

Caste and Identity in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract

The God of Small Things centers around caste and a chain of other issues. The paper analyses the connection between caste, Velutha and social mobilization in the novel. Meanwhile, the situations of subalterns in India are manifested because they are the significant Cultural "others" in Indian history. This is accompanied by the problem of identity. Under the dominance and influence of colonialism, both Indian people and India have faced identity crises. The paper also reflects on the orientalist perception of India as an exotic, mysterious nation. Yet there leaves some room for justification about whether the Orient is represented correctly in academic research and historical documents. "Postcolonial exoticism," one of the features of Roy's novel, reveals to us the function and significance of cultural translation both within and beyond borders.

Keywords: caste, culture, identity, ideology, untouchability.

Introduction

One of the traditions that distinguishes India from other nations is the caste system. Like racism in America and apartheid in South Africa, caste is "The sign of India's fundamental religiosity, a marker of India's essential difference from the West (Dirks 5).

Arundhati Roy's presentation of *dalits* in her novel *The God of Small Things* is constantly blended with irony. People well placed in the society attempt to be kind and sympathetic to them but their deep rooted prejudices and the fear of losing their supremacy undermine their professed liberal or revolutionary aims. Yet why put focus on caste instead of other cultural phenomena in the novel? Does caste carry so much influence in Indian society? The answer is positive. In a sense, the Untouchable Velutha in the novel represents the political and social upheavals which are tightly related to colonialism, hegemony, class mobilization, hybridity, and identity problems in Indian society. In addition, the stigma of untouchability is so deeply ingrained in the minds of Indian people that it may become a

dangerous judgement. Roy's portrait on the caste system poses a challenge to this centuries-old shibboleth and she expresses her disillusionment toward the social conditions of postcolonial India where the Untouchables still face a hostile society.

As Allison Elliott points out, the origin of caste could be dated back to 1200 BCE. Caste comes from the Spanish and Portuguese word "casta" with the meaning of "race," "breed," or "lineage." (Elliott 29)

Yet nowadays many Indians use the term "jati" instead of the ancient ones. So far, there are 3,000 castes and 25,000 subcastes in India and each is related to a specific occupation. These different castes are categorized into four varnas: Brahmins- priests; Kshatriyas - warriors; Vaishyas--traders; Shudras--laborers. Outside the caste system are the untouchables. They are considered polluted and not to be touched. Since upward mobility is hardly seen in the caste system, most people remain in the same caste for their whole life and marry within that caste. The character Velutha in the novel is then an exception of caste norms since he works in the factory owned by the touchable and he can talk with people higher than his rank. However, the division between the touchables and the untouchables is deeply rooted in Kerala so that Velutha is regarded as a nonhuman-"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" (Roy 293).

In late 19th century, there were three different views on caste: (1) The incubus view: caste as a divisive and pernicious force, and a negation of nationhood; (2) The "golden chain" view: caste as varna— To be seen as an ideology of spiritual orders and moral affinities, and a potential basis for national regeneration; (3) The idealized corporation view: caste as *jati*--to be seen as a concrete ethnographic fact of Indian life, a source of historic national strengths and organized self-improvement or "uplift" (Bayly 154).

Caste is sometimes used to decry the backwardness of Indian society. Besides, it is seen as a force impeding social equality and the better treatment of women in Indian society. The debates never seem to end over the issues about tradition, modernity, civil society, religion, politics and nationalist ideology.

Given the fact that caste is intricately interwoven with colonial history, we shall not ignore that colonialism not only happened in the past but continues to haunt the postcolonial nation in the present. For example, the British colonizers may take advantage of caste to control and assimilate those colonized. Nowadays in postcolonial India, it is still possible that the dominant authority see caste as its potent tool to demarcate the social properties and benefits between rich/poor, powerful/powerless. If caste is a sign of the past, it is also a vehicle for the construction of a different future. As is portrayed in the novel, untouchables are not allowed to "touch anything that Touchables touched. Caste Hindus and caste Christians" (Roy 71). Some people even convert to Christianity and join the Anglican church

to escape the scourge of untouchability. After Independence, however, the untouchables find that they are still not entitled to any government benefits like job reservations or bank loans at low interest rates (Roy 71). Hence, they couldn't enjoy the benefits like other touchables. Officially, they are Christians and therefore casteless. "It is like not being allowed to leave footprints at all" (Roy 71). In this way, caste is a source of inequality and disparity, yet belonging to a privileged caste can help people overcome barriers that hinder them from getting a better future and promising welfares. Yet ironically for those untouchables in India, their quest for a sense of "belonging" will not necessarily put them in the right place. In contrast, their "displaced" positions make them different from others and their identity is even more thwarted than before.

