

**THE PLIGHT OF DALIT AND CULTURAL TENSION IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S  
*THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS***

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***Abstract***

*The dalits have traditionally been the most marginalised people in Indian society. Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras are the four primary hierarchical caste groups in Indian society. A category of 'ati-shudras' or Dalits (as they are now known) exists outside of this four-fold categorisation. They are the lowest caste in India, known as untouchables. The practise of untouchability was made illegal by the Indian Constitution in 1950. In practise, however, the Dalit groups continue to face severe social and economic isolation and discrimination. They are denied not only access to common property (water and land), but also equal educational and employment possibilities. This paper examines the hardship of Indian dalits from the beginning, as well as efforts to remove the caste system and their current political, economic, and social situation. The present paper focuses on the plight of Dalit due to the problem of untouchability in the society in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. The novel depicts the caste system and gender difference that have existence in the country after the seven decades of independence. The study deals with the bridge between trodden and downtrodden, exploiters and the exploited, and the dominant and the marginalized. It also focuses on how Dalit have been affected through power structure and caste system and how they have been undergone small insignificant things that shape their behavior and their lives. On the basis of caste, discrimination takes place in the country. Thus one can analyze the root issue of the society because of it such incident occurs repeatedly.*

**Keywords:** Dalits, Untouchability, Discrimination, Power Structure, Cultural Tension, Domination, Caste System.

The deeper study of the novel, firstly one should understand that who are dalits? The word “dalit” is derived from Sanskrit which means ground, suppressed, crushed or broken into pieces. Actually, dalit is a designation for a group of people traditionally regarded as untouchables. They were considered as untouchables because their presence was considered to be so polluting that contact with them was to be avoided at all costs. Dalits or untouchables are marginalized brutally by the upper class because of the prevalent caste system in India. The term caste comes from the Spanish and Portuguese word “casta” which means “race”, “breed” or “lineage”. There are different castes which fall under four varnas. These are Brahmins (includes priests) Kshatriyas (includes kings, royal family, warriors), Vaishyas (includes merchants, farmers, Traders) and shdhras (includes laborers and servants). Unfortunately, dalits are the untouchables and are below four castes. Caste not only dictates one’s occupation but dietary habits and interaction with members of others caste also. Members of a high caste enjoy more wealth and opportunities while members of a low caste perform menial jobs. The untouchables are therefore considered polluted and not to be touched. The untouchables have separate entrances to homes and must drink from separate wells. They are considered to be in a permanent state of impurity. Untouchables were named “Harijans” (Children of God) by Mahatma Gandhi. The unjust and malice treatment meted out to the untouchables in India has been a matter of greater concern. Since, times immemorial, they have been suffering severe humiliations at the hands of the upper sections of the society. “Caste plays a highly important role in shaping the lives of the masses.”

In Indian writing in English, Dalits have been represented to their core by writers like Mulk Raj Anand in the pre-independent era and Arundhati Roy in the postmodern content. Mulk Raj Anand was the true champion of the underdogs. He was the first writer who represented the victimization of the Dalits in different strata of the society. Anand’s novel untouchable has set the benchmark for the writers writing for dalits. Arundhati Roy’s Booker Prize winning novel the *God of Small Things* deals with the ravages of caste system in south Indian state, Kerala. Arundhati Roy has vividly portrayed the various atrocities against the subalterns and in particular the problems of the dalit Christians in this novel. When the

Christian missionaries came to Kerala, they began to convert the lower caste people such as pulayas and parayas into Christianity. The nearly converted Christians become totally helpless when the dominant class within the church rejected them as unwanted people. The pathetic plight of these people has been represented in Arundhati Roy's novel, *The God of Small Things*.

