



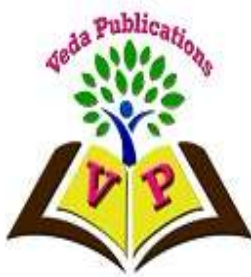
EVOLUTION OF ENVIRONMENTAL IDENTITY OF 'VELUTHA' IN *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*

Jini Varghes^{1*}, Dr. K T Pius²

^{1*}(Research Scholar, Bharathiar University, Coimbatore.)

²(Associate Professor and Research Guide, St. Aloysius College, Elthuruth, Thrissur, Kerala.)

ABSTRACT



The term 'Identity' is the reflection or totality of a person's being, having and doing. It consists of what an individual feels about himself as well as the social factors. There are two components as far as identity is concerned, namely the private and public identity. The private identity is about what a person conceives about himself/herself while the public identity is what society observes and constructs about a person from outside. An important factor that contributes to the formation of one's own identity is nature and environment. The natural environment follows the principle of unity in diversity, where all organisms are equal without any kind of discrimination. The apartheid or discrimination of a person is always something constructed. This paper attempts to examine the formation of private and public identity of the character Velutha, an untouchable in the novel *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy in the context of Eco-criticism, giving special emphasis to concepts like Equality and unity in diversity.

Keywords: *Apartheid, Equality, Identity, Nature, Unity.*



INTRODUCTION

Nature is an irrevocable image in many literary works. There is a strong bond between nature and literature as evident from the works of many famous writers. The association between nature and literature has paved way for many literary studies, which ultimately resulted in the birth of a genre of literary criticism named as 'Eco-criticism'.

The term 'Eco-criticism' appeared for the first time in the article "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" by William Rueckert in 1978. In simple words, the term 'Eco-criticism' indicates the portrayal of elements of nature in literary works. This literary theory became part of the academic discipline during the 1990's. Literary scholars have divided 'Eco-criticism' into two parts. The first wave/part of eco-criticism comprises of an analysis of elements of nature in literary writings and how environment plays an important role in the life of a human being. The second wave is a much broader one that brought out a parallel interpretation of the term 'environment' which moves beyond and explains how the life of a human being is affected by factors like gender, race, class etc in the context of environment. An important component of the second wave of 'Eco-criticism' is the concept of 'Environmental Identity'. The main aim of this paper is to analyze the formation of environmental identity in the life of the character Velutha from the novel *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy.

One's identity is developed over time and cannot be replaced easily. The term 'Identity' has a long history attached to it and is derived from the medieval French word 'Identite', meaning sameness. The identity of a person is always taken for granted because it is believed that a person has a 'given' identity and is considered as an inherent quality. However the debates and discussions around this term today assume that, identity is the result of a process as part of interaction with others. The formation of identity is considered to be an important component in life and is different from the concept of personality. Personality is an attempt to answer the questions related to 'What kind of person are you?' We may share many personal traits with other people. Identity on the other hand deals with

some recognition and awareness from our part and is also constructed by the society in which we live. Madan Sarup in his work *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World* published in 1996, is of the opinion that identity basically is a kind of interface between the personal and the social. It consists of what an individual feels about himself as well as the social factors. According to Sarup, each and every person has two major components in their identity namely their 'personal' identity and their 'public' identity. Sarup defines as follows:

Personal identity is how we see ourselves while public identity is how others judge us or observe us. (14)

In social life, people are urged to live following the societal norms and conditions.. The process of defining oneself within the context of a complex modern society is governed by factors like race, gender, caste, education, economic position etc. A person, in the journey of defining and defending himself/herself with respect to the predicates in association with the societal conditions around, has to incorporate conflicting models, recognitions, standards and values offered by his/her society. Thus identity formation has become challenging which might even lead to 'identity crisis' or an undefined personality. Environmental identity is yet another dimension of the identity of a person. Cheryll Glotfelty, a famous eco-critic in her work *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology explains environmental identity as the 'Thoughts and individuality of a person associated with the nature around. It is a reflection of the 'self' of a person in the context of environment' (Glotfelty, 35).*

DISCUSSION

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* has largely been esteemed as a fine, daring and adroitly intrepid work that gained widespread popularity in India and abroad. This novel is a dynamic work instilled with a turbulent spirit to break all the conventional methods of writing, both in theme and narration. The novel deciphers the scars, inner strife and tensions, dilemmas, agonies and adversities of a set of people, helpless and hunted by the social convictions leading to identity crisis. However towards the end of the novel we can see them embracing an evolved identity which is closely



associated with their 'self' in the context of environment. A prominent character in the novel going through the process of identity crisis and embracing an environmental identity is Velutha, an untouchable. This paper examines in detail the various factors and incidents that led to the identity crisis of Velutha finally concluding with him evolving into a new self in the cradle of nature.

