

INEQUITY'S ECHO: UNRAVELING SOCIAL DYNAMICS IN "THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS"

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A 'just' society is perceived as a rational society. Rationality is considered as a quality of being steered by reasons. Rational aspirations are possible only when the citizens of the country desire to be liberated from unreliable dogmas. Liberty appears to be tantalizing in the life of irrational people. People who belong to unfair societies cannot be conscious of their irrational doctrines because they might think that their society is 'just'. The term 'just' is derived from the word justice which means, to be treated fairly. In a fair society everyone gets equal access to education, employment and health care and every individual is to be treated with respect and dignity. Since literature is always realized as an artifact of socio-political and cultural realities, it provides ample awareness to the individuals. Thus, substantial change of a society largely depends on the influence of the literary works of the land that produces a lasting impact on the readers.

Literature has the authority to endorse social transformation as well as preserve cultures and traditions. It can offer a chance to encounter the standpoints and beliefs through reading. It questions opinions and dogmas, and compels the readers to critically visualize the world around. It launches an environment for social and political clarification that persuades readers to think about social renovation. Indian Writers in English seemed to follow the conviction that writing novel is a 'public approach'. They became distinctive forces in the English fictional world through their inclination towards 'public approach' and gradually seized the attention of the English speaking domain. Indian fiction acquired wide acclaim in world literature due to its

accountability. They brought attention to the serious issues in socio-political and cultural fields. Initially they appeared to be anxious of the values of Indian culture but quickly they preferred to expose the stark realities of India.

Representing the actual image of the perceptions and outlooks of the underprivileged Indians, a few writers became spokesmen of Independent India. They tried to expose the plight of unfortunate Indians who struggled hard to breathe the air of freedom. While examining the Indian English literature of the 1930s, it may be safely concluded that Raja Rao was the first novelist who successfully communicated the anguish of underprivileged Indians to the world. In 1980s, we see the great contribution of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. In 1990s, young writers such as Amit Chaudhuri, Vikram Seth, Mukul Kesavan and Amitav Ghosh stepped into the discursive space of postcolonial literature through their distinctive works. A few writers went on to receive prestigious Booker prize. Salman Rushdie became the recipient of the Booker Award for his novel *Midnight's Children* in 1987. Arundhati Roy secured the Award for her debut novel *The God of Small Things* in 1997. Kiran Desai bagged the prize for her novel *The Inheritance of loss* in 2006. Aravind Adiga received the prestigious award for his maiden novel *The White Tiger* in 2008.

The new generation Indian writers, constantly, tried to make the people aware of the battle between the privileged and the underprivileged in independent India. Their novels were universally praised for projecting the socio-political and cultural realities of the nation. Their novels come under 'the fighting phase', in which they try to disengage the privileged position of the 'centre'. Colonized Indians suffered the pain of discrimination from the colonizers; the same pain was experienced by the underprivileged Indians from the privileged ones in independent India. Being upset at the postcolonial realities, Arundhati Roy was impelled to write her novel

*The God of Small Things*. Depicting the mounting social issues of independent India, she attained significant global attention. A.R. Shukla states that “It is a big rise of the Indian Star in the West! Ms. Roy has chiseled a niche in the treasure-trove of Indian Fiction in English!” (216). She dared the oppressive social hierarchies of Indian tradition through her semi-autobiographical novel and presented a ‘sense of responsibility’ by raising her voice against the powerful.

Mulk Raj Anand focused on the plight of lower caste Indians in his novel *Untouchable*. Anand’s protagonist, the untouchable Bakha, was a scavenger who suffered a lot from the upper caste people. Similarly, Bama, the Dalit feminist of Tamil literature and the socially committed novelist, exposed the plight of the caste-ridden society through her autobiographical novel *Karukku* in 1992. Her novel recorded the torments of a Dalit Christian woman in Tamil Nadu. Roy set the stage for the younger generation to challenge the deep-rooted stigmas. Her ill-fated protagonist Velutha is unquestionably close to Bakha and Bama. *The God of Small Things* focuses on the incidents that happened in her village Ayemenem between 1969 and 1993. The novel addressed the denial of individual identity to the lower caste people in the traditional society. Even after getting freedom from the British, the majority of our citizenry, however, faced harassment of one sort or another. By pointing out that gap, Roy asked the people of India to come out of their repugnant indifference.

