

Eloquent Silence: A Study in Caste with Special Reference to ‘The God of Small Things’

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Abstract

The Caste system in India is an integral part of ancient Hindu tradition and dates back to 1200 BC. When caste taken as synonymous with Indian social system, it forms a ‘cultural’ category as it is indicated by the Hindu lawgiver, Manu, who is regarded as its architect. Untouchables have been in a very ambiguous position for many centuries in the context of Indian society. Seen from the view point of the Vedas, Untouchables have actually procured no place in the whole Hindu social order. Hindu society, as it came to be known, was clearly divided by Vedas into four categories or varnas which denoted certain social occupations. They can be listed as Brahmin (priest and teacher), Kshatriya (ruler and warrior), Vaishya (trader), and Sudra(servant). The term ‘Untouchable’ appears to be highly evocative in its suggestion as it insinuates towards a pernicious form of subordination known ever in history. The very idea that some people are so inferior or degraded as not to be touched physically or morally, makes such a strong appeal and impact as to make this term stand out of all and the best known all over the world.

Though from time-to-time various literary writers have voiced their concerns for the Dalits, the underdogs or the downtrodden section of the Indian society, Arundhati Roy’s ‘The God of Small Things’, the debut novel of the author and winner of Booker Prize in 1997, exposes the social consciousness and class discrimination prevalent in the caste-ridden society, leading to tyranny and exploitation in the face of apparent just and law- governed social order. It is interesting to note that caste-based divisions in the Hindu society have been present since ages, but Arundhati Roy presents a cross-caste clash in the novel, which is not the widely popular divide between the touchable and the untouchables of the Hindu society, but between the Syrian Christians and the Untouchables.

Keywords: Caste, Untouchability, Dalits, Paravans, Exploitation, Oppression, Tragic.

INTRODUCTION

The Caste system in India is an integral part of ancient Hindu tradition and dates back to 1200 BC. “The term caste was first used by Portuguese travelers who came to India in the 16th century. Caste comes from the Spanish and Portuguese word “casta” which means “race”, “breed”, or “lineage”. Many Indians use the term “jati” (Sharma, 149). When caste taken as synonymous with Indian social system, it forms a ‘cultural’ category as it is indicated by the Hindu lawgiver, Manu, who is regarded as its architect. Making a reference to verse 4 of chapter X of the Manu Smriti, Ambedkar points out that Manu talks of only four varnas in the verse. There is no such thing as a fifth varna. He says that the text now leads to two different interpretations: one being that the Untouchables are also included in the fourth varna and form a part of Sudras. When there is no objection in touching Sudras, how there can be with Untouchables, falling in the same class. Another interpretation, which seems to be more obviously the intention of Manu, implies that those who do not fall in the category of the four varnas, do not constitute the Hindu society altogether. The argument appears to be more convincing as the book mentions next a category of people who are

termed as 'Varna Bahyas', meaning those outside the varna system and it is here that the Untouchables make their way. "A caste is to be understood as a group within a society. It is recognized only in relation to other such groups in the society with which it interacts in the economic, political, social, and ritual spheres of life. This network outlines the working of the caste system. Thus, it is logical to define the caste system as a 'plurality of interacting endogamous groups (jatis) living a common culture'. Traditionally, these castes were arranged hierarchically as part of the varna system. And there existed a broad division of labour between them because of occupational specialization." (Atal, 158). Declaring his observations about the unified entity of the two – Untouchability and the Caste System, Ambedkar asserts, "The underlying idea that a caste and untouchability are two different things is founded on a fallacy. The two are one and are inseparable. Untouchability is only an extension of the caste system. There can be no severance between the two. The two stand together and will fall together ... Untouchability will vanish only when the whole of the Hindu Social Order, particularly the caste system will be dissolved. Is this possible?" (Ambedkar,39-40)

Untouchables have been in a very ambiguous position for many centuries in the context of Indian society. Seen from the view point of the Vedas, Untouchables have actually procured no place in the whole Hindu social order. Hindu society, as it came to be known, was clearly divided by Vedas into four categories or varnas which denoted certain social occupations. They can be listed as Brahmin (priest and teacher), Kshatriya (ruler and warrior), Vaishya (trader), and Sudra (servant). These Varnas are often misunderstood as 'caste'.

"The absence of Untouchables from the varna scheme may arise simply from the later emergence of the social condition: the weight of opinion suggests that Untouchability only crystallized in the second century of the common era, whereas the varna principle seems to have been established over 1000 years earlier. But since the varna classes persisted as a representation of the whole Hindu order, the position of Untouchables as Hindus has been contradictory. Their presence cannot be denied, but they have no legitimate place in the order."

