

ARUNDHATI ROY'S NOVEL THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS AS AN
ABOMINABLE PORTRAYAL OF UNTOUCHABILITY
IN INDIAN SOCIETY

Asif Ali Malik

Ph.D Research Scholar
Devi Ahilya Vishwavidyalaya, Indore (M.P)

Abstract: *The practice of untouchability even in present day India is one of the prevalent issues, which has its roots deep implanted in the prevailing caste system. There are certain practices practised by the upper castes towards untouchables, which evict them from the society like refusing the touch, not allow them to visit their residencies and not sharing water with them. Untouchables are debarred from the society on different philosophies like touch, purity and other religious principles. The people who are subjected to such inhuman treatment are referred as untouchables and conjointly called as Dalits. Since the caste system consists of diverse sub-divisions; where the inferior castes are treated as untouchables and hence are ejected from Hinduism. Since they are exorcised from the four varna system and thus are exposed to heart-throbbing humiliation, exploitation and discrimination almost in every spheres of life. In this paper endeavours are taken to explore the pathos, meekness and indignities of untouchables at the hands of dominant castes.*

Key Words: *Untouchability, Subjugation, Exploitation, Jealousy, Hatred, Caste- Discrimination, Hypocrisy.*

Introduction: It is not been documented yet authentically that where from the concept untouchability emerged in India. But there are many testimonials that prove that untouchables are the subservient people of India. Chamars, Dom, Busadh, Halolkar, Hari, Mochi and Mushahar are treated as untouchable classes. The caste system includes many sub- divisions; where the lower castes are treated as untouchables and hence are expelled from the Hinduism. According to many historians, the genesis of caste system is related to Vedas, the ancient religious book of Hindus. It is the *Purusa Sukta* in the *Rig Veda* that is responsible for the ramification of Indian society in to four Varnas namely the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Vaishyas and the Shudras. The untouchables are kept beyond the four Varnas and hence faced the extreme humiliation, exploitation and discrimination. This resulted in the social, political, economic, educational and cultural backwardness of these untouchables. Thus caste system has annihilated and distorted the lives of untouchables. Dhananjay Keer in his book *Dr. Ambedkar's Life and Mission* states:

The untouchables had different names in different parts of the country. They were called Outcastes, Untouchables, Pariahs, Panchamas, Atishudras, Avarans, Antyajas and Namashudras. Their social

disabilities were specific and severe and numerous. Their touch, shadow and even voice was deemed by the caste Hindus to be polluting. So they had to clear the way at the approach of caste Hindu. They were forbidden to keep certain domestic animals, to use certain metals for ornaments; were obliged to wear a particular type of dress, to eat particular type of food, to use a particular type of foot ware, and were forced to occupy the dirty, dingy and unhygienic outskirts of villages and towns for habituation where they lived in dark, instantly, and miserable smoky shanties and cottages (*Dr. Ambedkar's Life and Mission* 1).

According to Ambedkar, primitive Man also believed in untouchability and pollution. For him Death, Initiation, Birth, Puberty, Marriage and Cohabitation were the major means of pollution. The pollution was removed by proper ablutions and performance of different rites and rituals. Like primitive man, Manu Smriti also treats Birth, Death and Menstruation as the means of defilement. According to Manu the purification of such defilement can be done with water. There are other purification agents given my Manu like cow urine, dung, milk, curd, butter etc. The means of defilement are almost same in Manu Smriti and primitive Man but the greatest blow given by the Hindus to untouchables is that they added another means of defilement named 'hereditary untouchability', which has completely destroyed the lives of untouchables from Manu Smriti till present.

The 'hereditary untouchability' was not the concept of Primitive Man. Their defilement remained for a short time and then was eliminated by purifications. But in case of untouchables the defilement is permanent for Hindus and cannot be removed by any purification. For caste Hindus: "they are born impure, and they are impure while they live, they die the death of impure, and they gave birth to children who are born with the stigma of untouchability affixed to them. It is a case of permanent hereditary stain which nothing can cleanse" (Ambedkar, *The Untouchables: Who Were They?* 21).

