

Representing the Downtrodden: Dalits and Women in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract

*There are myriad forms of discriminatory systems all over the world, namely patriarchal oppression, caste-based oppression, class bias, racial bias etc. In the Indian context, the subjugations of dalits and women happen to be two of the major forms of marginalization. Women are subjugated universally by the patriarchal society and even more so in the Third World countries like India. However, if we carry out a comparative study between caste-based subjugation and the patriarchal one, we shall find that the domination of the dalits is the more severe of the two. With the purpose of establishing this point, the present paper intends to study Arundhati Roy's debut novel *The God of Small Things* (1997) which portrays that the dalits are more severely marginalized than the women.*

Keywords: Caste oppression, patriarchy, untouchability, power relations

One of the significant reasons behind the subjugation of a large number of people in the society is the inequality in the power distribution prevalent in society. Though all subjugated sections experience deprivation, injustice and oppression, however, the ideology employed behind each form of subjugation varies to a great extent. Thereby, we come across myriad forms of oppression --- namely, patriarchal oppression, caste based discrimination, racial bias, class discrimination etc. While patriarchal oppression victimizes women, class bias targets all the impoverished masses. Caste bigotry discriminates between people on the grounds of their birth, while racism differentiates on the basis of people's skin colour. The above-mentioned categorization is by no means absolute, as there are instances where two or more categories of oppression merge together in order to victimize a particular group. For example, if we consider the case of dalit women, we can observe that in their case there is an interplay of three forms of domination, i.e. caste-based domination, class domination and also

patriarchal oppression. Majority of the dalits are still reeling under terrible poverty. Dalit women hailing from those poor families belong to the class of have-nots. Secondly, because of their caste identity, they encounter caste based oppression in the hands of the entire upper caste community who look upon them as untermensch, subhuman. And thirdly, the dalit women are susceptible to patriarchal domination from both dalit as well as non-dalit men. However, each and every form of domination is perpetrated in order to maintain the power dynamics in society. Deprived of social rights and justice, the marginalized communities are condemned to social fringes.

Arundhati Roy's debut novel *The God of Small Things* (1997) captures multiple forms of marginalization rampant in society. Among these, two significant forms of subjugation dealt with by Roy are patriarchal and caste oppression. While both systems comprise oppressive social structures and discriminatory ideologies, there are some contrasting features which distinguish one from the other. While patriarchal domination possesses a universal character, caste-based discrimination is restricted only to some South-Asian parts of the world. Again, while the former to some extent loses its severity with the social advancement of women, the stigma of caste sticks whatever be the social position of dalits.

However, both forms of discrimination can be traced back to historical times. The classical writer Aristotle believed "the female is female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities" (Selden et al 125). In the ancient Indian literature, we find that the position of women is deemed as much subordinate to men. In Sukumari Bhattacharya's seminal text *Prachin Bharat: Samaj o Sahitya* (Ancient India: Society and Literature), we find that from the Vedic ages, women are viewed as beings who should be controlled by the male members of their families as they have no right to enjoy freedom (Bhattacharya 27-37). Exploring the ancient Indian literary works extensively, Bhattacharya claims that the women were marginalized on economic, social and cultural grounds by the male-dominated society. The Hindu marriage rituals always proclaim that the wife should obey her husband and his family members at every stage of life (Bhattacharya 33). Denying the women every social right and opportunity, the patriarchal society constructed the 'gender identity', thus imposing on women an inferior social status. Lois Tyson observes:

Traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing and submissive. These gender roles have been used very successfully to justify inequities, which still occur today, such as excluding women from equal access to leadership and decision-making positions..., paying men higher wages than women for doing the same job..., and convincing women that they are not fit for careers in such areas as mathematics and engineering. (Tyson 85)