Arundhati Roy was appalled at the barbarous treatment meted out to the lower sections of the society, even in this postcolonial age. In her book *Power Politics*, she says that:

Fifty years after independence, India is still struggling with the legacy of colonialism, still flinching from the cultured insult and we are still caught up in the business of "disproving" the White world's definition of us. Even the escape from the blood-thirsty period of colonialism has not brought any respite to these untouchables. (Roy-13)

The caste system in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* reflects the real condition of Indian social structure. Throughout the novel, one witness humorous encounters between caste and class. In this novel, Ayemenem, a small village in Kerala, is a very significant place. Ammu, the female protagonist of the novel is married to an alcoholic husband, who treats her in a beastly manner, and even asks her to satisfy the carnal pleasure of his boss, so that he can keep his job secure. Due to the unjust action of her husband, Ammu gets divorce from him and she returns to her parental home in Ayemenem along with her dizygotic twins, Estha and Rahel. She was seeking some respite in her home but unfortunately, her own home turned out to be a horrid place for her. She suffers a lot of mental blows by her own family members. Thus, her home became a storehouse of her sufferings.

In Kerala, the paravans are considered as untouchables. When nobody from her family took care for her and her twins, she was fascinated towards an untouchable Dalit Velutha because he loved Ammu and her kids. Velutha taught the kids, boating and fishing. The kids enjoyed their learning because they didn't know what untouchability was. Ammu also observed "the high delight" (Roy-175) on kids' faces. The friendly meetings of the twins and Velutha had brought nearer to each other, the twins, Velutha and Ammu. And

consequently, Ammu was fascinated towards the untouchable Velutha. Thus Roy in *The God of Small Things* writes that “the focal event of the novel is a socially transgressive and ultimately doomed love affair between Ammu and a low caste carpenter, Velutha.” (Roy-73-74)

Arundhati Roy has represented the plight of dalits and subalterns in a hierarchical structure of power in this novel. Roy makes a distinction between the oppressor and the oppressed in the third chapter of the novel and it is being entitled as “The Big Man Laltain, Small Man The Mombatti.” By the term ‘Laltain’, Roy means the high class people and Mombatti refers to the weaker section of the society. Both ‘Laltain’ and ‘Mombatti’ give us light and burn another lamp. The ‘Laltain’ is well fed and well protected. It can bravely face the blowing wind. But on the other hand, the ‘Mombatti’ has no glass, no protection, and no support. It can easily be blown out by the surge of wind. But the advantage of the ‘Mombatti’ is that it can soon light another lamp; ‘Laltain’, on the other hand, is somewhat stubborn to burn other’s light. Thus, through this fine connotation, the author has successfully tried her best to arouse our sense of pity and catharsis for the Mombatties, the down trodden and have-nots, the dalit and the deserted, the marginalized and the defenseless. The two central characters of the novel Valutha and Ammu constitute the Mombatties in the novel and all the other power exerting people, such as Chaeko, Baby Kochamma and Comrade Pillai come under the banner of Laltain. Valutha is a victim of caste subalternity. He is the representation of the untouchable in the novel *The God of Small Things*. He is black in complexion and there is an irony within the name Velutha, as it suggests ‘something white’. Comrade Pillai, who is supposed to safeguard the rights of the power, acts against Velutha for reason of caste: “He may be very well okay as a person. But other workers are not happy with him. Already they are coming to me with complaints... you see comrade, from local stand point, these caste issues are very deep rooted.” (Roy-278)

Velutha is an untouchable and dalit of the novel who bears the brunt of social presentation. Though he is a paravan, an outcast, he is gifted with so many virtues. He symbolically stands for the ‘God of Small Things’. He is an expert mechanic and craftsman. Perhaps this is why Mammachi employed him in her factory to do a carpenter’s work. But the workers already employed in the factory were not happy to see Velutha as a carpenter.

‘Vehutha’ was also seen taking part in the political activity and fighting for the cause of Marxism. The twins were very fond of him and were highly impressed by the craftsman’s skilled hand. He converted himself into the Christian religion only to immune from the victimization of a castiest society. But his conversion and his technical expertise, apart from many other good things, never brought any fruitful result in this cruel and callous society. Vehutha along with his father always used to go to the Ayemenem house to deliver coconut plucked from the trees. But they were never allowed to enter the room. They were not permitted to touch a thing that a “Touchable” touched. Mammachi, Estha’s Grand mother remembered a day:

When paravans were exacted to crawl backward with a broom, sweeping away their foot-prints so that Brahmin and Christians wouldn’t defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a paravan’s foot print. In Mammachi 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 their mouths when they spoke to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed. (Roy-73-74)

