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'SUBALTERNISM' IN *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*: AN APPRAISAL

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Abstract

The current paper analyzes the caste consciousness in Arundhti Roy's The God of Small Things in terms of its overlapping effect on human society. In this regard, the study attempts to explore how the caste or class system was established, what Hinduism says about caste system and how the sayings of Hindu scriptures were misused by the social masters. In addition, the study also investigated the relationship between the novel and the Hindu caste system. Roy minutely inspected all these social, political and cultural realities of her contemporary time. So, she focused on the societal quandaries related to 'subalternism' prevailing inside the human relationships among different classes in an impactful manner. The problem concerning caste system was depicted in Roy's novel in a vivid manner. This paper considerably presents an analytical review on 'subalternism' in terms of caste with reference to Roy's The God of Small Things.

Keywords: *Subaltern, caste, Hinduism, Marxism*

1. Introduction

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is a semi-autobiographical novel where Roy has depicted the keralian society of her time (1969) through the tale of her family. Here she has brought the real picture of Communism, of the caste system and of the keralian Christian society. The society where the author lives in, is harshly shaped by class distinction and this class distinction & its' worse condition has also been presented in "The God of Small Things". Infact, the misinterpretation of religious scriptures by the so-called social masters have initiated this class distinction. Arundhati Roy felt disturbed with this caste system that is prevailing in the society. Though 'The Indian Constitution' of 1949 outlawed the caste system and discrimination based on social status, still there are certain social rules that must have to be obeyed-particularly in terms of who is allowed to interact with whom. The novel pays particular attention to what the narrator calls the 'Love Laws', which interpret the caste system to explore who is allowed to love whom, how, and how much. (Roy, 1997, p. 33) (shmoop). Roy has written many political articles centering the caste system of India as well as of keralian society. This is one of the causes for which she has written the novel. Besides, Kerala has had a Marxist-led government but Roy doesn't hesitate to add that party leaders are 'Brahmans' and that caste still plays a strong role. 'Marxism' deals with equity, the party leaders, who will preserve this ideology, are not free from age-old caste consciousness. Roy has picked up this duplicity of the Marxist leaders for her noted novel. Furthermore, Roy has also written about the conditions of female class in Kerala. She has presented the gender discrimination that is present in Keralian society through the character of Ammu and Mamachi. Roy depicted the present condition of kerala women in an Interview with David Barsamian in April, 2001, "Women from Kerala work throughout India and the world earning money to send back home. And yet they'll pay a dowry to get married, and they'll have the most bizarrely subservient relationships with their husbands. I grew up in a little village in Kerala.

It was a nightmare for me. All I wanted to do was to escape to get out, to never have to marry somebody there…. I sometimes think I was perhaps the only girl in India whose mother said, "Whatever you do, don't get married" [laughs].” (Barsamian, 2007)

Roy has just written of those incidents and has expressed it through the character of Rahel in *The God of Small Things*. The crisis that Arundhati Roy has wanted to represent through *The God of Small Things* is a true social crisis that India is facing from the very beginning of its civilization to till now. India is a country where most of the followers of ‘Sanatan Religion’ live and there are too many religious monuments and places of pilgrimage of Hindus. Every religion has some ism or philosophy and the followers follow that philosophy and that’s why a remarkable number of Indians cannot come out of some age-old customs but they don’t try to understand or don’t feel interested to study those religious customs what actually has been told in religion. The fragmented study of religious scriptures actually gives birth to misinterpretation. And the social masters use this misinterpretation to suppress one or more down-trodden classes of the society. Those people of down-trodden classes are made to believe that what the social masters or other upper classes’ people determine for them which is right and they need not to think advanced. If someone or somebody thinks advanced by applying his or her own will or human spirit, then he or she would be strictly dominated by the exploiters of society. However, now we should look through some clause/shlok that Hinduism has actually told of ‘Class Distinction’ or ‘Varna System’.

2. Objectives

The paper tends to present the real picture of Caste-ridden Indian society and how the social masters are misinterpreting the sayings of religious scriptures for their personal benefits and opportunities. Indeed, this is the intention of each & every social master to dominate so-called lower ones. The paper justifies this negative attitude of the social lords to the distressed ones with reference to Arundhati Roy’s novel *The God of Small Things*.