Untouchability leads to the segregation of millions of untouchables from Hindus. The Hindus will not prefer to live in untouchables' quarters and will not allow them to live in their quarters. The Hindus lived inside the village and untouchables are forced to live in ordinary quarters (ghetto) outside the village, because according to *Shastras* framed on the ideologies of Manu Smriti; the *Antyajas* should restrict themselves outside the village. But according to Ambedkar: "the untouchables originally lived inside the village and that thereafter when the stigma of untouchability fell on them they were forced to vacate and live outside the village" (*The Untouchables: Who Were They?* 26).

Ambedkar further illustrates that the primitive Man were nomads; were grazing animals like cattle. They finally felt the need of permanent settlement and got

settled. But there were many problems faced by primitive settled community and broken Men. Primitive settlements were afraid of attacks by other tribes and broken Men were scared of their shelter and protection. The Hindus were also a nomadic community settled in India and there must have been settled tribes and broken Men also. The settled community lived inside the village and the broken Men compelled to live outside the village and in separate quarters. Thus untouchables were these broken Men; who with their broken trait were forced to live outside the village. The broken Men were actually Buddhists who were compelled to accept Hinduism and when they refused, they were driven out of the villages.

It was Ambedkar finally who took initiative to remove stain of untouchability from the lives of untouchables and tried to provide them equal rights in the society. Thus he denied joining the freedom struggle of India led by congress which was only based to attain power. The freedom of country was not compatible for untouchables but the self- freedom of them was necessary for Ambedkar. Thus he refused politics and devoted himself for the cause of Dalits. He suggested that brotherhood and fraternity of all castes will remove caste philosophies and hence untouchability from society. Ambedkar is highly opposite to the ideologies hold by upper castes towards untouchables. His despondency against Hinduism is reflected as:

To untouchables, Hinduism is a veritable chamber of horrors. The sanctity and infallibility of the Vedas, Smritis and Shastras, the iron law of caste, the heartless law of Karma and the senseless law of status of birth are to the untouchables veritable instruments of torture which Hinduism has forged against the untouchables (*What Congress and Gandhi* 277).

Ambedkar condemns Hinduism as it is far away from the concepts of fraternity, equality and freedom. For him, the real religion is one, which is based on the upliftment of people; irrespective of caste, sex and religion. But the Hindu religion instead of uplifting people made them more dependent especially in case of depressed classes. Thus he says: “the religion which does not recognise the individuality of man is not acceptable to me” (Kadam, *Dr. Ambedkar and the Significance* 45). He also rejects the Manu Smritis caste system that has annihilated the identity of lower castes. He also opposes Hinduism because it is: “religion of rules, compendium of rituals, regulations which are based on the caste ideology of hierarchy and untouchability” (*Annihilation of Caste* 120). Besides that Ambedkar gives the idea of emergence of untouchability in India as:

I think, if we take beef- eating, which is the root of untouchability, as the point to start from. Taking the ban on beef- eating as a point to reconnoitre from, it follows that the date of birth of Untouchability must be intimately connected with the ban on cow- killing and on beef- eating. If we can answer when cow- killing became an offence and

beef- eating a sin, we can fix an approximate date of the birth of Untouchability (*The Untouchables: Who Were They?* 155).

The God of Small Things (1997) is the first novel of Arundhati Roy, which won high acclamation throughout the world. The novel won her *Man Booker Prize* in 1997 itself. Roy, the post- colonial writer explored the cultural colonialism that is still predominant in modern India. The Britishers left India before seventy years but the cultural imperialism is still prevailing in Indian society. The primary motive of most post- colonial writers along with Arundhati Roy is to liberate the Indian society from the shabby concepts of colonialism and fill their intellect with the notions of decolonisation.

The dominant themes of *The God of Small things* are exploitation, marginalisation, women discrimination and untouchability. In this novel Roy has presented the evil practice of untouchability in the post- colonial era. Even in the post- colonial period, the untouchables are not getting proper status and relief in Indian society. In *The God of Small Things*, Roy has portrayed the strife not between Touchable Hindus and untouchables but between the Syrian Christians of Kerala and untouchables. This is testimonial of the fact that untouchables are not only exploited by Caste Hindus but also by the other religious communities of Independent India. Roy has meritoriously presented the sombre picture of Dalits in Kerala. Regarding the novel *The God of Small Things* Ranga Rao says: “Roy’s book is the only one I can think of among Indian novels in English which can be comprehensively described as a protest novel. It is all about atrocities against minorities, Small Things: children and youth, women and untouchables” (*The Hindu*13). Thus the novel depicts the revolt against the atrocities of dominant communities over the submissive communities of the society and warns them to refrain their attitudes towards them.