Roy's novel is based on the society which she has observed and analyzed. The questions raised by her are largely social questions. The novel takes place in a town called as Ayemenam in Kerala. It is the story of the fraternal twins, Estha and Rahel and their mother Ammu. The plot develops with the life of the twins in Ayemenam after Ammu left her husband and returned to her house. The story is a series of flashbacks and the narration moves back and forth. A memorable character in the novel is Velutha, an untouchable. He is a great friend of the twins. He is a skilled carpenter and works in the pickle factory of the twin's grandmother. His affair with Ammu and the problems it creates culminating in his brutal death form a major part of the main plot in the novel. Roy presents the life of a Dalit through the character of Velutha. In the novel, Velutha is marginalized owing to his birth as a 'paravan', an untouchable in Kerala. The novel examines the outlook of the society towards Velutha and his constructed identity as a Dalit as well as incidents that throw light at his own identity.

Ammu's family members especially her mother, Mammachi and her aunt Baby Kochamma symbolize society and how the society in Kerala looks at a Dalit. In the novel there are many instances that indicate Velutha's construction of his public identity as a Dalit. In the novel Mammachi recollects the memories of the rigid caste system that existed during her time. The memories of Mammachi are clear indications of how the Indian society wanted a Dalit to be and how his life should be. The society always considers them as separate and not belonging to the mainstream. They are often treated in a way which is much worse than that of an animal. The following lines of Mammachi are indicative of this:

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 into a paravan's footprint...Paravans, like other untouchables were not allowed walk on public roads, not allowed to cover their upper bodies, 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)

These lines clearly indicate the attitude of the society towards a person belonging to the lower caste. The way a paravan should live, behave and dress up is already decide by the society. They are born to be tortured and their identities to be molded by the society. The identity of a Dalit came to Velutha from his father, VellyaPappan. VellyaPappan is a victim of marginalization in society to such an extent that he himself has adhered to be considered a Dalit and be oppressed by the society. VellyaPappan was a toddy tapper and a faithful servant of the Ayemenam house. As a child Velutha used to work with his father for Pappachi, the twins' grandfather. Velutha and VallyaPappen were given permission to enter the Ayemenam house but to follow the stipulated path. They were not allowed to touch anything the touchable touched. Pappachi was a strict follower of the caste system and hierarchy and was not interested in the paravans entering the house. Even in order to deliver the coconuts, VellyaPappan and Velutha entered through the back entrance.

Another major instance in the novel that clearly constructs the attitude towards the Dalit is the way Mammachi hired and gave wages to Velutha. Velutha had great skills in carpentry. The dalit community was given the chores of cleaning dirt and filth. However Velutha found happiness in carpentry. His hands were magical when it touched wood. Mammachi recognized Velutha's talents and gave him the job of maintain the machines in Paradise Pickles. However the wages provided to him were very less compared to the other touchable workers. Moreover, the other workers always looked at him with contempt and disapproved of his presence in the factory because he was an untouchable. The other workers even disapproved of Velutha and disagreed to work with him. Mmmachi always paid



him less and always found chances to discriminate him from others.

A major incident that forms the crux of the main plot in the novel is the love affair between Velutha and Ammu. A dalit having a physical and mental relationship with a woman belonging to the upper caste was strictly forbidden. Velutha in the novel had to face the penalty of betrayal and punishment of death for his relation with Ammu. It was VelyaPappan who revealed the relation to Mammachi. VellyaPappan in many ways disapproved of the life led by Velutha as the latter didn't follow the life style of a Dalit with respect to the norms and conditions in the society in Kerala. His son worked as a carpenter, didn't give importance to the rules and regulations to be followed by an untouchable and was also a member of the communist party. VellyaPappan was full of guilt and remorse when he confessed the sin committed by his son to Mammachi. He returned his artificial eye glass to Mammachi who had paid for it and begged for forgiveness for the mistake committed by his son. VellyaPappan's victimization made himself a slave to the upper caste to such an extent that he was ready to kill his son for having a romantic relation with Ammu.

