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RESEARCH ARTICLE



SOCIETAL OPPRESSION: A STUDY OF ARUNDATI ROY'S *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*

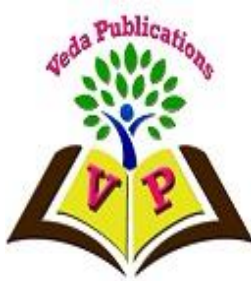
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ABSTRACT



The God of Small Things throws light upon hierarchical structures of power, and oppression at various levels in patriarchal societies. Arundati Roy explores how these differences of caste, gender and race, function through social institutions and the way they affect human interactions and relationships. In this paper, an attempt is made to show how the novel highlights the interrelationships of all power structures to shape society. The “Big Things” – the things in power, indicating in the end that the God of small things is an absent god, a god of loss.

Keywords: *Small Things, Big Things, Hierarchical, Human, Relationships*

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The story which encompasses three generations is seen through the stream of consciousness of Rahel who has witnessed the tragedy which overtook the Ayemenem house. Several years later she returns to the house because her twin brother Estha is 'Returned'. She relives mentally the events of her childhood. Various happenings – historical, social, and political have meshed together to create one tragedy. But according to Roy, the most responsible is our social code of conduct. The distress, she says, really began in the days when the Love Laws were made. The laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much. (p.33)

The victimization of the weak has been a common place in human history. All patriarchal societies see women as secondary humans. However, caste and class differentials generate hierarchies among women. Untouchable or Dalit women are the most deprived of all.

In *The God of Small Things*, Pappachi, the patriarch ill-treats his wife who bears his beating and abuse in silence. After the death of her husband, she herself takes into her hands the preservation of the 'honour' of the family. Baby Kochamma, her sister-in-law, who is unmarried, has faced no brutality since she is unmarried and belongs to an upper class 'reputed' family. Her only dissatisfaction in life is her unfulfilled love for father Mulligan. To assuage her bitterness she tries to poison the smallest joys of Ammu and her twins.

Chaco, the present patriarch, enjoys the rights of the pickle factory which his mother established and built up. Though Rahel and Estha, the twins, belong to the Ayemenem house they have no say whatsoever in any matter regarding themselves or

others. They are only 'provided for' like the barn animals. Their mother Ammu is a divorcee. So her children are punished for their mother's fault – the divorce as well as the inter-caste "love" marriage.

Velutha, the untouchable is the worst affected of all. As a person who is wholly dependent on his landlord's family – the Ayemenem house – for his livelihood and as a person belonging to the lowest caste, the untouchables, and his subjugation is multiple. He is brutally killed, leaving silence and emptiness in Estha and Rahel's lives, and loneliness in Ammu's.

To all this, the problem of race is an added dimension. Fair skin, blue eyes and red-gold hair signify perfect beauty and superiority. In *The God of Small Things*, Chacko's ex-wife Margaret Kochamma and her blonde daughter Sophie Mol outshine the members of the Ayemenem house. Ammu and her dark-skinned twins are made to feel inferior and out of place in the 'perfect' family gathering.

Gender, in our patriarchal society, plays a very important role in discriminating between the powerful and powerless. According to the ideology of male superiority and female inferiority, all men are empowered to exercise "right" over all women. Though Mammachi belongs to the upper class, she has no right whatsoever in her husband's family. She is beaten and ill-treated.

Every night he beat her with a brass flower vase. The beatings weren't new. What was new was only the frequency which they took place. (P.47)

Pappachi does everything to assert his manliness. His violence, creating fear in his subjects, serves as a manifestation of his frustration. When Mammachi



starts pickle making, he does not help though she is turning blind and he himself has retired.

He had always been a jealous man, so he greatly resented the attention the attention his wife was gettingIn the evenings, when the new visitors were expected, he would sit on the verandah and sew buttons that weren't missing onto his shirts, to created the impression that Mammachi neglected him. To some small degree he did succeed in further corroding Ayemenem's view of working wives. (p. 47-48)

Ammu, too, as a girl-child, is ill-treated by her father. After growing and completing her school, she is left with the only option of waiting for marriage. Ammu goes into a loveless "love marriage to a man who treats her like an object. Her divorce like her marriage is an outcome of being left with no choices to make. In spite of being unwelcome, she returns to the Ayemenem house with her twins.

Though Ammu is a daughter of the family, she has no say in any matter regarding property or household. Everything belongs to Chacko. After all the humiliation, when she seeks comfort in her love for Velutha, she is thrown out of the house.

Ammu has been a rebel as a child and as a woman. Though she has not had the kind of education, reading or upbringing as her brother, she is a person who does not accept smugness the way Mammachi does. Her firmness, fearlessness and assertion of what is right, lead her to go the police and make a confession of her affair with Velutha, to prove the FIR filed by Baby Kochamma false. The institution of 'justice' being mainly in the hands of upper class, upper caste men, the police men,

instead of taking her statement, call her a 'veshya' and her children 'illegitimate'. The police are seen to work as proprietors of 'touchability' to preserve 'order' in society. They unfailingly join hands with 'touchables', for a 'touchable' future.

