluth's mesmerizing talent catches Mammachi's attention and she would often say that " if only he had been a Paravan he might have become an engineer" (227). Chacko too acknowledges him as an excellent carpenter with an engineer's mind. As an accomplished mechanic, Velutha is "invaluable" for Chacko, for it is Velutha who "practically runs the factory" (279). However, neither education nor skill ensures freedom and equality for these underdogs. In a world of touchable's employment opportunities remain painfully limited for them. They are discriminated

against in terms of wages. In a social system where jobs are determined by one's caste, employing an untouchable as a carpenter even with salary is nothing less than a revolutionary step. Mammachi justifies it by thinking of her time, Paravans like other untouchables were not allowed to walk on public road, not allowed to cover their upper bodies and 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.

Although Roy presents both Ammu and Velutha as downtrodden, Ammu is someone superior to Velutha. Christina Bertrand Firebough opines that:

> When I would like to suggest is that, as a result of the combination of caste
>
> And colonialism Ammu can be seen as signifying the role of the "white
>
> English woman", while Velutha can be seen as the "dark native" (142).

The caste system as scrutinized throughout the novel. Unlike, Ammu, who is a rebel, many of other characters in the novel such as Mammachi, Pappachi, Baby Kochamma and Inspector Thomas operate under the belief that caste and class were vital to Indian culture and must be maintained. Roy maintains adherence to realism when she portrays Velutha's plausible violent end, and the irresistible disgust toward the inter caste affair felt by the family, community and communist party. Through the novel the novelist strongly criticizes the caste sysyem, untouchability and treatment of the Paravans in powerful language. The titular hero of the novel is a representative of the lower class talented and sincere youths. In a 1998 interview, Roy asserts, "since the dawn of the time, human society has found ways in which to divide itself, to make war across these divisions, to make love across these divisions. There will always be those of us who make these divisions and those of us who argue against them" (Abraham 91).

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