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THE DESPOTISM OF CASTE SYSTEM IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS* – A STUDY

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Abstract: This study is undertaken to explore Arundhati Roy's portrayal of caste system and hierarchy in Indian society and its impact on the disadvantaged communities. The award of the Man Booker Prize in 1997 for Arundhati Roy's groundbreaking, wide acclaimed, semi-autobiographical novel *The God of Small Things* has stirred the unprecedented attention of writers and critics.. Roy is a writer as well as an activist who is very active in environmental and human rights issues. She has produced many politically oriented works. Her novel touches upon sensitive contemporary issues such as gender, sexuality and caste system. Her novel *The God of Small Things* has departed from the stereotypical and conventional plots and deals with the condition of the marginalized section – the untouchables. The caste system has its impact on social relations damaging the social harmony. Caste system has certainly proved more divisive in Indian society at the economic, cultural and political levels. Today's world is moving towards Artificial Intelligence which challenges natural intelligence. The need of the hour is to drive away the hostility and to progressively demonstrate integrity to foster human relationship.

Key words: Caste, discrimination, hierarchy, untouchable, marginalization

I. INTRODUCTION

It is well known that the patriarchal system is a universal phenomenon, which is rooted in almost all the nations, religions and races. In India the caste system said to have originated 2000 years ago. The ancient Indian caste system divided the population into four major groups. The Brahmans (priests and scholars) used to be at the top followed by the Kshatriyas (political rulers and soldiers). Then in the next level of the hierarchy came the Vaishyas (merchants) followed by the Sudras at the bottom (laborers, peasants, artisans, and servants). Some of the Sudras who are beyond the pale of caste are also known as untouchables. Caste-based discrimination and prejudice became part and parcel of life in Indian for many years.

II. SOCIAL OUTCASTES

Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* with its complex and subtle narrative and with temporal shifts, delineates the Syrian Christians as a caste by themselves. The impact of the caste system can be felt among the people in India which is indicative of the fact that the dogma of equality has not been able to dissolve the caste system and its lingering effects. In Kerala the power structure is obvious and it has a caste-ridden society with discrimination. The untouchables, the Paravans, Palayas and Pulayas are treated as social outcastes. These untouchables are not allowed to enter the houses of the touchable. The novel centers around the relationship

between Ammu, a Syrian Christian young woman who got divorce from a drunken Bengali Hindu and Velutha, an untouchable, Paravan carpenter. To a westernized urban sensibility, this may not be a significant and shocking occurrence.

III. PARAVAN- CASTE RESTRICTION

Velutha is a pivotal character in the novel and he is represented as the “God” of small things. He is the son of Vellya Pappen, a toddy tapper. His black colour represents the marginalization and it symbolizes the challenges faced by the lower caste people in the society. Arundhati Roy has skillfully portrayed Velutha’s colour to portray the social layers and hierarchy. He is a skilled carpenter but his caste restricts his work.

“Velutha wasn’t supposed to be a carpenter. He was called Velutha—which means White in Malayalam—because he was so black. His father, Vellya Paapen, was a Paravan, a toddy tapper. He had a glass eye. He had been shaping a block of granite with a hammer when a chip flew into his left eye and sliced right through it. As a young boy, Velutha would come with Vellya Paapen to the back entrance of the Ayemenem House to deliver the coconuts they had plucked from the trees in the compound. Pappachi would not allow Paravans into the house. Nobody would. They were not allowed to touch anything that Touchables ... They were made to have separate churches, with separate services, and separate priests” (Roy, 70).

Velutha’s forefathers were Paravans and they were converted to Christianity and joined the Anglican Church to flee the plague of untouchability. Velutha had been going to the Ayemenem house with his father Vellya Pappen to deliver coconuts. The Paravans were never allowed to enter the house of the touchables and hence they used to go to the back entrance to give coconuts. They were not allowed to touch anything.

IV. CHALLENGING THE DYNAMICS OF SOCIETY

He is loved by Ammu’s twins Rahel and Estha for his warmth. The twins develop a genuine connection with Velutha and they almost considered him a surrogate father. Ammu too discovers a kind and unadulterated soul in him. She finds herself drawn towards him. Their relationship transcends social norms and restrictions. They both feel liberated and challenged the caste system by having secret gratification and thus forming an implicit rebellion against the oppressive system. This relationship has significant challenges and is short lived. They faced severely ingrained prejudices and are impacted by the complex dynamics of the society. They know that they have nowhere to go and no future in the society and the when the entire societal norms are hostile to them. The relationship is considered to be a taboo and the individuals who defy the “love laws” of the society would face the consequences. Their forbidden relationship had severe opposition and the societal reaction unfolds tragic events in the novel.

V. FABRICATION AND DESTINY

All hell break loose as the loyal and superstitious Vellya Pappen in a drunken state discloses the nightly trysts of the lovers. Ammu is condemned and isolated and eventually is expelled from her family. Velutha has to face the repercussions for crossing the societal boundaries. A conspiracy is hatched by the Syrian Christians, the members of the upper caste, Hindu Marxists and the touchable police men to intimidate the prodigal Paravan. When the cousin of the twins, Sophie Mol accidentally drowns, Velutha is falsely implicated for her death and is arrested. He is taken to custody and faces brutal encounter of the authorities. He is beaten to death as he challenged established social structures. The police fabricate their own story to punish Velutha.

Even the people who Velutha hoped to stand by him showed their true colors. Roy has exposed the deceitfulness and treachery of the communist party and its chameleon like leaders who dismiss the tragedy as the inevitable consequence of necessary politics.

Both Velutha and Ammu are destroyed as they refuse to turn into mirrors reflecting back the images that the establishment wants to see. The price that the lovers pay for their transient elation and whole hearted commitment of life, and not to a fossilized tradition, is unaffordably high. Velutha leaves the world with a

bruising smile in his blood stained mouth. He left behind a hole in the universe through which darkness poured like liquid tar.

Thus Velutha and Ammu pay for their transgression with their lives. Ammu's children Estha and Rahel are the two hapless, innocent victims who not only lose their mother, but are also robbed of their childhood and of each other's company. Thus Arundhati Roy trenchantly critiques the ways in which caste impinges upon the lives of women and the double standards of sexual morality prevailing in the society. Within a caste, a hierarchy exists between the people.

VI. CONCLUSION

To conclude, in *The God of Small Things*, Roy has depicted the hierarchical notions of Kerala's society as well as the plight of downtrodden untouchables. Her artistic courage and frankness in critiquing Kerala and her boldness in attempting to transgress oppressive social fetters are extremely remarkable. The tragedy of the untouchable goes to the heart of taboos, the bigotry, the hypocrisy, the lovelessness and the deadening respectability of our godless society. It is fitting that the defeated tragic heroes are the outcasts of our society: an untouchable, a status-less, divorced woman and her two powerless children.

Like Velutha and Ammu, Arundhati Roy also has been housing a living, breathing anger against the caste-ridden society and the novel is a reflection of what she sees. Having noticed the unnoticeable, she thinks the unthinkable and says the unsayable.

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