Roy’s *The God of Small Things* depicts the socio-political conditions of Kerala from the late 1960s to the early 1990s. It reflects the life and customs of the people and the major traditions, patriarchal domination and caste hegemony in the society. The novel gives a shocking picture of caste disputes brought in by the Varna system of Hinduism and demonstrates how the lives of the underprivileged were doomed by the caste system. The novel focuses on the lives of the Syrian Christians and on their struggle to deal with the effects of the deep-rooted caste

system. In addition, she refers to the inescapable hold of Communism and the unsuccessful rebellion of Naxalism in the state. The communist union leaders in Roy's novel attempt to organize the workers to fight for their rights. They claim to raise the wages of the paddy workers who toil in the field for eleven and a half hours. They also demand that the lower-caste people will no longer be addressed by their caste names.

Roy's protagonist Velutha embraces the communist party for leading a dignified life in the society, but he never gets that in his own life. Her references to EMS Namboodiripad, the first Chief Minister of Kerala, are highly critical. Through the hypocritical Comrade KNM Pillai, she implies that EMS was a crooked opportunist. Roy severely criticizes the communist leaders of Kerala because she believes that they failed to raise questions against the caste conscious society and its orthodox values. Some critics believe that her description of the communist leader seems naive. They assert that the Communist government of Kerala did much to liberate the marginalized society from the tyranny of caste domination. Kerala has witnessed significant social, political and cultural movements including struggles for the eradication of untouchability and other social taboos. The lower-caste people of Kerala have been subjected to inhuman cruelty, indignity and exploitation. The trade union marches, communist slogans, dreadful Naxalite activities and their ruthless suppression by the state provide the political background of the novel.

Bose (1998) discusses Roy's construction of the erotic concept in the novel. Bose argues that Ammu's sensual encounter with Velutha is an aggressive action, not a "private utopian indulgence" (Prasad 21). Adhikari relates how Roy has explained the theme of enclosure and freedom open-mindedly. She says, "It is evident from Roy's treatment that since men and women are placed in various enclosures, the search for freedom is a perennial quest of Man"

(“Enclosure” 46). Bhatt states that the novel is a portrayal of helpless human beings who has no meaning in their lives. She claims, “What to Naipaul is an Area of Darkness, to Roy is the Heart of Darkness. But they both are of interest, attraction and entertainment for the tourists as also for readers outside” (“Heart” 101). Pandit (1999) examines how societal oppression works to abolish the beautiful small things and how the God of small things in the novel becomes a God of loss. Dwivedi (2000) examines the socio-political concerns of the novel. He observes that the novel concentrates on caste rigidity that creates chaos among the weaker sections of the society and it portrays the issues of child abuse and parental negligence. Ahmad’s essay focuses on how Roy’s ideological prejudices get an upper hand and how her authenticity is doomed.

This research paper intends to analyze how far Roy focuses on the social inequality in her debut novel. While trying to find out the real intention and factual base of Roy, certain pertinent questions arise: Does the novel echo genuineness in depicting the dark side of our nation? Does the novel pose any threat to the existing societal set-up and its ethics? Will it leave any positive legacy to posterity?

Roy assertively brought forth the miserable aspects of the small village Ayemenem. ‘God’s own country’ was severely criticized by her for its ungodly atmosphere. She used the metaphor ‘Heart of Darkness’ to indicate the inhuman conditions in her society. The History House of Ayemenem was actually an old colonial bungalow of Kari Saipu. That was later altered as Heritage Hotel. In her interview with Praveen Swami, Roy states, “It’s saying that we, the characters in the book, are not the white men, the people who are scared of the Heart of Darkness. We are the people who live in it; we are the people without stories....In Ayemenem, in the Heart of Darkness, I talk not about the White Man, but about the Darkness, about what the Darkness is about” (qtd. in “Heart of Darkness”, Bhatt 98). Joseph Conrad used the word

‘Darkness’ to refer to the ignorance and backwardness of African savages and also the bottomless pit of cruelty and wickedness in the heart of the European. Roy adopted this term to refer to the inhuman treatment of the lower classes in Ayemenem.

