

Dalit Consciousness in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* : A Feminist Perspective

RANJEET KUMAR

Abstract. Arundhati Roy has painted the canvas of the dirty picture of our society very aesthetically. The novel is an “ugly picture beautifully described” in which the character of Ammu stands for Mary Roy and where victims of social ostracism have been kaleidoscopically depicted. One is touched to tears to find the plight of Christian Paravan family to which Velutha belongs. Velutha is an untouchable and for that matter a natural prone to the brutality by “touchables”. So he is oppressed, tortured, tyrannized and scoffed at by the owners. The caste was in full swing like an outrageous fury in every section of the society. As a result a Syrian Christian family looks down upon him as an outcaste. Velutha is a parallel figure of Bakha in *Untouchable*. The most horrendous is that Velutha, the marginalized, never gets a chance to break his silence as a defence of the accusation and punishment for the crime he has not committed. The marginalized has always been marginalized despite a plethora of socio-political reforms and it is a million dollar question still unanswered.

Keywords : Tortured; oppressed; marginalized; undeserved humiliation; patriarchal society.

Arundhati Roy's magnum opus *The God of Small Things* (1997) has left an indelible mark on the psyche of contemporary readers and has tried to engage them on the issues which had been relegated to the background for the elite class. She questions the efficacy of “love laws” which regulate the life of women and the outcaste and builds a socio-cultural perspective embodying the role of history, religion and education and politics. Ammu, Velutha, Kochu Maria and Vellya Paapen are the characters who are supposed to have no rights and are subjected to the tyranny of hegemonic forces emanating from religious, cultural and political dogmas. They commit transgressions which are subtle yet of paramount significance to overthrow the hierarchy. These transgressions, however, are viewed in the light of Foucault's concept of power which tantamounts to shifting which gives rise to a hope to a radical change in the dynamics of power that govern the place of the marginalized section in society.

In *The God of Small Things* Arundhati Roy exposes the corruption and inhumanity of socialist party politics and capitalism both of which are domains of power and of subtle colonial imperialism. While “small things” may connote triviality and commonalities, the novel in the final analysis is concerned with marginality, absence, and loss. Both M.R. Anand and Roy take up the same issue but provide different solutions that conform to the contours and configurations of their characters and time. Anand applies his Gandhian ideology to address the issue

Received : 18th April, 2021; Accepted : 16th June, 2021

whereas Roy takes to a feminist as well as communist approach that stimulates Velutha to raise his voice against the prevailing social evils of his time. It is Vellya Paapen and his two sons Kuttapen and Velutha who are “the small things” in the novel.

The God of Small Things portrays the truthful picture of the plight of Indian women, their great suffering, cares and anxieties, their humble submission, persecution and undeserved humiliation in male dominating society. It shows the women’s marathon struggle for seeking the sense of ‘identity’ in a totally averse, despicable and envious society. The social structure of an average Indian woman is full of ups and downs, ifs and buts. It can be very clearly seen in some of the women characters like Ammu, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, Rahel and Margaret Kochamma.

Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* is a text of ‘feminine writing’. She has beautifully and effectively shown the plight of women in Indian society which they undergo because of orthodoxy and obsolete customs and traditions. The suffering of women has been taken up as the issue of feminism to fight their identity and economic and social freedom. Her female characters in the novel *The God of Small Things* stand out as persons and not as role-players. Through this novel, she throws light on some important things of life like how love is always associated with sadness, how a person’s childhood experiences affect her perspectives and whole life.

Roy’s *The God of Small Things* is feminine creation of unique nature. The novel clearly shows the untold miseries and the undeserved sufferings of women who have to bear the brunt of male domination silently and meekly. She transcends the ordinary concept of feminism. The novel examines the feminist jealousy among the women, the plight of woman in male dominated framework. Ammu is the central character of the novel. Her tragic story, right from the beginning to the end arouses our sense of pity and catharsis. Her tragic tale begins in her childhood. As a little girl Ammu had to endure some unbearable nightmarish experiences.