Like the gender identity, the caste identity is also a social construct. It condemns the so-called lower castes to a miserable life, devoid of social justice and human dignity. Akin to the patriarchal oppression, the caste discrimination is also approved by the Vedas and the

literature of the Vedic and post-Vedic eras. The allotment of the lowest social position to the lower castes is legitimized by ancient scriptures like *Taittiriya Samhita*, *Dharmasutra* etc. It is declared in *Taittiriya Samhita* that “The Shudra, because he was created from the feet, is to be the transporter of others and to subsist by the feet” (qtd. in Ghurye 45). The casteist ideology, as formulated by the Brahmanic society, claims that the lower castes themselves are to be blamed for the misery in their lives. Their sins in their past lives (as propounded by the karma theory), or their birth from Brahma’s feet (as per the Creation myth), or their natural impurity (as per version of congenital purity/pollution), account for their lowness or lack of power. This is two-pronged attack on the dalits, for it not only justifies casteist exploitation but simultaneously exonerates the upper castes from all blames. No wonder that dalit writers and activists like Arjun Dangle have voiced their strong protests against caste-based domination.

Roy’s novel *The God of Small Things* (1997) vividly portrays the violent oppression meted out to dalits and women in a patriarchal society. Reena Kothari, in her article “The Multiple Power Structure in Ayemenem”, comments that “It (the novel) shows how the caste system and hierarchy, which is still prevalent in India, operates and is a powerful ally of patriarchy, which is another powerful component of Indian society” (Bhatt & Nityanandam 143). Through a close reading of Roy’s novel, the present paper intends to explore the basics of patriarchal and caste-based domination as portrayed in the novel, and also to evaluate which group is more disempowered.

In the novel, Roy presents a Syrian Christian family still adhering to casteist beliefs. The Syrian Christians of Kerala considered themselves to be Brahmans who had been converted to Christianity by Saint Thomas the Apostle (Roy 66). Alex Tickell rightly quotes Brown who said that the Syrian Christians were “Christians of Mesopotamia in faith and worship and ethic [and] Indians in all else” (Brown, qtd. in Tickell 22). Though Christianity as a religion promulgates equality among its members, however, in the Indian context, the Christian converts tend to retain their caste status which had been a part of their identity before conversion. This is possibly because their social status as ‘upper castes’ endows them with a power over the lower castes, thereby providing them with the opportunity to enjoy the same privileges which they used to possess before getting converted. It shows that the casteist mindset is so deeply entrenched in the entire nation that not even change of faith can uproot it from the society.

The Syrian Christian family comprises the patriarch Pappachi, his wife Mammachi, his sister Baby Kochamma, his son Chacko and daughter Ammu. Being a divorcee and single mother of two children Estha and Rahel, Ammu leads a life lacking in dignity in her father’s house. The other family, which is situated at the exact opposite pole from the Syrian Christian family in terms of social and economic status, is the family of Velutha. His family comprises his father Vellya Paapen and his paralysed brother Kuttappen. We also come to know about his mother Chella, who had died of tuberculosis without any medical treatment.

Dalits and women, despite constituting separate subjugated categories, have to negotiate a common obstacle --- attainment of education. Roy's novel presents that Ammu was not provided with a college education as her father Pappachi considered that "college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl" (Roy 38). In this context we may recall the case of Virginia Woolf who was deprived of Greek lessons whereas her brothers were provided with it (Selden et al 128). The male-dominated society, in this way, situates women in a subordinate platform. In the text, we find that Velutha has attained education upto high school in the school for Untouchables and has also acquired the skill of carpentry from Johann Klein, a carpenter from Bavaria (Roy 75). In comparison to Velutha who is educated, his illiterate brother Kuttappen is viewed as a "good, safe Paravan" (Roy 207). Velutha's education makes him "a Paravan with a future" (Roy 119), thereby posing a threat to the monopoly of the upper castes. Keeping the dalits illiterate blocks all possibilities of their attaining any other job except the caste jobs which sustain their low status. Moreover, education renders them conscious of what is responsible for their abjection, thereby helping them to overthrow the fetters with which they are bound by the upper castes. Angela Y. Davis, in her book *Women, Race and Caste* (2011), while discussing about the significance of education for black people, cites Frederick Douglass who had asserted "knowledge unfits a child to be a slave" (Davis 100). This saying comes to be true in the case of Velutha, in whom education instills:

...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. (Roy 76)

The famous dalit writer Omprakash Valmiki, in his autobiography *Joothan* (2003), narrates how Kaliram, the headmaster of his school had compelled him to sweep the classrooms and the entire school compound instead of attending classes for a number of days (Valmiki 5-6). When he was in the final year of his intermediate programme in school, he was again discriminated against on the basis of caste by his Chemistry teacher Brajpal Singh, as a consequence of which he failed in class (Valmiki 65). These instances confirm that the upper caste society, in order to monopolise power, restrict education for the dalits.

