

The Wretched of India: The Socio-cultural Space for the Untouchables in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Like racism which is the fundamental factor in dividing people in European history, the caste system, a deep-rooted factor hindering the integration of people in India, affects the socio-economic and socio-cultural system of Indian society. The most unwanted and exploited ones are the untouchables, who are socially, economically, and even culturally and politically suppressed and oppressed and exploited. Untouchability in India has a long history. Several theories and opinions have been propounded in relation to the origin and development of this system in India.

Some scholars opine that the Aryans, a fair-skinned race, invaded and subjugated the dark-skinned aborigines placing them at the lower strata of society. These dark-skinned aborigines were forced to become partly the fourth class of society and partly the untouchables. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, discarding this theory, said that the pre-Dravidian aborigines were forced to become untouchables by the Dravidians. He commented that "the Brahmins and the Untouchables belong to the same race" (62). Untouchability was born, Ambedkar thought, sometime around fourth century A.D., 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.

Ambedkar's estimation was opposed by U.N. Roy who said that untouchability existed before fourth century in the age of Panini, Kautilya and Buddha. The food gathering people who were in continuous conflicts with the food producing people used to take foods like flesh of dead animals and dogs which were prohibited by the settlers. These people were labeled as untouchables and had to live away from the settled communities.

According to the *Rig Veda*, the sacred text of the Hindus, humanity is divided into four *varnas*, namely Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Shudras. In the social hierarchy, first come the Brahmins who are priests engaged in worshipping the gods. They are the most powerful section who control people from the rest three *varnas*. Then come Kshatriyas who are rulers and warriors. Vaisyas form the third segment who are land owners and merchants. In the bottom rung of the hierarchy come the Shudras that include artisans and servants. They have been the most oppressed and exploited people. A section of Shudras that include 'Chandal' and 'Mritapa' are called 'excluded shudras' by the grammarians like Panini and Patanjali, and 'asat shudras' by the law makers. They are the untouchables who are to engage in the professions like butchers, leather workers, launderers and latrine cleaners.

In South India untouchability is practised more meticulously than elsewhere in India. Brahmanas and other 'higher' castes believed themselves to become polluted if Kammalan (blacksmiths, carpenters etc.) approached within sixteen hands, toddy trappers within twenty-four, Pollaya or Cheruma (peasants) within thirty-two and Paria within forty hands. Nayadi were kept at a distance of more than two hundred hands. Tanks of higher castes became unworthy of use if the untouchables passed by them. Untouchables could not wear gold ornaments, nor use umbrellas and foot-wear. They could not attend schools where children of other castes were enrolled. In Maharashtra, they had to drag a thorny branch to wipe out their footprints and had to

be (sic) prostrate themselves at a distance when a Brahmana passed by so that their shadow might not defile the Brahmana. In Kerala, untouchability assumed its most appalling features. (Amitabh Roy 107-08)

Although in different ages, the religious leaders, social reformers and philanthropists fought untouchability, its complete eradication could never be achieved, as it served to maintain the power structure of society. In the middle ages, religious leaders such as Kabir, Nanak, Dadu, Raidas, Nabhadass and Sri Chaitanyadev, and in the nineteenth century organizations such as Brahmo Samaj in West Bengal, Prarthana Samaj and Satyasodhak Samaj in Maharashtra and Arya Samaj in Punjab appealed to the people to behave humanely towards the untouchables. 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* (which means 'people of God') to confer upon them human dignity and honour. Indian Government moved to eliminate the inhuman practice of untouchability and in the Indian Constitution, Article 17 has been devoted to the cause of untouchables. It articulates: "Untouchability' is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of "Untouchability" shall be an offence punishable in accordance with law." These untouchables enlisted in one of the schedules of the Constitution of India are given advantages in admissions to schools and colleges, and also a percentage of government jobs are reserved for them.

However, the life of untouchables has not been enviable even in the twentieth century when some initiatives have been taken to confer upon them the status of human beings. They are still the outcastes, the alien creatures. Even very recently about fifty million people, among whom *dalits* and *adivasis* form the majority, have been displaced by big dams and other developmental projects without any proper rehabilitation. "A huge percentage of the displaced are Adivasis (57.6 percent in the case of the Sardar Sarovar dam). Include Dalits and the figure becomes obscene" (*Algebra* 62). 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 centres around a Syrian Christian family of Ayemenem House. It is, therefore, highly essential to assess the origin and development of Syrian Christians in India. The Christians of Kerala are divided into five churches: Roman Catholic, Orthodox Syrian, Nestorian, Marthoma, and Anglican. 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. Syrian Christians have a history that predates European rule. While the Jesuits made only limited alteration to community life in 1830s and 40s, the nineteenth-century British Colonial state played a significant role in undermining Syrian Christian-Hindu connections. The old Catholic-Jacobite division gave way to as many as fourteen competing Episcopal allegiances. One of the most significant splits took place in 1888 when the Travancore High Court ruled in favour of the Jacobites (Mar Dionysius vs Mar Thomas Athanasius). The losers formed a separate ecclesiastical body, the Mar Thoma Syrian Church. (Khurshid Alam)