Despite his untouchability and poor background, Velutha is a great help to Ammu's family. At first, it is Mammachi who notices little Velutha's "remarkable facility with his hands" (Roy 71). Apart from the carpentry skills, Velutha has a way with machines. In Mammachi's words, if Velutha hasn't been a Paravan, he might have become an engineer. Unlike the scholarly Oxford-training Chacko, it is Velutha who maintains the new canning machine and the automatic pineapple slicer. It is also Velutha who oils the water pump and the small diesel generator, and so on. Increasingly, the whole family of Mammachi depends more and more on Velutha. Yet it causes a great deal of resentment among the other Touchable factory workers when Mammachi retires Velutha as the factory carpenter and puts him in charge of general maintenance.

Actually, there is a rivalry between touchable and untouchable workers since both sides need money to maintain their lives. In addition, Roy reveals to us that there is a competition and struggle between the local factories, the People's Government and the communist party. Not surprisingly, Velutha is a member of the Communist Party (Roy 248). And he participates actively in the communist movements. At first glance, the communist party seems to provide political protection for those minorities and subordinate. "They were also demanding that Untouchables no longer be addressed by their caste names" (Roy 67). For instance, when Comrade Pillai notices that "all the other Touchable workers in the factory resented Velutha for ancient reasons of their own," he "stepped carefully around this wrinkle, waiting for a suitable opportunity to iron it out" (Roy 115). In this way, the communist party becomes the second authority which monitors the social order to see if there is anything wrong.

In Michel Foucault's terms, the disciplinary power here is to reduce multiplicity (difference, variety) to manageable and useful order (qtd. in Harris 269). Besides, the party even promotes workers' benefits by teaching them how to demand a raise, whether they succeed or not.

Indeed, the caste consciousness is stirred by the impact of British colonialism, yet it also results in the movement for Sanskritization, caste solidarity and caste rivalry. Due to the

fact that the political evolution of Indian society leads to caste solidarity, some leaders of specific castes find it useful to mobilize support from caste brethren for social recognition, jobs and political favors which is encouraged by the gradual introduction of electoral politics. This remark can also apply to the binary concept between "us" and "them", 'we' are the ones with a legitimate claim to solidarity; it is always 'they'--one's unworthy rivals--who are given to so-called 'casteism' or 'casteist' values and actions. To a certain degree, the political process does not always erase divisions within caste/class groupings. Rather, it provides new opportunities for exploitation and the enrichment of elites. In the end, the policy of caste-based reservations does not help solve the problems but encourages the caste-based politicization. Ultimately, the rich and the influential get benefited most, not the poor and the weak.

Ironically, Roy intends to highlight the misuse of power in the novel when Inspector Thomas Mathew is described as the one who knows "whom he could pick on and whom he couldn't" (Roy 10). Besides, the inspector seems so proud of his rank and status--"He had a Touchable wife, two Touchable daughters--whole touchable generations waiting in their Touchable wombs" (Roy 245). However, Velutha does not get any protection from the communist party when he is charged of raping Ammu. The police does not even get the whole truth before they decide to give Velutha a death penalty, just the fact that Velutha is an Untouchable is a sufficient reason. In the end, Velutha is betrayed not only by the big authority but by his caste destiny.

When speaking of Velutha, it is hard not to mention about identity problem and the Indian identity. As Robin Cohen indicates, globalization at the cultural level has brought about the fragmentation and multiplication of identities (Cohen 169).

Yet we must notice that globalization is not a brand new phenomenon. Instead, we should see it as "a more dramatic form of re-territorialization and multiplicity within a new regime of capital accumulation. Therefore, the identity of caste groups will not stay in a fixed situation, nor will the Indian identity.

In the words of Friedman, "Identity is constructed relationally through difference from the other" (Mappings 19).