Women in India were denied their space, their rights and their freedom whereas their male counterparts enjoyed their lives expansively. Depicting the subservient role of traditional Indian women, the novelist gave an authentic picture of our society. The story is a direct attack against the society and it clearly portrays how women are deprived of their own space in the patriarchal society. Ammu’s childhood days were doomed because she received severe torture from her father Pappachi. She was deprived of higher education at her parental home and she bore the brunt of drunken violence from her husband after marriage. Thus the novel displays the absurdities and discriminations of the domestic and the social life of the village Ayemenem. Aleyooty Ammachi, the great grandmother of Rahel, had appeared as an ideal match for her husband in the photograph. But nobody could recognize her inner feelings about her husband. Roy says, “With her eyes she looked in the direction that her husband looked. With her heart, she looked away” (30).

Ammu and her brother Chacko became divorcees as a result of their abortive inter-religious marriages. Ammu had no property rights, but Chacko himself proclaimed that he was the owner of his family property. Chacko lost nothing in the conservative society, but Ammu faced severe threats and lost everything. She could not relish the honour, the concern and the respect of the society like her brother. Above all, the female members of the family gave prior importance to Chacko’s ‘biological needs’. But their attitude towards Ammu’s transgression was extremely different. The society administered contradictory verdicts on them. Ammu struggled

to keep her position in the patriarchal world and was excluded from the Syrian Christian Church itself in the end.

The isolated woman broke the barricades of her societal structure and crossed the river to enjoy her love with Velutha. She had no position in her family and Velutha had no position in the society. Both of them found their position in another world, an imaginary world of togetherness that they created but they were destroyed by the love laws of the village. Ammu's sexual urge generated chaos in the life of Velutha and her twins. The Church disallowed her body to be cremated in the graveyard. Her life ended in the electronic crematorium. "Her hair, her, her smile, her voice...into a little clay pot. Receipt No.Q498673" (163). Chacko's erotic concern with various women was accepted as a customary practice in the society whereas Ammu's affair with the lower caste man was considered as an unlawful affair.

Roy's portrayal of Velutha clearly reveals his subaltern position in the society. She gives a microscopic vision of caste subalternity. Velutha stands as the replica of untouchables in our society. Individual identity and dignity were denied to him. He was not a rebel against the upper caste but he silently fought against the upper caste tricks. The upper caste police murdered the innocent man not for any personal vengeance, but to secure their position in the land. Marxism speaks of equality but Marxist slogans simply remained as words in the party manifesto. Velutha and his father were not allowed to enter Ayemenem through the path the upper caste people used. He disliked his father's age-old humbleness towards the upper caste. Instead of investigating the truth behind a crime, the upper caste people isolated the untouchables from their land forever. The police team never sought to find out the truth about Velutha's connection to the death of Sophie Mol. Their main effort was to reduce the influence of the untouchable in the land. They brutally kicked the man with their boots to wake him up and blindly convicted

him. He was not given any chance to prove his innocence. Velutha's father had never raised his voice against the injustices done to him. He stood as a typical example of orthodox untouchables who were always docile, calm and inferior, but Velutha deviated from the trodden path. His death created a vacuum in the life of Ammu and her twins. The twins witnessed the police atrocities, but they were not aware of the severity of the love laws of the land.

Roy attacks the Christian institution for its partial treatment towards the lower caste people. The converted Christians were known as 'Rice Christians' and the Syrian Christians never accepted the converted Christians as their equals. The converted Christians were open to vulnerability owing to the caste-based split-up. Moreover, a separate Pariah Church and Pariah Bishop were assigned to the lower caste converted Christians. Prestige and equality remained as a dream to them. "They were not allowed to touch anything that Touchables touched"(73). Independent India could not liberate them from their isolation and discrimination. They were deprived of the reservation benefits which were allotted to the members of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes. Since they recorded their religion as Christian, they had to bear the label of casteless category but continued to be the lower caste.

Roy attacks the caste-based Hindu culture for its prejudice. The unjust aspects of Hindu culture show its preferential treatment towards the dominant group while crushing the subalterns. As per the religious doctrines of India, women are known as frail and irrational whereas men are recognized as rational and impartial. Dependency and vulnerability of Ammu makes her a subordinate in the family and in the society. Untouchability and lower status of Velutha makes him as a subordinate in the caste-oriented society. Ammu started to break the shackles of conventional India to find her own private space. She fought against the socio-religious taboos of Ayemenem, but she turned out to be the loser in the game. Roy's characters clearly reveal the



full picture of the age-old social and religious traditions of the small village. She discloses the ugly side of South India by describing the brutal social injustices of India.

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