As a consequence of this lack of education in the cases of dalits and women, they are rendered less independent economically. Lois Tyson, in the context of patriarchal oppression, rightly observes that the patriarchal society attempts "to justify and maintain the male monopoly of positions of economic, political and social power, in other words, to keep women powerless by denying them the educational and occupational means of acquiring economic, political and social power" (Tyson 86). The same observation can be applied in the case of dalits who had been retained powerless for centuries by the Brahmanic society. Inability to enter any other profession except their caste specific jobs not only rendered the dalits economically marginalized but negated all their scopes for overcoming the situation as

well. In the novel, we can see that the other touchable factory workers grudge Velutha's employment as a carpenter because, being a Paravan by caste, his traditional job is toddy-tapping. However, though Mammachi employs him as a carpenter she pays him less than she would an upper caste carpenter but more than she would a Paravan. This is mainly because "she knew that nobody else would hire him (Velutha) as a carpenter" (Roy 77). Mammachi, therefore, follows the casteist strategy of oppressing the lower castes economically. By taking advantage of the prevalent caste bias, she exploits the labour and exceptional skill of Velutha without paying him what he deserves. It is the caste system that is to be blamed for such unfair attitude of the upper castes towards the dalits.

Ammu is also excluded from the heirship of her father's property as well as of her mother's business. Her family deems her brother Chacko to be the sole inheritor of their family property. Roy notes "though Ammu did as much work in the factory as Chacko, whenever he was dealing with food inspectors or sanitary engineers, he always referred to it as *my* factory, *my* pineapples, *my* pickles. Legally, this was the case because Ammu, as a daughter, had no claim to the property" (Roy 57). In this context, we may relate the fact that Arundhati Roy's mother, Mary Roy, had singlehandedly fought and won a case which gained equal rights for Syrian Christian women on their father's properties. Before Mary Roy filed this case, the daughters in the Syrian-Christian community could inherit only a quarter of the amount a son could inherit or 5000 rupees, whichever was less (Tickell 13). Mary Roy's struggle posed a challenge to the male-dominated social structure that tended to concentrate all the material wealth within the corpus of the male members only. On the other hand, the patriarchal ideology propagates the prejudice that the actual place of women is in the domestic circle, not in the professional one. However, in the view of Christine Delphy, the women's work in the domestic field also remains unpaid because "patriarchy defines women in their domestic roles as nonworkers" (qtd. in Tyson 98). Tyson asserts that this economic exploitation is extended to the professional circle as well because employers pay women workers roughly between fifty-five and eighty cents, depending on their ethnicity and age, for every dollar earned by men (Tyson 85). This economic exploitation renders women to some extent powerless in the domestic as well as the professional spheres.

Another very potent strategy employed by the powerful section is to indoctrinate the downtrodden groups ideologically, and thereby secure their hegemony over the latter. Ideology happens to be a very powerful weapon of the ruling class with which it justifies the prevalent social inequality. Althusser defines ideology as "a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (qtd. in Selden et. al 107-108). Ideology blunts the awareness of being subjected to injustice, and thereby the unequal distribution of power in society is projected as normal. Consequently, the scope of resistance against the oppressive social structure is minimized. In the novel, we find that the patriarchal as well as the casteist ideologies influence the majority of the downtrodden section who, because of indoctrination, rather than questioning the system become mouthpieces of the

