

Untouchability and Social Exclusion in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997)

Veena Shukla, F.G.I.E.T. Rae Bareli (India)

The unjust and malice treatment meted out to the untouchables in India has been a matter of great concern. Since times immemorial, they have been suffering severe humiliations at the hands of the upper sections of the society. Even after attaining political autonomy, there has been no improvement in their status. 'Caste' still continues to play a highly important role in shaping the lives of the masses. Today there are about 250 million Untouchables. Although the Government has banned the Caste discrimination since 1950, but prejudice continues. Postcolonial Indian society has managed to achieve only political liberation, and not the social freedom; though the later certainly needs to be invoked in an active way. Because caste has got the inherent capacity of positioning oneself, it can be, at once, both beneficial as well as dangerous, to the people who practice it. The emergence of so many regional political parties in India has only magnified this problem. They have made the 'untouchables' and other castes occupying the lower hierarchy in the society a political tool through which they construct their own identities. Caste, then, can be highly paradoxical, especially when we view it in the context of the Indian society.

Here in this paper, I propose to examine the maltreatment meted out to Velutha, one of the characters in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997). Before I proceed, it would not be a bad idea to have a look at the word 'caste'. The word 'caste' is derived from the Portuguese word 'casta' which means pure or unadulterated (sharing a Latin root, with the word 'chaste'). The caste system in India is an important part of ancient Hindu tradition and dates back to 1200 BCE. In ancient India there developed a social system in which people were divided into separate close

communities. These communities are known in English as caste. It is generally believed that the origin of the caste system can be found in Hinduism, but it has plagued the entire Indian social system. The caste system in the religious form is basically a simple division of society in which there are four castes arranged in a hierarchy and below them the outcast. But socially the caste system was more complicated, with much more castes and sub-castes and other divisions. The religious theories explain how the four Varnas were founded, but they do not explain how the *Jats* in each Varna or the untouchables were founded. According the Rig Veda, the ancient Hindu book, the primal man - *Purush* - destroyed himself to create a human society. The different Varnas were created from different parts of his body. The Brahmans were created from his head; the Kshatriyas from his hands; the Vaishyas from his thighs and the Sudras from his feet. The Varna hierarchy is determined by the descending order of the different organs from which the Varnas were created. Other religious theory claims that the Varnas were created from the body organs of Brahma, who is the creator of the world.

Presently, there are about 3,000 castes and 25,000 subcastes in India, each related to a specific occupation. This occupation, it must be remembered, has been assigned to them by the ancient *rishis*. These different castes fall under four basic varnas:

Brahmins--priests
Kshatriyas--warriors
Vaishyas--traders
Shudras--laborers

Arundhati Roy has dealt with the problem of untouchability plaguing the Indian society in her booker winner novel, *The God of Small Things*. She is appalled at the barbarous treatment meted out to the lower section of the society, even in this postcolonial age. In this regard, she says that: "Fifty years after independence, India is still struggling with the legacy of colonialism, still flinching from the cultural insult (and) we are still caught up in the business of "disproving" the white world's definition of us"¹. Even the

Veena Shukla, F.G.I.E.T. Rae Bareli (India)

escape from the blood-thirsty period of Colonialism has not brought any respite to these Untouchables.

The entire incidents in *The God of Small Things* take place in the southern Indian state of Kerala, and revolve around a forbidden relationship between a Syrian Christian divorcee, and mother of two children, Ammu, and a low caste carpenter, Velutha. 'The temporal setting shifts back and forth from 1969, when Rahel and Estha, a set of fraternal twins are 7 years old, to 1993, when the twins are reunited at age 31'. It is a story about the rights of the women and the untouchables versus age-old restrictions imposed by the traditionalist Indian society. The characters in this novel are caught up in a complex web of actions that take place in their lives, and affect each other in one way or the other. Most of the human drama takes place in the novel in the context of the division of India through caste and class. Throughout the novel, we witness numerous encounters between these two, and ultimately, it is the one occupying the upper position in the domestic and the social hierarchy, which emerges as a winner.