Reverend E.John Ipe, the great grandfather of Rahel and Estha, was a priest of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church. "Twenty percent of Kerala's population were Syrian Christians, who believed that they were descendants of the one hundred Brahmins whom Saint Thomas the Apostle converted to Christianity when he travelled east after the Resurrection" (*God of Small Things*)

66). Therefore, by origin all the members of the Ipe family are Hindus. The untouchables depicted in the novel are also converted Christians.

When the British came to Malabar, a number of Paravans, Pelayas and Pulayas (among them Velutha's grandfather, Kelan) converted to Christianity and joined the Anglican Church to escape the scourge of Untouchability. As added incentive they were given a little food and money. They were known as the Rice Christians. It didn't take them long to realize that they had jumped from the frying pan into the fire. They were made to have separate churches, with separate services, and separate priests. As a special favour they were even given their own separate Pariah Bishop. After Independence they found they were not entitled to any Government benefits like job reservations or bank loans at low interest rates, because officially, on paper, they were Christians, and therefore casteless. It was a little like having to sweep away your footprints without a broom. Or worse, not being *allowed* to leave footprints at all. (74)

The power structure is quite obvious in the caste-ridden Kerala where the untouchables, namely Paravans, Palayas and Pulayas, as 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 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. In Mammachi's time, Paravans, like other Untouchables, were not allowed to 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)

Since then the condition of the untouchables has improved but not much as it should have been. The politicians, administrators and the upper castes could not strive by design to improve the condition of the untouchables, as every powerful, in the human history, left no stone unturned to retain their power. The Communist Party in Kerala took up the problem of untouchables as a means to the objective of electoral gain. They "never overtly questioned the traditional values of a caste-ridden, extremely traditional community. The Marxists worked from *within* the communal divides, never challenging them, never appearing not to" (66-67).

Michel Foucault affirms that the social codes, which are a form of discipline with clear mechanisms of punishments, control the citizens by putting forth pressure to make one fit its certain patterns of behaviour and public morality. Social punishments are in the form of prejudices, marginalization and public exclusion. These punishments thwart transgressors from escaping with their individualism, and teach rebellious citizens to obey. Social codes are formed by the powerful in order to exercise their power over the powerless. These are the means to exploit the powerless as these are always in favour of the powerful. It is the powerful of society by whom "the Love Laws lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much" (177). If these love laws are broken by the powerless, they must be punished to keep the social order in balance. Vellya Pappen is aware of it, and, therefore, he never dares to break these 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, although he is not ignorant of the dire consequences of it.

Vellya Pappen and his two sons, Kuttapen and Velutha, belong to an untouchable caste called Paravan. Among them Kuttapen is a neutral character who has no significant role to play in the novel. Vellya Pappen and Velutha serve the objective of showing how untouchables are being victimized jointly by politicians, administrators and members of upper-caste families.

Vellya Pappen, an “Old World Paravan” (76), is a docile conformist who takes for granted the social disabilities inflicted on the untouchables without daring to raise any objections. He is the perfect epitome of the ones who nourish their own exploiters with extreme loyalty and gratitude. Gramsci’s concept of hegemony “that a social class achieves a predominant influence and power, not by direct and overt means, but by succeeding in making its ideological view of society so pervasive that the subordinate classes unwittingly accept and participate in their own oppression” (Abrams 151), is highly applicable here in the case of Vellya Pappen who is like a mirror reflecting the image of Mammachi and Baby Kochamma. His gratitude to Mammachi and her family is “as wide and deep as a river in spate” (*God of Small things* 76), because for his family for generations they have done, he thinks, so much such as giving his father, Kelan, the title to the land on which his hut stands then, paying for his glass eye when he loses one of his eyes, and arranging for Velutha’s education and giving him a job. That from generation to generation they are being exploited economically by paying them lower wages than what they actually deserve, socially by looking down upon them as creatures of lower order who are not allowed to enter their house and to touch what the touchable touches, and culturally by arranging different schools and churches for them hardly bothers him. The concept that they are born to serve the upper class people and what they do is good for them is deeply rooted in his psyche.