In her writing various dimensions are noticeable. She is famous not only as a novelist, but also as a notable social activist, social and political thinker, and she is apparently concerned with downtrodden class and caste. *The God of Small Things* is her well known novel not only in India, but also in Euro-American society. Her writings on social and political issues are not less than her literary work. She is regularly writing in prominent magazines and newspapers like *Frontline*, *Economic and Political Weekly* and *The Hindu*. Arundhati Roy is known to all not only for her new and original style, but also for her thought-provoking attitude regarding social consciousness. Her debut novel *The God of Small Things* deals with, apart from other things, the universal theme of social consciousness, for example, confrontation between class antagonism and class exploitations, exposure of the tyranny and injustice against women, child abuse, political bigotry, caste-system,

breaking of love marriages and above all, the trials and tribulations. The defenceless have to pass through police custody and are beset with caste ridden social structure.

The novel is based on the theme of untouchability. There are two dimensions of untouchability. In this novel both women and Dalit are marginalized class, one as gender and the other as caste, and the writer has established that both are discriminated and exploited. This is a fact that the Marxists always ignored the discrimination and exploitation on the basis of caste and gender but in Indian perspective both are vital problems. Ammu is such a tragic character that even her last rite is not done properly with traditional rituals. Ammu, the tragic character is tortured and abused by police, family and political persons. It is not only the men folk alone responsible for her tragic plight but mostly the women characters like Mammachi and Baby Kochamma too may be called the real culprits to engender sufferings in Ammu's life.

In the novel Arundhati Roy raised the question related to women, children and dalits. She is fighting for these three human groups for long as an activist against dam and nuclear weapons. Arundhati Roy, a great champion of the cause of the Dalit and the deserted women, points out those unnoticed shades of a social problem, which generally escapes the eyes of social scientists.

Arundhati Roy is an activist apart from being fiction writer and she has been actively participating in the movement against big dam projects like Narmada and Sardar Sarovar with Medha Patekar. In this respect *The Shape of the Beast* collection of her interviews and her new book *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* are noteworthy. The impact of her struggle in favour of marginal class, caste and women can be seen in her novel. In her political and social writings she criticized the contemporary idea of development in our country. Following lines reveal her conviction:

The war for the Narmada valley is not just some exotic tribal war, or a remote rural war or even an exclusively India war. It's a war for the rivers and the mountains and the forests of the world. All sorts of warriors from all over the world, anyone who wishes to enlist, will be honoured and welcomed. Every kind of soldier will be needed. Doctors, lawyers, teachers, judges, journalists, students, sportsmen, painters, actors, singers, lovers... The borders are open, folks! Come on in.
(*The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, 65)

She raises some burning questions and she concludes:

Big Dams are to a Nation's 'Development' what Nuclear Bombs are to its Military Arsenal. They're both weapons of mass destruction. They're both

weapons governments use to control their own people. Both twentieth century emblems that mark a point in time when human intelligence has outstripped its own instinct for survival. They're both malignant indications of a civilization turning upon itself. They represent the severing of the link, not just the link- the understanding between human beings and the planet they live on. They scramble the intelligence that connects eggs to hens, milk to cows, food to forests, water to rivers, air to life and the earth to human existence. (95)

Syrian Christian family line is Ayemenem in the southern Indian state of Kerala. In the Ayemenem house Ammu, her twin children Estha and Rahel, her brother Chacko, her mother Mammachi and her aunt Baby Kochamma live. Pappachi, who is disgruntled retired entomologist and the patriarch of the family also lives in the family. Chacko, who has returned home from Oxford, where he had been a scholar, can no longer tolerate his father's abusive behaviour towards his mother and one night he intervenes, demanding that he should stop beating her. Pappachi stops but he also stops speaking to Mammachi for the remaining period of his life. Pappachi also forces Ammu, his daughter, to discontinue her college education.

Ammu marries Baba to avoid returning to her parents' home in Ayemenem. The couple have twins, Estha and Rahel. Ammu divorces Baba who has turned out an alcoholic and wife beater. Ammu, Estha and Rahel return to Ayemenem to live with Mammachi, Baby Kochamma and Chacko. Pappachi dies, and after his death, Mammachi starts a pickle factory called Paradise Pickles. Soon she develops a love relationship, regularly meeting him in an abandoned house called 'History House' across the river. As soon as Baby Kochamma and Mammachi know about the affair the situation explodes. The women lock up Ammu in her room. Enraged Ammu blames Estha and Rahel for her miserable life and asks them to go away. Sophie Mol, Estha and Rahel run away. At night they decide to cross the river in a boat to reach the 'History House', but the boat capsizes and Sophie Mol drowns. Estha and Rahel try in vain to find her. Exhausted they fall asleep in the History House not realizing that Velutha was there waiting for Ammu. But Ammu does not show up.