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. This unjust action of her husband (whose name is not told in the novel) forces Ammu to leave him. After getting divorce from her husband, Ammu, along with her dizygotic twins Estha and Rahel, returns to her parental house in Ayemenem, now part of [Kottayam](#) in [Kerala](#) state of [India](#). She seeks some respite in her home but ironically, her own home turns out to be a horrid place for her. It is here that she suffers a lot mental blows by her own family members. Ayemenem thus becomes a storehouse of Ammu's suffering. Thus, "the focal event of the novel is a socially transgressive and ultimately doomed love affair between Ammu and a low-caste carpenter, Velutha"³

Ammu's quest for emotional support ends in Velutha, a low-caste or 'untouchable' carpenter; whose family has been serving in Ammu's house since a long time. A clandestine love-affair between the two starts and we witness a series of

furtive love-meetings between them across the river in the haunted house. They do not realise that in doing so, they are trying to dismantle the traditional rules put down by the so-called protectors of Indian culture. For Ammu and Velutha, caste or status do not matter. What matters most is to preserve the bond of pure love, and without a trace of doubt, we can say that they love each other very passionately. Even though Velutha knows that Ammu is a divorcee and a mother of twins, he does not hesitate to offer his full commitment to her.

The novel is replete with instances of caste politics. The dizygotic twins are told by their grandmother Mammachi that Paravans are expected "to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away the footprints so that Brahmins or Syrians Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan's footprints"⁴ (pp. 73-74). This amply demonstrates how a feeling of hatred and superiority is installed in children who are rather innocent to understand all these racial myths.

There are many other instances of social exclusion in *The God of Small Things*. We can see the unjust treatment meted out to the dizygotic twins. They are treated in this way because they have no father/no home. The maltreatment meted out to Ammu can also be seen as an outcome of this absurd reality. Pappachi's sister Baby Kochamma also receives a shock of her life when her dream of marrying Father Mulligan, an Irish priest, gets shattered. She starts living an isolated life in the Ayemenem house, and develops a liking in the misfortune of others. Also, facing a similar crisis in life is the character of Chacko, son of Pappachi, and the future master of the Ayemenem house. While pursuing his studies at Oxford, Chacko falls in love with Margaret Kochamma and marries her. But this marriage also turns out to be sordid bond, and soon the couple drifts apart; and Chacko returns to India. Soon after the death of his father Pappachi, Chacko starts managing the family pickle factory, Paradise Pickles and Preserves. However, he proves unsuccessful in this business, as the factory registers a severe economic crisis. Ironically, we find the Ayemenem house giving shelter to all the sufferers in this novel.

Veena Shukla, F.G.I.E.T. Rae Bareli (India)

Getting no respite in their personal lives, Chacko and Baby Kochamma prove to be a handful for the less privileged persons. If we have a look at this rude behaviour from a psychological perspective, we will find a binary opposition of exploiter/exploited working here. Since Chacko and Mammachi have failed to achieve anything significant in their lives, they are keen to set the scale straight.

Despite the fact that Velutha is a highly talented person with proven skills of carpentry, yet he what he gets in life is the social exclusion. He fails to understand why his father Vellya Paapen scolds him for his love-affair with Ammu, a high status woman; and is against this social discrimination. Consequently, his boldness in carrying on this restricted love-affair proves a deadly menace for him. On hearing about this love-affair, Babby Kochamma conspires with the Inspector and Velutha is put behind the prison by Inspector Matthew, where he is severely beaten to death.

Thus we see that untouchability is still being practiced in Indian society. There has to be some proper implementation of laws to curb this social discrimination. Arundhati Roy needs to be congratulated for exposing this foul play of postcolonial India to the entire world. Of course, there has been numerous works on this theme before this novel but the fact that this novel went on to win the Booker Prize has definitely brought Roy and her novel much more appraisal than the other writers.

References

Roy, Arundhati, *Power Politics*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge Mass: South End Press, 2001), p.13.

Tickell, Alex, "The God of Small Things: Arundhati Roy's Postcolonial Cosmopolitanism", *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 38, (2003), p.74.

Roy, Arundhati, *The God of Small Things*, (New Delhi: India Ink, 1997), pp.73-74.