The novel begins in a small village of Kerala named Ayemenem. Ammu, a young woman is married to a Bengali man who finally divorced her. Her father, Pappachi does not support her in education as was her brother, Chacko supported. Chacko fell in love with an English woman named Margaret Kochamma and married her. She gave birth to Sophie Mol. After the death of Pappachi, Mammachi his wife begins the business of Paradise Pickles and Preserves. However, in the meantime Chacko returned from Canada to Ayemenem and took over his mother’s business. Ammu is a woman who does not receive a proper respect in her family after her divorce because she had married a Bengali belonging to a different caste. Ammu has two children namely Rahel- a girl and Estha- a boy. The family of Ayemenem house belongs to Syrian Christians. Baby Kochamma, sister of Pappachi refused the arrival of Ammu after her divorce because she was an orthodox Christian woman. Most of the family members in the house are fanatic Syrian Christians.

In Kerela, Paravans are considered as untouchables. Velutha, the son of Valleya Pappen suffered a lot at the hands of upper caste Syrian Christians. The novel

explores the denial of untouchables' rights in social and political spheres of life. Mammachi, an orthodox Syrian Christian opened a school for untouchables named untouchables' school. Velutha was also sent to this school because he was an untouchable and could not mingle with the other touchable students of other touchable schools. Thus the untouchables are discriminated and treated as filthy even in the post- colonial age which is regarded as the age of science and intellectuality. But the time we talk about Dalits and their rights, the intellectuals have no time to discuss on the topic. The broadmindedness of the modern era corrupts when there arises the question of untouchability. Velutha in Malayalam means 'white' But the irony is that he is so black that no one would prefer to touch him. But for Roy untouchables are not impure but pure and white like other human beings. The novel *The God of Small Things* expresses the exploitation and oppression of Paravans in the society. Regarding the exploitation and suppression of Paravan untouchables, Mammachi tells Estha and Rahel:

As a young boy, Velutha would come with Vellaya Pappen to the back entrance of the Ayemenem House to deliver the coconuts they had plucked from the trees in to the house. Nobody would. They were not allowed to touch anything that touchables touched, caste Hindus and caste Christians. Mammachi told Estha and Rahel that she could remember a time, when Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping in to Paravan's footprint. In Mammachi's time, Paravans, like other untouchables, were not allowed to carry umbrellas. They had to put their hands over their mouths when they spoke, to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed (73- 74).

However, Velutha was a skilled and magnificent carpenter. He is called by Mammachi and others a: "little magician" (74). He could make charismatic windmill, rattles and small jewel boxes out of palm reeds. Despite of his magnificent skill, he was not permitted to touch Ammu's hand because he is an untouchable. He prepares these things for Ammu and: "holding from out of his palm (as he had been taught) so she wouldn't have to touch him to take" (74). Apart from carpentry skills, Velutha has mastery over machines also. He could restore radios, clocks, water pumps etc. So Mammachi hired Velutha as a maintenance worker in her factory. As an untouchable, the other touchable workers became jealous and they would say: "Paravans were not meant to be carpenters. And certainly, prodigal Paravans were not meant to be hired" (77). This shows the compassionate attitude of Mammachi towards untouchable Velutha, but it was not actually that as she has hired him only for her benefit only. It is the Hindu Varna system that has completely shattered the lives of Dalits in India. The taint of untouchability will never remove from their identities. For the well- being and authentic status in the society, untouchables got converted in to Christianity with

the impact of Christian missionaries, but their conversion also did not bring them any amendment in their status. They are still dominated and exploited in the Church also. Even the Britishers do not pay a proper heed on the untouchables' miseries and predicaments. They were only focused on the conversion trends, rather to restore the broken-down condition of untouchables in Indian society. Thus the evil practice of untouchability remained unresolved. Arundhati Roy's intentions are to generate a consciousness among the people regarding their atrocities and aged-old practices of untouchability. She explores male chauvinism where women are segregated to extreme limits. She also attacked the dominant castes ideology based on the strife notions between touchable and untouchables. Rahel and Estha are the two children who love Velutha irrespective of his caste and reject the centuries- old notion of untouchability. According to a critic, Mallikarjun Patil:

Roy explores the ugliness of the society by bringing the two children to react to it, since children are as yet uncorrupted and unwrapped by rigid social attitudes and can bring their pure response, however pinned to an issue or an event; the children's pain serves as a powerful language of rejection of this system (*Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things* 57).