Velutha is already dead and no harm would possibly come to the Ayemenem family which is supported by 'law' itself. But Baby Kochamma is shocked by Ammu's behavior. She believed that though Ammu did not care for family's reputation, she at least cared for her own. Ammu's going out and making a confession of an affair with an untouchable was in itself a daring step. She, as a result, is feared of being capable of 'anything' and is therefore forced to leave the place. She dies alone in a pitiful state, and after her death she is not buried in the church cemetery. The only persons who attend her funeral are Rahel and Chacko.

Like her mother, Rahel marries because she has no alternative. Her marriage also ends in divorce. In her school, she does not follow rules unquestionably. So, she is moved about from one school to another. Her womanhood is expected to hidden and unexplored. The more she grows curious about her body, the more she is expected to ignore it. Her small ways of rebelling only generate disapproval.

It was, they whispered to each other, 'as though she didn't know how to be a girl'. (P. 17)

Along with gender-oppression, Roy comments on the colonization of the mind which many Indians suffer from. The week that Sophie Mol, the blonde daughter of Chacko was arrive, had been the 'What will Sophie Mol think?' week. (p. 36)



Baby Kochamma makes it a rule to speak in English. So whenever the twins are caught speaking in Malayalam they are given written impositions:

I will always speak in English. I will always speak in English. A hundred times each. (P. 36)

Chacko tells the twins that they are a 'family of Anglophiles'. In spite of this realization, he, the Oxford scholar, quotes passages in English without any provocation. Nevertheless, he fails to recognize the ambivalence in the combination of his family's Anglophobia and its strict adherence to caste hierarchy in spite of being Christian. He is a man who talks of the identity crisis of Indians resulting from British rule and at the same time displays his ex-wife and blonde daughter as trophies.

Chacko's father, Pappachi had also been very proud of his government job to which he wore a three-piece suit unflinchingly even in the extreme heat of Ayemenem. He is so blinded by English sophistication that he does not believe his daughter at all. According to Ammu, 'Pappachi was an incurable British CCP, which was short for 'chhi-chhi poach' and in Hindi meant shit-wiper. (p. 51)

Skin color and race are seen to create a different power structure. A white skin is an ideal of beauty which leaves anyone with dark skin in a lower bracket. The impression that Sophie Mol leaves of herself is:

Hatted, bell-bottomed and loved from the beginning. (P. 186)

This glorification of the West is seen in the whole family's behavior, especially in Baby Kochamma's. The 'Foreign Returnees' are imagined to be looking scornfully at the visitors at the airport. 'Look at the

way they dressed! Surely they had more suitable airport wear! Why did Malayalees have such awful teeth?...Oho! Going to dogs India is. (P. 140)

The sense of inferiority complex at being Indian makes Baby Kochamma speak with a put on accent and ask Sophie Mol questions on Shakespeare's *Tempest*. Chacko wears, in spite of discomfort, a coat and tie to the airport instead of his usual mundu. His daughter Sophie Mol is seen as a paragon of beauty. She is constantly compared to Rahel and Estha, leaving them broken hearted and embittered. The death of Sophie Mol brings life at Ayemenem to an end. The two children Rahel and Estha could have brought happiness and life to the family. But they are Ammu's children, and therefore go unacknowledged.

Over the years, as the memory of Sophie Mol Slowly faded, the Loss of Sophie Mol grew robust and alive. It was always there. Like a fruit in season. As permanent as a government job. (P.16)

The children who are the 'smallest things; in the novel are the worst affected of all. They go against the rules and make Velutha, who is a paravan, an untouchable, their God. They are made to pay a heavy price for their 'misconduct'. Velutha – 'The God of Small things' and also 'The God of Loss' is their best friend, because he lets them be, and also participates in their world of make – believe in spite of being an adult. As Rahel grows up, she realizes,

It is after all so easy to shatter a story. To break a chain of thought. To ruin a fragment of a dream being carried around carefully like a piece of porcelain. To let it be, to travel with it as Velutha did, is much the harder thing to do. (P.190)



The world seen and experienced through Rahel and Estha brings about a recognition of the difference between the world of children and that of the adults. The vulnerability and innocence of children is often exploited by adults. Baby Kochamma treats Estha and Rahel scornfully because they are Ammu's children. Sophie Mol, on the other hand, is treated as an ornament to be locked away in a safe. She has to reject outright the 'advances' of the adults, to reveal herself to be human. Ammu tends to ill-treat and neglect her children because of her own frustration. Thus, in spite of being a victim, she happens to victimize, though unknowingly. When Rahel disobeys Ammu, she is threatened with the prospect of the withdrawal of love. She tries to inflict her punishment on herself, the seriousness of which Ammu fails to recognize. When the family members humiliate and ill-treat Ammu, she takes out her frustration on Rahel. But Rahel has no power over anyone. So he reacts by killing red ants.