It is to be noted that untouchability is one of the greatest evils that our country has been facing from the time immemorial untouchability is that disease which creates contagion in our social structure. Arundhati Roy, a great champion of the cause of the dalit and the deserted points out those unnoticed shades of a social problem which generally escapes the eyes of social scientists. Velutha’s grandfather kelan, along with a number of other untouchables embraced Christianity to escape the scourge of untouchability. But they, later on found that they had done a blunder. Though they were given separate churches and separate priests and in a special favor they were even given their own separate Pariah Bishop, but after 1947, they found that they were not entitled to any government’s benefits like job reservation nor bank loans at low interest. Roy says in the novel: “It was little like having to sweep away your foot-prints without a broom or worse, not being allowed to leave foot-prints at all.” (Roy-74)

Velutha had to fight for his existence in the society. He had to struggle hard to achieve a sense of identity. He never behaved like a fuming or roaring tiger. He never tried to

hammer the age-old norms of society and traditions. He never behaved like a rough and savage man. He was a man of innocence and simplicity, the god of small things, the god of loss, a man who knew how to make intricate toys, tiny wind mills, rattles, and minute jewel boxes out of dried palm reeds; a man who could carve perfect boats out of tapioca steps and figurines on cashew nuts. When Mammachi decided to enclose the back verandah, it was Velutha, who designed and built the strong folding door. According to Roy Velutha knew more about the machines in the factory than anyone else. Mammachi often said in the novel that "if only he hadn't been a paravan he might have become an engineer." (Roy-75)

In spite of all these great virtues in Velutha, he doesn't command respect and proper treatment in society. Vellya Paapen, the father of Velutha was strongly dead against any type of education or advance knowledge in a paravan. He thought that in a paravan they could be construed as insolence. He always grudged the craftsmanship and natural skills of Velutha. Further, Vallya quickly degenerated into nagging and bickering and as a result, there was a sense of unpleasantness between father and son. Due to this, Velutha began to avoid going home.

The tragedy began to take its toll in the life of Velutha when he come in contact with Ammu or when Ammu's troubled eyes and dimpled cheeks turned Velutha a transgressor aswell as a victim into the secret heart of a touchable woman and a miserable victim of its punishment in the police custody. Velutha developed his weakness for Ammu and vice-versa. As a result they spent their vulgar nights on the bank of the river. As illustrated in the novel:

Clouded eyes held clouded eyes in a steady gaze and a luminous woman open herself to a luminous man- She was as wide and deep as a river in spate. He started on her waters. She could feel him moving deeper and deeper into her. Frantie. Frenzied. Asking to be let in further. Stopped only by the shape of her- The shape of him. And when he was refused, when he had touched the deepest depths of her, with a sobbing, shuddering sigh, he drowned. (Roy-337)

This illicit love affair between Velutha and Ammu was dead against the attitude of both Marxism and Socialism. The Ayemenem leader, Comrade Pillai, in his heart of hearts, does not approve this relationship. Mr. Pillai is dissembler who had no real

attachment to the principles of Marxism. He is such a leader who only knows how to grease the palm or how to feather his own nest.

Velutha, the *God of Small Things* in the novel, was punished by the police for an unknown reason. He was accused of murdering Sophie Mole and molesting Ammu. When Mammachi heard about the illicit relationship between Ammu and Velutha, she summoned Velutha to Ayemenem house. Roy described graphically in her novel:

When Velutha arrived, Mammachi lost her bearings and spewed her blind venom, her crass, insufferable insults, at a pond in the sliding- folding door until baby Kochamma tactfully swiveled her around and aimed her rage in the right direction, at Velutha standing very still in the room. (Roy-283-284)