Roy in her novel has also highlighted the humbug nature of some politicians like Comrade Pillai, who in the guise of reformist deceived the downtrodden class. Comrade Pillai is the harbinger of the Communist party which was based on the self-realisation of the labourer class about their injustice and also persuades them to soar up their voices against their humiliation and exploitation. Velutha is however a member of the Communist party but he has not given any authority. It was the deceptive promises of Comrade Pillai that are responsible for the exploitation of untouchables. The conversation is the validation of the fact that untouchables like Velutha are not given proper rights in the society. Velutha's injustice is due to his ancestral blot of untouchability. However, Velutha is a converted Christian but the taint of filth never removed from his life. Instead of reforming the position of Dalits, Comrade Pillai proved to be the discriminator and blunt practitioner of untouchability. Pillai is highly detested with Velutha and he holds that: "these caste issues are very deep- rooted" (278). The biggest tragedy in Velutha's life occurred when he was accused of been forcefully persuaded Ammu for sexual harassment and abduction of the twins-- Rahel and Estha. This accusation entirely bamboozled the life of untouchable Velutha. It was Baby Kochamma, who was delirious to see Velutha on gallows as he had tried to molest her niece, Ammu. The incident completely changed the environment of Ayemenem house in to desperate gloom.

Velleya Pappen, father of Velutha also face extreme humiliation when he went to Ayemenem house to discuss with Mammachi and Baby Kochamma about the wrong accusation of his son, so that he could save him. Valley Pappen reached

Ayemenem house all wet because it was raining heavily. Drenched and trembling in rain, he came closer to the kitchen door. When Mammachi saw him near the kitchen door, she callously began to abuse him shouting: “how dare you come here in this condition” (255). Mammachi was furious at Valleya Pappen because he was not supposed to come near the kitchen door as he was an untouchable. The apex of his meekness and distortion is exposed when: “Valleya Pappen began to cry. Half of him wept. Tears welled up in his real eye and shone on his black cheek. With his other eye he stared stonily ahead. An old Paravan who had seen the backward days, torn between Loyalty and Love” (255). This shows the heartless attitude of upper castes towards the untouchables while exploiting them beyond the measures. Roy explores the hypocritical nature of Mammachi, whose attitude towards Valleya Pappen totally changed because his son Velutha was accused. Roy has presented the insensitive and cruel nature of Mammachi towards Valleya Pappen when she was humiliating him:

Suddenly the blind old woman in her rickrack dressing gown and with her thin gray hair plaited in to rat’s tail stepped forward and pushed Valleya Pappen with all her strength. He stumbled backwards down the kitchen steps and lay sprawled in the wet mud. He was taken—completely by surprise. Part of the taboo of being an untouchable was expecting not to be touched (256).

The treatment received by Valleya Pappen gave him the confirmation that his son Velutha will be killed soon. Roy has portrayed the modern world where people are heartless and unsympathetic towards a section of people in the society; determined to humiliate and exploit them. Even the dogs are allowed to enter the houses but untouchables like Valleya Pappen are not allowed though he is a human being. It seems that they are born to face oppressions from the dominant classes of the society and there is nobody who could emancipate them from the chains of caste hierarchy. They are treated as smutty and cruddy as Baby Kochamma says Mammachi: “how could she stand the smell? Haven’t you noticed? They have a particular smell; these Paravans” (257).

It is the human nature that if an untouchable is charged, all other touchables get united in order to destroy him. If Velutha would have belonged to other caste except Paravan, there would have been a possibility to serve. But he is an untouchable and there are naught chances of his survival. This begins the strife between touchables and untouchables and thus the touchable inspector, Thomas Mathews did not even enquire whether Velutha was guilty or not. He has got the chance to annihilate an untouchable and he would never lose it. Thus all the touchable policemen went in search of Velutha and reached his house where he was sleeping. The inhuman treatment of these policemen is explored when they: “woke Velutha with their boots” (308). Roy here explored that there are millions of untouchables who are accused without any charge and leave them bamboozled. The policemen beat Velutha so adversely that he

lost his consciousness. The atrocity and barbarity of Thomas Mathews towards Velutha is portrayed by Roy as:

His skull was fractured in three places. His nose and both his cheekbones were smashed, leaving his face pulpy, undefined. The blow to his mouth had split open his upper lip and broken six teeth, three of which were embedded in lower lip, hideously inverting his beautiful smile. Four of his ribs were splintered, one had pierced his left lung, which was what made him bleed from his mouth. The blood on his breath bright red. His lower intestine was ruptured and haemorrhaged, the blood collected in his abdominal cavity. His spine was damaged in to two places, the concussion had paralysed his right arm and resulted in a loss of control over his bladder and rectum. Both his knees were shattered (310).