3. Literature Review

The term subaltern derived from Antonio Gramci’s Cultural Hegemony which identified the social groups who are excluded from a society’s established structures for political representation, the means by which people have a voice in their society. The term subaltern is used in postcolonial theory. GayatriSpivak, RanajitGuha, Homi K Bhabha are some of the pioneers of subaltern studies group. Basically, the word ‘Subaltern’ means an army officer whose rank is lower than captain. Some thinkers use it in a general sense to refer to marginalized groups and the lower classes. The term *Subalternism*, in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, refers to the treatment of the upper-class society towards the subalterns who are socially or religiously remains in the outer part of the hegemonic power structure. From *The God of Small Things*, Subalterns can be categorized into three categories- Subalterns in terms of religion, Subalterns in terms of gender and Subalterns in terms of colonialism. One notion goes very much with subalternism-

> “[There is] no need to hear your voice, when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still [the] colonizer, the speaking subject, and you are now at the center of my talk.” (Coronil, 1994)

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak uses it in a more specific sense. She argues, “Subaltern is not just a classy word for oppressed, for other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie....In postcolonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern - a space of difference. Now who would say that's just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It's not subaltern....Many people want to claim subalternity. They are the least interesting and the most dangerous. I mean, just by being a discriminated-against minority on the university campus, they don't need the word ‘subaltern’...They should see what the mechanics of the discrimination are. They're within the hegemonic discourse wanting a piece of the pie and not

being allowed, so let them speak, use the hegemonic discourse. They should not call themselves subaltern." (Nelson & Grossberg, 1988)

4. Methodology

The researcher has conducted the study on the basis of secondary sources. Observation method with conceptual analyses was the utmost supportive ways to develop the sense in the mainstream. The secondary sources that the researcher has followed were books, several research papers, articles, news reviews and different sites of Internet that are related to this topic. Besides, the researcher followed some statistical study of different NGOs to learn the fact of the present condition of *Dalits* in India. Moreover, reading different sacred religious books such as the *Veda*, the *Manusamhita*, the *Srimadvagbat Gita* and the *Upanishad* were also supportive. It is almost impossible to read all these books by this short time and that's why the researcher read only the related *Shloks* or chapters; and have tried to compare the matters with the novel *The God of Small Things* and its' notable character Velutha. To prove the fact that how different mythological characters, being of lower caste have achieved superior place and how some of the characters, being of higher caste have fallen into inferior position, the researcher took help from two primary epics-the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*. Furthermore, news and reviews of *Times of India*, *The Guardian*, *The Hindu* and *The Daily Prothom Alo* were also collected to be more authentic.

5. Findings and Discussion

The title *The God of Small Things* suggests the meaning of two terms- 'God' and 'Small Things'. The term 'small things' refers to all the down-trodden classes (in terms of caste, in terms of gender etc.) of the society and the term 'God' refers to the upper caste people and the male class who respectively dominate the lower class people and female class. In fact, the term 'God' refers to the colonizers i.e. British but with the passing of time a class has been aroused from the colonized people who aim at dominating the other classes of the same group. That means colonized people itself has been divided into two classes after British rule where one class is still acting as colonized and the other class is acting as the 'God' of colonized.

In the novel, Roy has discussed the status of relationship between so-called 'God' and 'Small Things' in the contemporary India. She has chosen a very significant title to uplift the real picture of India as well as Kerala after the British rule. By dwelling on the small things, Roy brings out big issues from history. It is also through the act of writing against empire that we get a chance to revise our conception of India and its history. She intends to mean that though British people have left this land in 1947, the lot of India has not changed in the fullest sense. Some classes are still not independent, still India is divided into two classes- 'Colonizer' (Dominating) and 'Colonized' (Dominated). In the novel, Velutha, Ammu, Mamachi are representing the 'dominated' class while other characters such as Papachi, Chacko, Baby Kochamma and obviously the society are representing the 'dominating' class. Being in the modern era, India is still afflicted with the cancer of 'class-distinction'.