Estha is sexually abused by the Orange –Lemon drink man in the theatre. This memory haunts him and leaves him frightened and insecure. The adults are never made aware of this catastrophe and they continue to behave as though everything is all right.

Stereotyped notions are introduced in the minds of the children from the beginning. Movies like 'The Sound of Music' which the twins watch together, condition the children with notions regarding perfect love and perfect family, and also perfect happiness. The twins aspire to be loved by Captain Von Clapp – Trapp who would supposedly love perfect children like Sophie Mol and not them. If they are not 'clean white children', if they blew spit-bubbles, shivered their legs like clerks or held 'strangers' soo-soos', a

'perfect man' like Captain Von Clapp-Trapp wouldn't be their Baba.

When Rahel as an adult meets comrade Pillai, he too talks about his son having a 'perfect' family – two children one wife, and a bajaj scooter – as one finds in advertisements.

The twins witness the brutal killing of their beloved Velutha. Baby Kochamma bribes Estha into giving a false word against Velutha in exchange for 'saving Ammu'. He lives with the guilt of this action for a lifetime. Rahel grows up without any love or concern, shifting from school to school. Her marriage cannot fill the emptiness within her. She ultimately divorces her husband and returns to Ayemenem for Estha.

Saving Ammu at the cost of Velutha, according to Baby Kochamma was a small price to pay. The price is: Two lives. Two children's childhoods. And a history lesson for future offenders. (P.336)

Rahel grows up to be a disillusioned unhappy adult with nothing but emptiness within her and Estha is forced to retreat into silence occupying very little space in the world. His memories are full of Velutha's blood.

When Rahel and Estha meet, he is still carrying with him the guilt of having deserted Velutha. Rahel, on the other hand, is fiercely vigilant and brittle with exhaustion from the battle against real life.

Velutha is a victim of the caste system which is deeply rooted in the Indian society. Though untouchability is the outcome of the age-old Hindu Varna system, conversion to Christianity does not do away with it. The Ayemenem families are Christians, but they take great pride in their Brahmin origin.



Instead of giving up notions of caste purity and superiority, they perpetrate them with a heavy hand. The accident of being born a 'paravan' – an untouchable, handicaps a person in all spheres of life. In spite of his extraordinary mental and physical abilities, he has no right to live a normal life.

Velutha is the most skilled craftsman in the pickle factory. He practically runs the factory. But being an untouchable, he is resented by the other 'touchable' workers of the factory. Mammachi, the upper caste 'Modalali' does not allow him to enter the house unless she needs him to do some work which no else can do. Even comrade Pillai, the leader of the communists in Kerala, does not allow him to enter his house.

Velutha's uprightness and high self-esteem which is feared by his father is resented by his employers. He dares to love Ammu, a woman belonging to an upper caste, upper class family. For this he is made to pay with his life.

His father Vellya Paapen, who has seen the days of 'walking Backwards', to remove pollution of touch, goes to Mammachi to complain about his son being torn between Loyalty and Love.

Mammachi had been ill treated by her husband in the past. She has experienced helplessness as a woman. In spite of this, she does not hesitate to punish Ammu and Velutha. Her attitude towards Velutha is such as one would have towards an animal. She is surprised at Ammu's being able to love him.

How could she stand the smell? Haven't you noticed? They have a particular smell, these paravans. (P. 257)

Baby Kochamma goes to great lengths to save the honour of their reputed family. She takes the help of the police Inspector Mathews who is a 'touchable' and is all too ready to instill order into a world gone wrong.

The Communist Movement was supposed to aim at a classless society. In spite of Communism's theoretical emphasis on equality and justice, the institution of the Party in Ayemenem functions from within the caste system. This institution like Christianity is concerned with maintaining itself. To acquire power it does not hesitate to destroy the expendable. Comrade Pillai lies to Inspector Mathews about Velutha's not being a card-holder.

The policemen and politicians make sure that no transgressor of rules is spared. It is in their hands to establish order and to punish those who defy orders. Velutha is the extreme transgressor of rules. So he is abandoned by God and History, by Marx, by man, by woman and by children.

He pays the price of disobedience. He is referred to as 'The God of Small things'. The Big Things and Small Things being poles apart from each other, the God of small things is bound to be separate from the God of Big things. The two will not be allowed to be one. Ironically the small things have no God. If they happen to have one, he becomes the 'god of loss' as Velutha does.

The Big things, in spite of their own individual difference unite whenever there is a threat from Small Things. The 'Small Things' –Ammu, the twins and Velutha, who get together for mutual warmth and genuine love, and not for any material benefits are crudely acted upon and destroyed. They leave



behind no memory of pain or concern in the minds of the survivors, nothing as posterity, not even their own footprints. Their every mark is wiped away.

Some things come with their own punishments. Like bedrooms with built-in cupboards You could spend your whole life in them wandering through dark shelving. (P.115)

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