The death of Sophie Mol and the arrest of Velutha with charge of murder is another incident from the novel that emphasizes the fact of the constructed identity of a Dalit, a public identity. A dalit has neither rights nor freedom to express his thoughts. His life has already been constructed even before his birth. BabayKochamma in the novel creates a false story and get Velutha arrested for molesting Ammu and killing Sophie Mol. The police don't even give any importance to the innocence of Velutha. She reciprocated the story of his cruelty in a most believable manner. He was presented as a cruel, ill-mannered paravan who took revenge at the family for dismissing him from work at the factory. He was tortured brutally and had a sad demise in the police station. Ammu makes all her effort to convince the police officer that Velutha was innocent. Despite knowing that Velutha was innocent, the police officer was not bothered to help him. The innocence of Velutha comes to limelight with the words of the

police officer that what the paravan had taken from the touchable kingdom was not taken but given.

Every human being irrespective of age, sex, caste, class etc all belong to nature. In many ways the concepts of social justice and equality are considered as social issues where environment doesn't have any role to play. However from a literary perspective, sustainable development in its extended term eco criticism includes a fair and equal treatment for all human beings to meet the needs of present and conserving the rest for future. It assumes the form of an inter generational equality. In the novel Roy clearly describes how Velutha experiences equality in the laps of nature. In the presence of the Meenachal River and the environment around Velutha doesn't feel any rules or restrictions. He is free to act and behave like a normal human being and not an untouchable. Identity of Velutha only becomes complete with the association of it to the environment outside, especially the Meenachalriver. In front of nature all are equal without any restrictions on caste, race or gender. All are equal and have freedom to be what they are and who they are. Velutha also feels his identity, his self identity only in the presence of the river. It is in the presence of the river, Velutha meets Ammu, touches her and expresses his love. Velutha is not a dalit in the eyes of nature. Thus the character of Velutha faces his self identity only in the presence of nature. His emotions are related to the forces of nature around him.

Velutha in the novel has an identity crisis owing to his constructed identity or public identity as a dalit. However there are many situations in the novel where he asserts the thoughts of his self and tries to move away from the restrictions imposed upon him by the society, which happens when he is in close association with the environment around him. One major incident is his attraction and love towards Ammu. Though he tries to move away and restrict his feelings towards her, he still loves her. The following lines are indicative of this:

If he touched her, he couldn't talk to her, if he loved her he couldn't leave, if he spoke he couldn't listen, if he fought he couldn't win (189)

Though he wanted to love her he is incapable because he is a dalit, an untouchable. This



shows the clear reference to the identity crisis faced him. The touch, voice and even the love of a dalit was considered to be polluted. However their meetings and relationship, both physical and mental develops near the river Meenachal. Both Velutha and Ammu consider the river as the true witness for their love. Another indication of the personal identity of Velutha is when he is with the twins. He doesn't feel any restrictions to play around and have fun with the twins even when he is officially prohibited. Velutha is not allowed inside the house in Ayemenam but outside, near the river and forest nearby Velutha plays and talks to the twins. They sit together and feel the wind and sound of nature which provides the context for developing their true friendship. Another main incident in the novel that throws light on Velutha's attempts to ascertain his self identity is his skills in carpentry. When he was a child Mammachi recognized his talents and sent him to the school of untouchables. He made toys out of things obtained from the nature around. It is the basic education and training that he acquired that gave him the courage to take part in political and social issues like becoming a member of the communist party. The light brown birthmark of Velutha is associated to a pointed dry leaf by the twins. Similarly Velutha always likes to live in close relation to nature. He makes the river his home by eating fish from the river and sleeping near the banks of river. All these are incidents from the life of Velutha where he expresses his desires and dreams without any restrictions of being a Dalit in the presence of environment.

CONCLUSION

Vandana Shiva, the famous environmentalist in her article "Everything I need to Know, I Learned in the Forest" is of the opinion that all species on earth should be considered equal. This philosophy of her is evident from the following words:

The Earth University teaches Earth Democracy, which is the freedom for all species to evolve within the web of life, and the freedom and responsibility of humans, as members of the Earth family, to recognize, protect, and respect the rights of other species

(Shiva, 12)

Thus every human being is an equal in the eyes of nature. This paper on Identity Crisis talks about the ways in which the character Velutha in the novel face dilemmas and confusions owing to the conflict between who he is and what others assume about him, in terms of the outside society. The above section examines in detail the various examples which portray the issue of identity crisis occurring in the life of Velutha. The author through the novel puts forward various instances to show how the construction of the identity of the victim based on the societal norms create an image of Velutha, the dalit and how he tries to compare this image with his own self Thus it can be concluded that, the character Velutha attains his self, his environmental identity only in the presence of nature and the major factor that adds to the identity crisis of the victims is the role played by the society in their lives.

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