Velutha, the untouchable, lives in a tiny hut on the other side of the river that flows through Kochamma's property. Mammachi noticed Velutha's extraordinary skill with his hands when he was young and sent him to a carpentry school. There his talent developed and enabled him to become a cabinetmaker, furniture designer, wood carver, and eventually a mechanic. Estha and Rahel were forbidden to enter Velutha's hut but they did.

Therefore, it is clear that Ammu and Velutha, both are exploited due to their belonging to untouchable caste. According to psychoanalysis, it may be partially caused by love between Ammu and Velutha, but there is no more chances to give focus on psychoanalysis of these characters. The need is to focus on dalit questions in this novel and in this sense the story of Velutha is more important than anything else. Velutha is tortured because he is an untouchable lover of Ammu. According to Alka Singh:

Velutha's technical expertise and newly acquired religious status as a converted Christian could not serve as a substitute or grant him immunization from being a victim in casteist society.

(Dhawan, 127)

The novel is based on the theme of discrimination. The plot of this novel is based on the story of middle class where the untouchable dalit young boy Velutha and Ammu, a dalit female both are exploited. Velutha beaten by police dies in police custody; no one comes for his help in the society.

Ammu shows her strength of mind not only in marrying the man of her choice but also in divorcing her previous husband when the choice goes wrong eventually. Her husband, to her dismay, is found to be alcoholic. As he neglects his duty, he is threatened with dismissal by his manager, Mr. Hollick and acquiesces in to his proposal to go away for a while and send his wife to his bungalow to be looked after. When Ammu learns about it, she is stunned at first. But when the unworthy fellow resorts to violence, she does not take it meekly like her mother, Mammachi. She takes the heaviest book from the shelf and hits him with it on head and on legs. She is far from the traditional idea of an ideal woman who worships her husband like a god and obeys him blindly despite all his blemishes.

The divorce leaves her no option but to return unwelcomed to her parents with two children, Estha and Rahel. Her father does not believe her story of the reason for the divorce which implies that she herself is to blame for it. However, his disbelief is not based on his high esteem of her husband, he cannot simply believe that an Englishman can ever covet another man's wife. That vindicates her estimate of her father whom she calls an incurable British. She is equally defiant in her assessment of her brother and dares express her views courageously. She challenges her mother's obsession with her son and refuses to admit that Chacko is 'brilliant', made of prime ministerial material or one of the cleverest men in India. She cuts Chacko to size. While her mother and her aunt subscribe to the male chauvinist notions of 'Men's Needs', she takes a correct view of the self-proclaimed Marxist Chacko and his relationship with women workers of the factory. She is quite accurate in calling it 'all hogwash' and characterising him as an 'Oxford avatar' of the old zamindar mentality-a landlord forcing his attentions on women who depended on

him for livelihood. It is significant because others in the novel fail to notice the contrast between the Marxist mind and feudal libido. When Chacko claims to be writing a family biography that the family would have to pay him not to publish, Ammu declares that he is the only person in the family fit for such a biographical blackmail.

Ammu challenges the androcentric notions of society when she avoids surname after divorce. Estha and Rahel have no surname because Ammu is thinking of reverting to her maiden name, though she feels that choosing between her husband's name and her father's name does not give a woman much of a choice. Law does not give a daughter any claim to property. Though she does as much work as Chacko, the latter feels free to declare the factory as his own. He tells her children that they have no locus standi and tells her that what's hers is his and what's his is also his. Ammu views this all as a product of the wonderful male chauvinistic society.

She is bitterly aware of the hypocrisy around her and she has learned to recognize and despise the ugly face of sympathy. During the first few months of her stay at the parental home, old female relations pay overnight trips to Ayemenem pretending to show their sympathy for her about her divorce. Actually it is their way of getting devilish pleasure by subjecting her to mental torture systematically. She restrains her dislike and anger with a lot of effort.