It's true that the 'Class Convention' has got its' origin from Hinduism but Hinduism never tells of exploiting the other caste. This religion never supports any type of suppression or oppression but in the Post-Vedic period, Brahmanism emerges and Brahmans, thinking them as superior caste, started to dominate other classes in a limited scale but that very tendency with the passage of time has got its' prominence. Moreover, British people encouraged the aristocratic landlord Brahman class to be more powerful with the support of them. They tried to make some agents of them to dominate the people of this land and the aristocratic Brahman class helped them in this regard, though not all. And this thing, particularly, gives birth to two classes dominating and dominated. Especially, the treatment of Brahmans and other two castes (Khstriya, Boishya) towards the lower caste i.e. Shudras or Scheduled Castes was horrible which was never supported by Hinduism. The people of upper caste misuse 'Caste Convention' to suppress the lower castes. Susan Bayly, a critic, has said, "Caste principles have often provided the means of excluding, disempowering or subjugating others" (Bayly, 1999). The very allergy regarding caste has now entered into the followers of other religions of India too. Even in this Post-Colonial Modern era,

people of India still nurture the matter strictly though Indian government has outlawed the 'Caste Restriction' in 1949. And this crisis has sharply been presented by Arundhati Roy through her famous novel *The God of Small Things* (1997).

Arundhati Roy brings forth the context of Ayemenem of Kerala where she has been brought up. Actually, 'Ayemenem' is the miniature form of India which presents the entire humanitarian crisis that is faced by people of different classes. Though the literacy rate of this province is above 90% (Chu, 2006), and this is the only province of India which has reached 90% of the literacy scale, yet this land is not free from 'Caste-Allergy'. In the novel, Roy has presented the Kerala of 1969 and starting the novel in 1992, she has completed it in 1997 but the condition of Kerala as well as India has not yet been changed. That means even after 50 years of its' independence, India is fighting with this problem which is appeared almost like racism. Roy is sickened at the barbarous treatment meted out to the lower section of the society, even in this postcolonial age.

In this regard, she says,

"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. Even the escape from the blood-thirsty period of Colonialism has not brought any respite to these Untouchables." (Roy, 1997:13)

Velutha, the central figure of the novel, is the unique creation of Arundhati Roy. Velutha is a Member of 'Untouchable' or 'Paravan' class. The name of Velutha means "White in Malaylam--because he was so black" (Roy, 1997:70). For being a Subaltern or Untouchable, Velutha has to suffer a lot. As is indicated in the novel, we know that low-caste people or the so-called Untouchables are denied the basic human rights in many ways. For instance, Untouchables are not allowed to enter the house of higher classes. In earlier times, Paravans are not allowed to walk on public roads, to cover their upper bodies, or to carry umbrellas. (Roy, 1997: 71) Even more ironically, they have to put their hands over their mouths when speaking, so that they can divert their polluted breath away from those whom they address (Roy A. , 1997, p. 71). Velutha, however, is more fortunate than other untouchables because he is a skilled carpenter and he is given a job by Mamachi in her Pickles factory with other 'Touchables' but yet he has to suffer. As a carpenter, he has no parallels in the factory. Despite his having all abilities, he is looked down upon. Mamachi, owner of the Pickle factory, often says, "If only he hadn't been a Paravan, he might have become an Engineer." (Roy, 1997)

Though Mamachi understands this, she pays a fewer wage to Velutha as compared to other workers as she knew that nobody else would hire him as a carpenter. Moreover, Mamachi knew if Velutha is given same payment as other workers then other workers would protest against this. Velutha can understand everything but he cannot protest. He asks himself "What's the worst thing that can happen? I could lose everything, my job, my family, my livelihood, everything." (Roy, 1997)

Velutha is maltreated in his political party i.e. Marxist Communist Party. Velutha joins in the Marxist Communist Party to build an exploitation free society. Velutha is a leader of 'Untouchables'. For the excessive oppression or suppression of the Hindu social-masters, Velutha's father transformed himself into Christianity to delete the tag of lower class but like other converted Dalits, his lot didn't change. In Christian society, he is again treated as Dalit but in the banner of new name i.e. Paravan and in Sacchar Committee report 2008, it is seen that 66% people of Keralian Christian are converted from Hindu religion but their status has not changed. Roy has presented exactly the real picture of Keralian society through the characters.