Thus, they tend to form a grouping outside the varna system often referred to 'Outcaste'. For Gandhi, Untouchability was a historical corruption of Hinduism and it would be cured by caste Hindus, purging themselves of the immorality that imperceptibly made its way into the pure body of Hinduism. He consistently visualized that the Untouchables would join their fellow Hindus in a reborn equality. Shashi Tharoor argues that,

"Looking at the prohibitions imposed by caste, and the prejudice and discrimination it permitted, it is easy to see why Gandhi and the more enlightened of India's nationalists, anxious to unite the country against the foreign colonizer, campaigned passionately against the caste system." (104)

On the other hand, the Untouchable leader Dr. B.R. Ambedkar- popularly known as Baba Saheb- born an untouchable in a caste-ridden Hindu society, ceaselessly struggled for equality and justice. Ambedkar's intellect and courage took him to Columbia University, London School of Economic and Gray's Inn. Returning to India, he dedicated his life to the welfare of the poorest of the poor- The Dalits. He tried to get the Hindu temples doors open in Maharashtra for the Untouchables as his first effort in this direction in the late 1920s. Soon he foresaw the futility of his whole effort as he sensed Hinduism as to be irredeemable, leading to his gathering determination to find a religious way out. His intention was made clear in 1935, when he declared at Yeola that he would not die a Hindu. His words, however, took another two decades for the execution in behavior. Firstly, thinking about Sikhism as his religious harbor, he finally anchored his conversion inclination in Buddhism along with millions of his Mahar followers shortly before his death in 1956 and thus making his declaration in words true in his action.

The word 'Untouchable' seems to have its genesis in the early twentieth century and can invariably be viewed as a member of a cluster of towns forming a secondary category (these terms included 'Outcastes' 'Depressed Castes' and 'Exterior Castes') to be differentiated from the category of political character which was dictated by two leading terms: 'Harijan' and 'Dalit'. The term 'Harijan' was adopted by Mahatma Gandhi in 1933 with an objective to invent a term which identified the relevant people without binding them to an inferior status. 'Harijan' is translatable as 'People of God'. The term was widely welcomed and adopted by the people in general and also by Untouchables themselves, but recently this nomenclature has lost its appeal as many felt that the term seems to have the undertones of condescending and sounds as a meaningless, futile endeavour. All these terms have been replaced by the term 'Scheduled Castes', now the official identifier of the so-called Untouchables, entitling them to parliamentary seats, public employment and special education benefits. The term 'Schedule' was first enforced by the British Government in India in 1936 but came to be used widely only after independence. The Term not only has a moral neutrality but also is essentially legal in nature as making people be viewed as a special legal class of citizens for certain purposes of the state.

The most unpopular term, perhaps, seems to have been 'ex-untouchable' which was often used in the early post-independence period. Though the term is legally correct as Untouchability was abolished by the Constitution of India. But the term is as far away from its meaning as from its sociological acceptance, when considered that Untouchability has not fallen apart in reality.

The term 'Untouchable' appears to be highly evocative in its suggestion as it insinuates towards a pernicious form of subordination known ever in history. The very idea that some people are so inferior or degraded as not to be touched physically or morally, makes such a strong appeal and impact as to make this term stand out of all and the best known all over the world.

Though from time-to-time various literary writers have voiced their concerns for the Dalits, the underdogs or the downtrodden section of the Indian society, Arundhati Roy's 'The God of Small Things', the debut novel of the author and winner of Booker Prize in 1997, exposes the social consciousness and class discrimination prevalent in the caste-ridden society, leading to tyranny and exploitation in the face of apparent justful and law- governed social order. Talking about her book in an interview, Roy explains:

"It is about trying to make the connections between the smallest of things and the biggest of things and to see how they fit together." (General Knowledge Today)

Commenting upon the contemporary socio-cultural scenario in Kerala, Upadhyay writes, "Roy's novel stresses some of the issues arise in any caste-based society. It is well-known that how caste system played an important role within Indian society but it is less widely known that how rigid and strict the caste structure of Kerala was. The lowest castes were confined to particular high castes for whom they were always on call as labourers or slaves. If they displease them, they had to evict the land on which they lived because it was owned by the high caste only." (Upadhyay, 127)

Roy has made sincere efforts in portraying the contemporary Keralite society realistically. It is interesting to note that caste-based divisions in the Hindu society have been present since ages, but Arundhati Roy presented a cross-caste clash in the novel, which is not the widely popular divide between the touchable and the untouchables of the Hindu society, but between the Syrian Christians and the Untouchables. Christianity is known for compassion, equality and humanism. It is told that Velutha's grandfather Vellya Kelan converted into Christian with others to get away from the curse of untouchability, but soon they realized that they were not considered equivalent with the other Christians. What made it worse was that

they did not get the benefit of job reservations and bank loans on low interest in the post-independent India, as they were Christians and hence casteless.