The false story was fabricated by baby Kochamma to take revenge upon Velutha for his relationship with Ammu. Since Velutha was a subaltern, the police turned a deaf ear to his plan. Velutha approached Comrade Pillai for help since he was a card-holder of the communist party. Pillai refused to help him and reminded him saying, "It's not in the party's interest to take such matters. Violating party discipline means violating party unity." (Roy-28) Velutha was neglected both by the police and the political party to which he owed his allegiance. When Velutha was in police custody, Ammu rushed to the police station and appealed to police that Velutha was innocent. But Ammu was humiliated in the Police station by the police inspector Thomas Mathew. The dalits and untouchables have no scope for convincing things. They have been forced to maintain the age old tradition of silence by the lattaans. Both Velutha and Ammu failed in their attempt to communicate to their authority. The Mombatties have never been allowed to voice their protest against lattaans, as they have been silenced to nothingness. Velutha was severely and brutally beaten by the police that he died in the custody of the police. The torture of Velutha by the police was heart rending Roy describes:

Blood spilled from his skull like a secret. His face was swollen and his head looked like a pumpkin, too large and heavy for the slender stem it grew from. A pumpkin with a monstrous upside-down smile. Police boots stepped back from the rim of a pool of urine spreading from him, the bright bare electric bulb, reflected in it. (Roy-319-20)

Velutha, the *God of Small Things* in the novel, died in the police custody at the Kottayam police station. The police didn't listen to his plea as he was a dalit and not supported by anyone. Velutha was dumped in the pauper's pit even though he was a Christian. An innocent carpenter who had the gift of an engineer had to become the scape goat for the prestige of Ayemenem family. Baby Kochamma and Comrade Pillai were responsible for the inhuman death of Velutha. The dying moments of Velutha in the police station had been described by Roy in the novel as:

Boot on bone. On teeth. The muffled grunt when a stomach is kicked in...his skull was fractured in three places. His nose and both his cheek bones were smashed, leaving his face pulpy, undefined. The blow to his mouth had split his upper lip and broken six teeth. Four of his ribs were splintered; one had pierced his left lung, which was what made him bleed from his mouth. (Roy-308-310)

Arundhati Roy in her novel, *The God of Small Things* has presented the hardships and the deplorable conditions of the people who are segregated on the basis of their caste. Roy has portrayed that Velutha, the God of loss, takes no cognizance of social conventions and restrictions and thus comes in conflict with history and tradition without any chance of success. On the other hand, Ammu who antagonizes her family by marginalizing herself socially was maltreated by the governing body of the family. When her nocturnal rendezvous with Velutha was discovered and in the drowning of Sophie Mol was wrongly associated with her illicit affairs, she was asked mercilessly to leave the Ayemenem house. Ammu was tormented by her family for her relationship with Velutha. She had to seek a job outside for her survival. But she was found dead at the Bharat lodge in Alleppey where she had gone for a job interview as someone's secretary. The church refused to bury her, as she had gone against the norms of the church. Ammu's dead body was cremated in an electronic crematorium. Roy in the novel describes: "Her ashes. The gift from her bones. The teeth from her smile. The whole of her crammed into a little clay pot. Receipt no. Q 493673". Roy observed in the novel: "She died alone. With a noisy ceiling fan for company and no Estha to lie at the back of her. She was thirty one. Not old, not young, but a viable, dieable age." (Roy-161)

Rahel, Estha and Sophia Mol are the next Mombatties who develop a sense of taciturnity and isolation in a conservative framework. In other words, the brutality and persecution Ammu and Velutha underwent, was also operative against Estha and Rahel. They were treated by the family as outsiders Estha led a miserable life in Calcutta at his father's residence. Estha's taciturnity and his loneliness are the result of brutality and savagery of the Big Men- Baby Kochamma, Chacko, Mammachi, and Inspector Thomas Mathew. When the twins go to the Ayemenem house, they become prey to morbid stiffness and dry and sapless treatment. Rahel and Sophie Mol were also subjected to the tyranny and injustice, abuse and insult, thus, the children of the novel become the objects of suffering, pity, contempt and hatred. Neglected both in home and outside they were like a ship without radar or a gang without a leader.

Thus, Arundhati Roy has portrayed the sociopolitical realism of democratic India, where one community became the victim of the brutality of the other community. *The God of Small Things* is a story about the brutality against the dalits the Ayemenem incident of killing. Velutha is the microscopic vision of the orthodoxy's brutality against dalits. Thus, Roy succeeded in the depiction of the plight of dalits in her novel.

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