dominating class. Roy portrays that whereas Baby Kochamma and Mammachi have acceded to the patriarchal norms, Ammu has strongly resisted against them and finally transgressed them. Mammachi is regularly beaten by her husband, but she hardly protests against it. She also tolerates when Pappachi abruptly stops her violin lessons and refuses to help her in any way with her pickle business. This acquiescence to the patriarchal domination situated Mammachi in a subordinate place in society, specified for women by patriarchy. In this context, we may cite the words of the famous feminist critic Simone de Beauvoir who said “If woman seems to be the inessential [being] which never becomes essential, it is because she herself fails to bring about this change” (qtd in Tyson 97). Mammachi’s ideological conditioning is again foregrounded when she, despite sanctioning Chacko’s extra-marital affairs as “Man’s Needs” (Roy 168), becomes furious with Ammu on knowing about her clandestine relationship with Velutha. Baby Kochamma also turns out to be an ardent supporter of patriarchal views:

She subscribed wholeheartedly to the commonly held view that a married daughter had no position in her parents’ home. As for a *divorced* daughter --- according to Baby Kochamma, she had no position anywhere at all. And as for a *divorced* daughter from a *love* marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochamma’s outrage. As for a *divorced* daughter from an *intercommunity love* marriage --- Baby Kochamma chose to remain quiveringly silent on the subject. (Roy 45-46)

But Ammu defies the patriarchal code of conduct several times in the novel. Not only she marries in a different community without her parents’ permission, she also displays the pluck of ending that marriage and returning to her parents’ home with her children. Unlike her mother, she refuses to passively bear with the tortures of her husband. In her father’s house as well, she asserts herself as far as possible. And finally, her transgression of the conventional “Love Laws” (Roy 177) poses a challenge against the traditional social structure. Thus, Ammu’s mindset reflects a feminist outlook towards life.

In the cases of Velutha and his father Vellya Paapen, we can detect a similar aspect. While Vellya Paapen displays servility towards the casteist social structure, Velutha is articulate against it. Vellya Paapen, referred to as an “Old World Paravan” (Roy 76) by the novelist, is completely moulded by the casteist ideology. Consequently, he feels anxious about Velutha’s self-respect and his assertive nature. In Vellya Paapen’s view, Velutha’s self-confidence and fearlessness “(could and would, and indeed, *should*) be construed as insolence” (Roy 76) for a Paravan. Thus, unknowingly, he participates in the process of marginalizing the lower castes by submitting to the authority of the casteist society. Such ideological conditioning of the dalits has prohibited them from registering a protest against upper caste oppression. The renowned dalit writer Bama, in her autobiography *Karukku*, narrates an instance where her grandmother reveals an attitude of ultimate subjugation towards her upper caste employers. In answer to Bama’s protest against tolerating the

humiliations of the upper castes and accepting their left-over foods, Bama's grandmother says "These people are the maharajas who feed us our rice. Without them, how will we survive? Haven't they been upper-caste from generation to generation, and we been lower caste? Can we change this?"(Bama 14)

However, though there are several similarities between the two dispossessed communities of women and dalits, there are some factors which distinguish the two as well. Firstly, in the eyes of the powerful section, the social positions of these two communities differ in terms of honour. Whereas the women of a family constitute the social honour of that family, the untouchable, because of his/her birth, lacks any kind of social honour at all. In the case of women, the ideology of 'Angel in the House' demands them to be submissive, and more importantly, pure. Thereby, it restricts their freedom and renders them powerless in front of patriarchy. However, despite being marginalized, unlike the untouchables, their existence is not deemed as impure or degraded. The traditional social structure considers the dalits to be polluted and through their touch, the purity of the upper castes is compromised. This stigma of untouchability subjects the dalits to immense humiliation. V. Geetha, in her article "Bereft of Being: the Humiliations of Untouchability", writes:

...when one's corporeal and spiritual existence is itself considered evidence of one's lowness, when being (as in the self) is disallowed the knowledge of its integrity, its claims to self-respect, then a profound crisis besets the self --- a crisis which the American philosopher Cornel West describes very aptly as 'an ontological wounding'... (V.Geetha, in Guru 95)