As a mother, she loves her children. She is concerned about their innocence which makes them willing to love people who do not love them. They appear to her like small bewildered frogs... lolloping arm in arm down a high way full of hurtling traffic. She is quick to reprimand her children, but even quicker to take offence on their behalf. She wants to impart not only the bookish knowledge to them but cares to teach them correct manners too. That is why she says to Rahel on a certain occasion, "I never want to hear you discussing people's deaths with them again." (*The God of Small Things*, 151) On another occasion, she makes Rahel realise that careless words hurt people. To the last of her days she cherishes the idea of reliving with her children (whom ill-luck has snatched away from her) in a little house and buying gifts for them. Her children love her no less. Rahel's list of her dear ones places Ammu at the top. And both Estha and Rahel fall in the trap of Baby Kochamma simply because they think it will save Ammu.

The rebel in Ammu does not permit her to remain contented with motherhood and divorcee hood. There is an 'unsafe edge,' an 'unmixable mix,' 'the rage of a suicide bomber' along with the 'infinite tenderness of motherhood' in her. So she proceeds to reclaim her body. Her walk changes, she wears flowers in her hair, she spends hours on the riverbank listening to a transistor, smokes cigarettes and has midnight swims. Tired of the proprietary handling of her, she examines her body in bathroom mirror which shows her worry about her passing youth. Then there are other factors which stir her. The dream of the one armed man suggests her

that it is no use seeking perfection in life, the small and powerless people like her can but satisfy themselves with the little time provided them. The arrival of Margaret Kochamma provokes her desires. And finally Velutha's return after many years makes her take a fatal decision. The secret love affair goes on for thirteen days until it is reported to Mammachi by Velutha's father and compounded by the accidental death of Sophie Mol. To that we can only add that Velutha appears like a father figure to her children and his real love for the children builds a bridge for the love she too needs. But earlier she is drawn to him when she sees him holding a red flag at the procession because he seems to be a rebel, housing a living, breathing anger against the smug, ordered world she too resents. So what seems an illicit relationship between divorcee, touchable woman and an untouchable Paravan is actually a union of two rebels protesting against hypocritical laws of society, not in word, but in deed.

When that relationship is revealed, Mammachi and Baby Kochamma who have not only tolerated but assisted Chacko in his licentious affairs with working women, become highly indignant. Ammu is tricked into her bedroom and locked while Velutha is implicated in false cases of attempted rape, kidnapping of children and murder of Sophie Mol. Velutha is grabbed by the police and killed, while she is allowed to attend Sophie's funeral standing separately with her children. Soon after the funeral she goes to the police station and tries to set the record straight. But the police officer dismisses her pleas with the remark that the Kottayam police does not take statement from *Veshyas* (Prostitutes) and their illegitimate children. He stares at her breasts while speaking, taps them with his baton and asks her to leave quietly. That shows her moral courage on the one hand and the obscene nature of the law and order on the other. The incident, however, frightens Baby Kochamma who has not taken into account the unsafe edge in Ammu and she contrives to get her out of Ayemenem soon lest the case of Velutha is reopened. So, four days after the funeral, Chacko assumes the role of a defender of morality and asks Ammu to pack-up and leave, "Get out of my house before I break every bone in your body." (212)

Arundhati Roy who is deeply rooted in her native national culture, highlights the political, social and cultural issues which constitute the very fabric of Indian life in her Booker Prize winning novel *The God of Small Things*. Roy presents politics as a very complex force, operative, at different levels beginning with home, and manipulating different people for different ends. The novel focuses on the problems created by the deceptive roles played by the political radicals who have vowed to bring about a Marxist revolution to banish all exploitative systems and establish a society based on equality and respect for man as man.

Ranjeet Kumar

Research Scholar, P.G. Dept. of English
Magadh University, Bodh-Gaya

Works Cited

- Dhawan, R. K. *Indian Novelists*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2009.
Roy, Arundhati. *The God of Small Things*. Haryana: Penguin Books India, 2002.
———. *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*. Haryana: Penguin Books India, 2013.