However, Velutha has joined Marxist Communist Party as the party tells of equal right. Though Marxist Communist Party is in strong position in Kerala but yet they can't change the discriminating condition of Kerala. Where does the problem actually lie that has also been explored by Arundhati Roy? In the novel, Mr. Pillai is the local leader of the Marxist Communist Party. He is highly educated fellow who believes in Marxism as a political philosophy that aims at creating a classless society. Though Pillai attempts to make an image for himself as a supporter of

the dalits or subalterns and follower of working class people but as the matter of fact, he is too a caste conscious fellow who belongs to the upper caste community i.e. Brahman. His becoming Brahman cannot be regarded as a fault but his avoidance to Velutha's call and his dictating Velutha's problem as his (V) personal problem bear the message that this person is not free from 'caste restriction'. As he is a Marxist leader, he should stand beside his political activist's problem but here he has given value to the public demand or so-called class afflicted society's demand without judging Velutha's fault. When Velutha approached Pillai for some help regarding the false allegation of rape and abduction against him, Pillai said that Party was not constituted to support worker's indiscipline in their private life. In this case, we cannot blame the religion; rather it is the hypocrisy of an upper caste Hindu or a political leader who falsely do his politics by entering equality and fraternity. The complexity of religious, regional and caste differentiation in Kerala led Vivekananda to call Kerala a "mad house "of communalism. Mr. Pillai's caste prejudice prevents him from treating Velutha as his comrade or equal. And these types of people are available in our society. Here, author has basically attacked the Marxist Communist Party of Kerala which has failed to preserve the right of all class. And according to Roy, the fault is, actually, within the party itself.

Moreover, Chacko, Ammu's brother, is also an activist of Marxist Communist Party but he doesn't approve the relationship between Ammu and Velutha. He vehemently acts against their love-relationship though he himself has several illegal relationships with different ladies. However, not only Chacko, no other member of 'Ayemenem House' approves the relationship between the two. Here, the main problem is caste. Ammu is a Syrian Christian and a member of upper caste but Velutha is a member of 'Untouchable' caste i.e. Paravan. Only for this reason, their love-relationship will never be accepted in 'Ayemenem House' as well as in society. By breaking the so-called 'Love Law' (who will marry whom), Ammu and Velutha continues their relationship. Because of this challenge, Ammu becomes an 'untouchable' within the 'touchables'. Velutha starts to face different problems. The ultimate outcome of this love affair is the tragic death of an 'Untouchable' by the 'Touchable Boots' of the state police. Actually, this incident brings most of their sufferings. A clandestine love affair develops between the two which results in furtive sexual encounters which is the violation of the traditional norms of the Syrian Christian society. Because of Ammu's moral transgression, the Church also refused to bury her when she dies. Before her death, Ammu was disowned by her society, separated ruthlessly from her children. She faces a lonely death only at the age of 31 -"a very viable diable age" (Roy A. , 1997, p. 161). So, a touchable's attachment with an untouchable' turns touchable into an 'Untouchable'. How harsh the treatment of the society was towards the Untouchables and, to some extent, towards the touchabes also. In spite of being human, 'Untouchables' are not allowed to love. They, even, have to love according to the will of upper caste people.

In contrast to Velutha, Chacko can get away with his debauchery -- or his "man's needs" as his mother terms it -- because he is a "touchable". The matter is that Chacko has the right to continue illegal relationship with several women as he is a touchable but Velutha can have no right to continue a sacred relationship with a 'touchable' as he is an 'untouchable'. Roy has justly put the issue when she says, "Change is one thing. Acceptance is another" (Roy, 1997, p.279)