However, in the case of women also, they hardly have any right over their bodies. Ranjana Harish, in her article "Her Body was her Own: A Feminist note on Ammu's Female Estate", quotes Sidonie Smith who confirms "In the patriarchal set up the object female body has not been a personal body, however. It has been the communities' body, one which threatens to contaminate the body politic, to destroy the very fabric of cultural identity and nationalism" (qtd. in Harish 47). Though women are not allowed to assert their right over their bodies, their bodies are not marked as bearers of pollution, perhaps except in times of menstruation. Thus, this stigma of untouchability creates a point of distinction between the two downtrodden communities. In the text, we find several instances of Velutha being treated disgracefully by the upper castes. His lower caste identity not only makes him encounter impediments in the factory, but his entry in the Ayemenem house is allowed 'only' when it is absolutely necessary (Roy 77). This is because "Pappachi would not allow Paravans into the house. Nobody would. They were not allowed to touch anything Touchables touched" (Roy 73). Such humiliating existence was unique in the case of the dalits. Moreover, they also suffered from an identity crisis. S.D.Kapoor, in his book *Dalits and African Americans: A Study in Comparison* (2004), analyses the reason behind this issue. He argues that unlike the African Americans, the untouchables do not belong to any separate ethnic category than the upper castes. Still they were "denied full access to the cultural and mythological resources of

the mainstream culture...Thus Dalits were kept on the fringe of the dominant Hindu culture and were fed on the crumbs thrown to them by the caste Hindus" (S.D.Kapoor 92). In this way, the dalits have been subjected to a more ruthless form of discrimination than the women have been done.

In Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), we observe that both Ammu and Velutha transgress the traditional social norms by falling in love and engaging in physical relationship. But "all social forces controlled by the upper castes join hands in keeping Velutha in his place" (S.D.Kapoor 236). Though Ammu and her twins are also subjected to torture and punishment, it is Velutha who is mercilessly beaten up which turns fatal in his case. It signifies that, for the society, the urge to check the self-assertion of a dalit is more crucial than to counter the defiance of the women. Roy portrays the terrible beating that Velutha endured in the hands of the policemen in vivid details. The indescribable torture meted out to Velutha aptly reveals the hatred the upper caste society bears towards rebel untouchables.

His skull was fractured in three places. His nose and both his cheekbones smashed, leaving his face pulpy, undefined. The blow to his mouth had split open the upper lip and broken six teeth, three of which were embedded in the lower lip, hideously inverting his beautiful smile. Four of his limbs were splintered, one had pierced his left lung, which was what made him bleed from his mouth.... 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. (Roy 310)

The brutal and merciless thrashing that Velutha suffered was the punishment meted out to him by the Brahmanic society for transgressing the casteist decrees and asserting his human rights. Even if it is transgression, it is a transgression involving two people. But the caste system is so powerful that Ammu, who is otherwise vulnerable is spared, but it is Velutha who has to suffer the brunt of the upper caste anger as the "only one victim" (Roy 191). Though Ammu also suffered terribly for her 'crime', her suffering is almost nothing compared to the atrocities that Velutha underwent.

Tickell, in his book *Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things* (2007), cites Popham who has quoted one important remark of Roy. While pledging the royalties of the Malayalam translation of *The God of Small Things* to the Dalit Sahitya Akademi (the Academy of Untouchable Literature), Roy claimed that the eradication of caste inequality was "going to be, and indeed ought to be [India's] biggest challenge" (qtd. in Tickell 28). Though Roy does not overtly mention it, it is clear that she considers the scourge of caste as the most important issue of the novel.

The Indian society has so deeply internalized the discriminatory ideologies that it is difficult for it to recognize the human rights of the discriminated communities. Connected

with this discriminatory ideology is a very regressive mindset which is adverse to the establishment of a just and equal social order. The pathetic ending of the lives of Velutha and Ammu establishes that Indian society needs to uproot casteist prejudice from its mind in order to acknowledge the equality of rights of every individual. Moreover, in the case of the dalits, the ideology that they are inherently 'polluted' condemns them to a subhuman status. In order to uplift the social status of the dalits from subhuman to human level, the mindset of the entire society needs to be revamped.

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