

The Socio-cultural space for the Untouchables in ‘The God of Small Things’

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The caste system is a deep-rooted factor hindering the integration of people in India. It affects the socio-economic and socio-cultural system of the Indian society. The most unwanted and exploited ones are the untouchables, who are socially, economically, culturally and politically suppressed and oppressed and even exploited. Untouchability has a long history in India. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar said that pre-Dravidian aborigines were forced to become untouchables by the Dravidians. He commented that untouchability was born sometime around 4th century, when in the frequent clashes between the settled and the nomadic tribes, a section of the nomadic tribes were compelled to live on the outskirts of the village. They were untouchables as they used to eat the flesh of the dead cows.

According to the Rigveda, humanity is divided into four varnas, namely Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and shudras. The Brahmins are the most powerful sections who control others. The shudras have been the most oppressed and exploited people. In South India untouchability is practiced more meticulously. In Kerala, untouchability assumed its most appalling features. (Amitabh Roy 107-108). In the twentieth century, two great personalities namely, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi fought for the cause of untouchables till the end of their lives. Mahatma Gandhi renamed untouchables as Harijan, means ‘people of God’, to confer upon them human dignity and honour.

Arundhati Roy raises her voice against the oppression of untouchables because of the caste system prevalent in Kerala and portrays a gloomy and bizarre picture of them in *The God of small things*. The plot of the novel moves around a Syrian Christian family of Ayemenem House. Syrian Christians claim the Apostle Thomas as their founder. The term ‘Syrian’ refers to the West Asian origins of the group’s ancestors and to their use of Syriac as a liturgical language. For centuries, their spoken language has been Malayalam. Twenty percent of Kerala’s population was Syrian Christians, who believed that they were descendants of one hundred Brahmins whom Saint Thomas the Apostle converted to Christianity when he travelled east after the Resurrection (*The God of Small Things*-p66). Therefore, by origin all the members of the Ipe family are Hindus. The untouchables depicted in this novel are also converted Christians. When the British came to Malabar, a number of Paravans, Pelayas and Pulayas (among them Veluth’s grandfather, Kelan) converted to Christianity and joined the Anglican Church to escape the scourge of untouchability. They were known as Rice Christians. They were made to have separate churches, with separate services and separate priests.

The power structure is quite obvious in the caste-ridden Kerala where the untouchables, namely Paravans, Palayas and Pulayas are mentioned in the novel, are treated as social outcasts who are not allowed to enter the houses of the touchable. Pappachi would not allow Vellya

Pappen and his son to touch things touched by Caste Hindus and Caste Christians. The description of inhuman treatment of the untouchables becomes obvious when Mammachi tells the twins: “.....in her girlhood, when the Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan’s footprint. (p.73-74) Since then the condition of the untouchables has improved but not much as it should have been. The Communist party in Kerala took up the problem of untouchables as a means to the objective of electoral gain.

Vellya Pappen is aware of the social reality and therefore, he never dares to break existing social laws. He is submissive to these age-old traditions made to suppress and exploit. His loyalty to the Ipe family overcomes his love for his son Velutha. On the contrary, Velutha has a rebellious spirit in him who loves to break all sorts of laws made against them; he is not ignorant of the dire consequences of it. Vellya and his sons belong to an untouchable caste called Paravan. They serve the objective of showing how untouchables are being victimized jointly by politicians, administrators and members of upper-caste families. The concept that they are born to serve the upper class people and what they do is good for them is deeply rooted in their psyche.

Velutha is the worst sufferer in the novel, because he defies age-old traditions and rules imposed on the untouchables to exploit and oppress them. He is the representative of the exploited. For the cause of poor labourers and the untouchables he joins the procession to protest. Velutha is highly intelligent and an excellent craftsman with an engineer’s mind. He is “The God of Small Things” who is forced to convert to “The God of Loss” who “left no footprints in sand, no ripples in water, no image in mirrors” (p.265) Arundhati Roy mocks the caste conscious Ipe family who use dining table made by an untouchable Velutha. He hates the powerful upper caste who denies giving minimum rights to the untouchables. M. Dasan remarks: “Velutha is placed on the borders of society, caught in between right and wrong; sanity and insanity; morality and immorality.” Velutha is victim of narrow politics in which Comrade K.Pillai is the supreme agent who in order to fulfill his self-interest of developing political career designs a conspiracy to remove his only competitor Velutha from his path.

When Velutha’s illicit sexual relationship with Ammu is revealed, he goes through innumerable mental and physical tortures. Baby Kochamma lodges an FIR of attempted rape of Ammu. Mammachi spits in the face of Velutha and screams: “If you find on my property tomorrow I’ll have you castrated like the pariah dog that you are! I’ll have you killed!” (p.264) Velutha is involved in breaking the age-old customs and rules of society and that is why he is killed to defend the social norms and order. Baby Kochamma points out that Velutha’s murder is “a history lesson for future offenders”(p.336) It is not a crime when Chako sexually exploits the poor untouchable women workers in the factory. Even Mammachi defends him by considering it “Men’s Needs”(p.258) and makes an arrangement for his convenience. But untouchable Velutha’s physical relation with touchable Ammu cannot be tolerated. The touchable police beat

him to death and Baby Kochamma justifies it as a divine retribution: “As ye sow, so shall ye reap” (p.31). Velutha’s sowing brings him his violent annihilation, but what will Baby Kochamma and other powerful agents of society reap for what they have sown? Is there any answer to this echoing question from generation to generation?

Works cited

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