Velutha, at the end, is bitterly treated by 'state machineries'. Because of his 'untouchable' caste, the state police show no sympathy for Velutha as a fellow human being. By not judging the fault of Velutha in the abduction of Sophie Mol and her death, Police severely tortures him in the complaint of two children- Rahel and Estha who were actually pressurized by Baby Kochamma. Arundhati Roy has explained his (V) unbearable condition-"blood spilled from his skull like a secret" (Roy A. , The God of Small Things, 1997). Nobody was there in the Police custody to show any care for him or respect him. Infact, Velutha's love affair with Ammu has given birth to his suffering which ultimately results in death. So, caste-prejudice has forwarded the death of Velutha in the 'Police Custody'. After the death of Velutha, the Marxist Party raised its' voice that's why a human has been killed in Police Custody. They, who ignored to help Velutha in his personal problem, now attempt to use the issue politically. Veluthas or Paravans are used even

after the death by so-called corrupted, hypocrite political leaders and class afflicted society. Rahel states about Velutha's status in the novel, "It was not entirely his fault that he lived in a society where a man's death could be more profitable than his life had ever been." (Roy, 1997)

6. Comparison with *Things Fall Apart*

The working of the class system is also seen in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. In the novel, there were also two classes in 'Umuofia' village-higher class and lower class. Likewise, in *The God of Small Things*, 'Ayemenem' is also divided into several castes including Paravan caste. In *Things Fall Apart*, the lower classes include those such as the untouchables and the outcastes. These outcasts are not spoken to, touched, or included in ceremonial events. They had to keep their hair long as a sign of their low status in society. When outcastes passed away, there was no funeral for them. They were, instead, placed in the evil forest as their burial place, not deemed worthy for a funeral ceremony. Class system is rather distinct in *The God of Small Things* as well. The lower classes of 'Ayamenem' consisted of untouchables as well as paravans. Untouchables were looked upon as impure and unworthy of any physical contact. Upward mobility for these individuals was extremely rare, and members of the opposite sex from different caste levels were not to become intimate with each other. Ammu and Velutha, a paravan and the family's carpenter, had an ill-fated affair with each other that ended in tragedy. Velutha was killed and Ammu exiled from Kerala.

However, in *The God of Small Things*, beside Velutha, Roy has also dealt with some other subalterns, who are also dominated in the society in different respects. Ammu, Chacko, Papachi, Mamachi, Rahel, Estha, Sophie Mol represent all types of down-trodden classes of the society and of the family. Actually, Roy has told of all types oppressed. Velutha is a subaltern in terms of caste while Ammu & Mamachi are subalterns in terms of gender. Papachi & Chacko are subalterns in terms of colonialism while Rahel and Estha are subalterns in terms of religion.

7. Conclusion

The age-old social norms are much stronger than modern education. The 'class system' has got its' establishment in India from the very beginning of this country. If we historically look at this, from the ruling period (6^{th} Century) of Guptas the Brahman class had started to get extra benefits from the rulers and this type of 'extra benefits' gave them the social superiority which slowly turns into exploiting the other classes. With the passage of time other two classes- Kshatriya and Boishya have also changed their social status but the status of Sudras has not yet changed even in this 21st Century. In fact, Sudras are not given equal social opportunity like other two castes. The haughtiness of three castes has not led the Sudras go forward from the very beginning. A system, which is continuously getting established in India for 1500 years, is not too easy to change. Modern education might change the attitude of new generation in a limited scale but it is really tough to uproot the system in the fullest scale. It will take time. From this perspective, modern education has failed to alter the condition of the subalterns and to change the class afflicted society till today. And it is easily understandable by seeing the literacy rate of Kerala- above ninety percent but the condition of Kerala has been changed and this matter is presented by Arundhati Roy in *The God of Small Things*. Yet, to reform the class afflicted society we have to depend upon education. It is education and social awareness which can change the system. Another matter is an interruption to rub up the class system from society and that is people's inborn will to dominate others. The thing was present, is present and will present in people of all walks of life. This inborn wish of people is a great barrier in building up an exploitation free society. Hinduism never supports any type of suppression or oppression. Though in all Hindu scriptures, there is written of *'Varnasram Dharma'*, nowhere it is written that any class of people will be dominated by other classes or anyone can make bound other to do job according to his will. There is no master-slave relationship. Moreover, every human being is given same potentiality or *'Purushekar'*(divine power).So, any men can change his lot by using his potentiality and that person is most welcome to the Almighty. It is, actually, the society which misuses the religious interpretation to dominate one class. For this, the religion cannot be blamed.

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