Velutha, the hero of 'The God of Small Things', is an Untouchable, a member of the marginalized class of the society. He belongs to the community of 'paravans' who are socially ostracized. They are speechless and silent community who dare not to speak, if they do, they do it with subsequent hazardous consequences. Velutha dares to have the nerve to challenge the deep-rooted socio-cultural setup. Mammachi, Ammu's mother, recalls the times, taking great pride in,

"When paravans were expected to crawl backward with a broom sweeping away their foot-prints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a paravan's foot-prints ... they (paravans) had to put their hands over their mouths when they spoke to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed". (73-74)

Dr. Romila Thapar, presenting a resonance of the above, writes,

"Fa Hsien/ Fa Hian, a Chinese Buddhist monk who was on pilgrimage to India in the years AD 405 to 411, collecting Buddhist manuscripts and studying at Buddhist monasteries, describes people as generally happy. Yet he also writes that the untouchables had to sound a clapper in the streets of the town so that people were warned of their presence; and that if an untouchable came into close range, the upper-caste person would have to perform a ritual ablution." (303)

Velutha is representative of a class which has been denied what is considered prerogative only of the higher class. "They were not allowed to walk on public roads, to cover their upper bodies, to carry umbrellas. They had to put their hands over their mouth when they spoke to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed." (73-74) Velutha was blessed with mental and spiritual attributes. Not only was he a skilled craftsman and carpenter was also very good at repairing machines like radios, cloaks, water-pumps etc. Roy fondly mentions,

"It was Mammachi... who first noticed little Velutha's remarkable facility with his hands. Velutha was eleven then, about three years younger than Ammu. He was like a little magician. He could make intricate toys-tiny windmills, rattles, minute jewel boxes out of dried palm reed; he could carve boats out of tapioca stems and figurines on cashew nuts. He would bring them for Ammu, holding them out in his palm (as he had been taught) so she would not have to touch him to take them." (74)

Later, he is loved by Rahel and Estha also, the children of Ammu, who would frequently seek the help of Velutha in getting their boats repaired to be able to sail in Meenachal river. He gladly took the charge of becoming the swimming coach of these children. He works at the Paradise Pickles and Preserves Factory owned by Ammu's family. His carpentry skills and mechanical and technical knowledge made the touchable workers envious of him at the factory who believed that he worked above his station. He was paid less than the touchable and more than the untouchables.

Arundhati writes, "perhaps it was just a lack of hesitation. An unwarranted assurance. In the way he walked. The way he held his head. The quiet way he offered suggestions without being asked. Or the quiet way in which he disregarded suggestions without appearing to rebel." (76)

In this novel the rigid and ancient laws of Indian caste system are broken by the characters of Ammu, the touchable and Velutha, an untouchable by falling in love and having physical proximity which was tabooed by the champions of the society. Ammu, who is a marginalised character and a victim of male chauvinism, is denied any love or tenderness by her parents or husband. The male domination and patriarchal pressure drift quietly the emotionally starved Ammu towards having the illicit love affair with Velutha. “She in order to satisfy her long suppressed sexual desire goes out in the night, meets her lover Velutha.” (225) We find Ammu using the boat at night, “The boat that Ammu would use to cross the river. To love by night the man, her children loved by day”. (202)

Ammu and Velutha both were attracted towards each other and made illicit love inciting the fury of the society. But Velutha was considered as the main criminal and the verdict was passed that the unlawful love affair should be brought to a close by annihilating Velutha by all means. His own father could not bear this immorality to continue and informed the mistress of the house about this illegitimate relationship and requested to destroy what his son had created. He was trembling with fear at the magnanimity of his son’s sin and offered to kill him with his own hands. Ammu was beaten up and termed as ‘Vesya’ and Velutha was handed over to police on the false charge of killing the daughter of Chacko, who met an accidental death by drowning while playing in the boat. Velutha was beaten blue and black by the police and subsequently succumbed to the fatal injuries.

What is undeniably important to note here is that Velutha is not provided with any chance to speak in his defense breaking the ice of his silence, as he is being incriminated for the crime he did not commit. So was expected of him to do. As a Christian paravan, he was forbidden to speak up. Though, he still paid the price, for not his eloquence, but for his eloquent silence which defied all the rules laid down by the big-wigs of the society and threatened their dwarfish existence with his towering stature metaphorically.

Roy describes the scene of brutality at the police station with a marked explicitness; “blood spilled from his skull like a secret. His face was swollen and his head looked like a pumpkin too large and heavy for the slender stem it grew from, a pumpkin with a monstrous upside-down smile. Police boots stepped back from the rim of a pool of urine spreading from him, the bright, bare electric bulb reflected in it.” (319-320)

Thus, the life of untouchable Velutha, who had dared to challenge the age-old tradition of social morality by loving or accepting the love of Ammu and found guilty thereof, comes to an end. ‘The God of Small Things’, thus, paints a vivid picture of the Dalits or the downtrodden of the society. The acknowledgement by Ranga Rao sums up the novel quite truly as he affirms:

“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 untouchable.”

Although ‘The God of Small Things’ takes place in 1969, the caste has not disappeared since. However, it exhibits a marked adaptability to the changing social scenario. “Today inter-dining”, in the words of Yogesh Atal, “is a common feature, each caste is highly diversified occupationally, and untouchability is fast disappearing, particularly in the urban areas. It should be noted that not all occupations are caste bound... One can find even Brahmans selling shoes and leather goods, and some traditional leather

working caste people engaged in teaching and administration. Thus, occupation is not a defining characteristic of caste any more. “(163-164)

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