In relation to caste identity, it has to be fostered in order to combat centuries of oppression by collective organization and political struggle. If we return to Velutha's case in the novel, we will find that Velutha's identity is a flawed one because he is incapable of changing and resisting the powerful hegemony. Moreover, he belongs to no strong community which can support him throughout the whole hardship. Put simply, Velutha dwells in a world where privilege and exclusion determine the survival of small lives. That is, the call of death is on other's hands.

Apart from Velutha's personal identity problem, there is a bigger framework and the problem of national identity of India to look into. If Velutha's story is a reflection of the

destiny of India, then both Velutha and India are betrayed by the big authority- the former by the Communist Party and the latter by the British Colonizer. On the one hand, Velutha's case represents numerous "cultural others" who become the scapegoats of political bigotry and social hostility in India. Nevertheless, Roy's novel reveals to us India's traumatized experiences in challenging the colonial power. Eventually, India itself can be likened to the tasted body of Velutha which is seen as a site of scrutiny and surveillance of colonial Control.

As Suleri reminds us, colonial facts are vertiginous to us since they lack a recognizable culturally plot and they fail to "cohere around the master-myth that proclaims static lines of demarcation between imperial power and dis-empowered culture, between colonizer and colonized" For the invader/the colonizer, its way of cultural control will definitely be thwarted because it cannot function as "the other to a colonized civilization that had long since learned to accommodate a multiplicity of alter ties into the fabric of its cultures" (Suleri 19).

In a similar vein, the Indian identity becomes blurred with its painful experience of sexual aggression by the colonizer. What have been left, then, are probably the fragmentary, distorted images of "Indian self" and its colonized people.

Having said that India may signify the gendered female body, now the focus will be shifted to western perceptions of India as a nation of the Orient. First, a theoretical overview of Said's Orientalism makes sense of the reason why India is in "lack of discussion" in orientalist thinking. Then, it tries to explore the fissures of orientalist thinking which is based on western conception and construction. As Edward W. Said points out, "the Orient had become feminized by male writers in Europe" (*Orientalism and After* 217). In this way, the Orient is not Europe's "interlocutor" but its "silent Other" (*Orientalism Reconsidered* 202). Here, an undertone is suggested that the Orient is an object of reticence of western gaze. Moreover, it conveys a nebulous message that the Orient is deprived of "agency" in either historical documents or postcolonial studies.

Orientalism can be regarded a praxis of the same sort as male gender dominance or patriarchy because it relies on the contention that the Orient was routinely described as feminine, its riches as fertile, its main symbols the sensual woman, the harem, and the despotic. Therefore, Orientals are like housewives who are confined to silence.

As reviewers have recognized, to conceptualize orientalist ideas about India, we need to take factors such as language, history and colonialism into consideration. In the case of India, orientalism provides a discursive link between the special characteristics of the colonial period and the globalized political and social dilemmas of the present. However, there exists a crisis that the misinterpretation of previous documents may put readers in jeopardy. That is, readers (East, West or global) will feel confused about which is the truth claim and hold a skeptical view toward debates derived from Said's Orientalism.

On one level or another, orientalism as theory has influenced a number of political and administrative practices as well as the political life of the subcontinent. Despite the fact that the specific politics of colonial domination is less influential in present-day use, orientalist theory still casts its shadow over cultural politics in postcolonial India. Here, two things have to be noticed: First, the essentialization of the Hindu-Muslim opposition and its institutionalization in political representation is one of the most lasting and fundamental of the orientalist contributions to knowledge about India. Second, orientalism has created the discursive space here widely divergent understandings of South Asia had to be located. Nevertheless, a full understanding of India's history and ethnic conflicts should not be based solely on these two facts. Instead, we should move beyond these orientalist construction and Pay attention to what has been said outside this field.

Conclusion

The use of English--as against that of vernacular languages of India--is often seen as "unauthentic," "unIndian," "westernized," and "modern," English itself has been naturalized in the Indian experience with many implications and complications. However, Roy's novel also presents to us the narrative writing back against "neo-Orientalist representations" and an allegory of nation which can be seen as "symbolic resistance to metropolitan nation-state and neo-imperial discourses" Among the neo-orientalist features of Indian tradition, Roy includes the depiction about caste, kathakali dance, love laws, ancient legends and rituals which serve as "cultural markers" that appear exotic to the western readers.

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