In the Kottayam police station, Estha and Rahel witnesses Velutha's condition as: "he could not walk. So they dragged him. Nobody saw them. Bats, of course, are blind" (Roy, 312). However, Estha and Rahel gave the statement that they were not abducted by Velutha they went away in the river by their own will. The statement of both the twins even could not save meek Velutha because the catty Baby Kochamma forced the kids not to disclose the fact in the police station. So Velutha was tortured for being an untouchable but not as a criminal. This is the reality of India which is based on caste hierarchies. In Kottayam police station, Estha could see the gloomy lock-up in which Velutha was taking his final breaths as:

The lock- up was pitch- dark. Estha see nothing, but he could not hear the sound of rasping, laboured breathing. The smell of the shirt made him retch. Someone switched on the light. Velutha appeared on the scummy, slippery floor. A mangled genie invoked by a modern lamp. He was naked, his soiled mundu had come undone. Blood spilled from his skull like a secret. His face was swollen and his skull a pumpkin with a monstrous upside- down smile. Police boots stepped back from the rim of pool of urine spreading from him, the bright, bare electric bulb reflected in it (319- 320).

Velutha's life is entirely destroyed by Thomas Mathews without being proved his guilt. It is obvious that while brutalizing an innocent person so horribly, his survival chances remain very less. Thus Velutha's life has: "half an hour past midnight death come for him" (Roy, 320). Ammu developed a love affair with an untouchable Velutha but the caste dominated society did not allow them to do this and thus leads to the death of an innocent person. Thus according to Roy smallest things are devastated by biggest things. Roy is opined that once the small and big things mingle with one another the country will be free from all carbs.

Conclusion:

Roy's intentions are clearly visible in the novel *The God of Small Things*. She lays emphasis on the fact that untouchables are also human beings like others and should be treated as the respectable citizens of the society. Untouchability can be removed by providing these untouchables equal social and political rights. But it is not employed as such by the society because in the narrative Velutha is snatched from his political right. Being the supporter of Communist party he went to Comrade Pillai to save him from the accused sin which had not committed. In turn Pillai said: "party was not constituted to support workers' independence in their private life" (287). If Comrade Pillai would have used his power, he would have saved the life of innocent Velutha. But being a touchable traitor and hypocrite he preferred death of Untouchable Velutha. Arundhati Roy has sagaciously and meritoriously portrayed the reality of India in her novel *The God of Small Things*, where atrocity and barbarity is imposed on lower caste communities. Velutha's murder in Ayemenem village is the documentation of prolongation of orthodoxy in Indian society. The steps taken for the eradication of untouchability in the social milieu remained only the subject in books and not implemented practically. Roy finally suggests that until and unless the upper caste people would not change the centuries-old caste ideologies towards Dalits, the atrocity, dehumanization, exploitation, humiliation and untouchability will never be excavated.

Works Cited

1. Ambedkar, B.R. *Annihilation of Caste*. Bangalore: Dalit Sahitya Academy, 1987. Print.
2. ---. *The Untouchables: Who Were They? And Why They Became Untouchables*. New Delhi: Amrit Book Co., 1948. Print.
3. ---, *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to Untouchables*. Bombay: Thaker and Company Ltd., 1945. Print.
4. Kadam, K. N. *Dr. Ambedkar and the Significance of His Movement*. London: Sangam Books, 1991. Print.
5. Keer, Dhananjay. *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1962. Print.
6. Patil, Mallikarjun. *Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things: A Study of Themes, Language and Style, Arundhati Roy's Fictional World*. Ed., A. N. Bwivedi. New Delhi: B.R. Publishing House, 2001. Print.
7. Rao, Ranga. *The Booker of the Year*. The Hindu, Sunday, November 16, 1997. 13
8. Roy, Arundhati. *The God of Small Things*. New Delhi: India Ink, 1997. Print.