The restitution of Vellya Pappen’s loyalty to his masters appears too heavy to bear for him. His extreme loyalty brings unbearable torture and agony both for him and for his son Velutha. Mammachi with all her strength pushes Vellya Pappen who “stumbled backwards, down the kitchen steps and lay sprawled in the wet mud” (256) when, taking all the responsibilities of what his untouchable son has touched, he tells the “story of a man and woman, standing together in the moonlight. Skin to skin.....His son and her daughter” (255-56) and takes permission “to kill his son with his own bare hands” (78). Mammachi spits in him and calls him “‘Drunken dog! Drunken Paravan liar!’”(256). When he realizes “his part in History’s Plans, it was too late to retrace his steps. He had swept his footprints away himself. Crawling backwards with a broom” (200). His son Velutha is beaten to death by an army of touchable policemen, the machinery of the powerful. His love for his son is sacrificed on the altar of his loyalty towards his masters.

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. History pays him back heavily, as he challenges it by breaking the laws of history. He is a rebel who is like a “Mombatti” (candle) burning by himself without taking oil from outside. He is the representative of the exploited. For the cause of poor labourers and the untouchables he joins the procession to protest. This earns him the wrath of Baby Kochamma who later takes revenge upon him.

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” (265). Mammachi, Baby Kochamma and Chacko know about his mastery in making of intricate toys, making little things for Baby Kochamma’s nativity plays or something to fix in the garden, mending machines, radio, clocks, water pumps or machines in the factory, maintaining the new canning machine and the automatic

pineapple slicer and many more things in the factory. Nevertheless, Mammachi “paid Velutha less than she would a Touchable carpenter but more than she would a Paravan” (77). It is the hypocrisy on the part of Mammachi that she does not allow Velutha to enter her house “except when she needed something mended or installed” (77). And in this case his entrance into the factory premises and touching things that the touchable touches is, as Mammach thinks, “a big step for a Paravan” (77). Roy mocks at the caste conscious Ipe family who use dining table made by untouchable Velutha. It is quite similar to orthodox Brahmins who sprinkles water over their dishes after the untouchable servant has cleaned them.

To Estha and Rahel who as children know the difference only between love and hatred with complete ignorance of individual distinction on the basis of religion, caste, colour and politics. Velutha’s house is forbidden, but they often secretly visit it, as he is their best friend bonded with pure love. Baby Kochamma forbids the twins to be over-familiar with untouchable Velutha.

The word gift implies a sweet sense of token of love where there exists no wall of religion and caste, but even in his boyhood Velutha is aware of this colourful wall, because the elders have instilled in him the poison of caste-system and his position in society. Therefore, he holds the little gifts such as boats, boxes and small windmills that “he had made for her, flat on the palm of his hand so that she could take them without touching him” (175). He hates the powerful upper caste who denies to give minimum rights to the untouchables. Sometimes he tries to hate even Ammu, because he thinks “*she’s one of them*” (214). His is a soul of conflict. His consciousness of the human rights yearns to be recognized as one with all the men in society, and his status of untouchability lowers his confidence. M. Dasan remarks: “Velutha is placed on the borders of society, caught in between right and wrong; sanity and insanity; morality and immorality. This untouchable master craftsman floats on the periphery of society yearning to be accepted, confided and recognised like O’Neil’s Black protagonist, Yank, in *The Hairy Ape*” (31-32).

Velutha is a victim of narrow politics in which Comrade K.N.M. Pillai, the local communist leader, 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, acting against the true principles of Communism in which caste system has no place. He deliberately instigates Chacko to sack Velutha from his job, because being an untouchable, he thinks, he may cause trouble for Chacko as other touchable workers are not happy with him. His point is that “from local standpoint, these caste issues are very deep-rooted” (*God of Small Things* 278). He is proud of how his wife behaves with the Paravans: “Even she will never allow Paravans and all that into her house. Never. Even *I* cannot persuade her. My own wife” (278). He behaves with double standards. On the one hand, he instigates Chacko to remove untouchable Velutha from the job, and on the other, he incites the untouchable workers about their rights. He articulates the communist slogan: “caste is class” which he himself does not follow.

When Ammu’s illicit sexual relationship with black-skinned Velutha is revealed, Velutha goes through innumerable mental and physical tortures. His condition is like a lion in the cage, a helpless prey in the hands of a number of brute fowlers. In order to take revenge against Velutha whose fellow marchers once humiliated her in a procession, and to save the family from scandal without any intention to save Ammu, Baby Kochamma lodges an FIR of attempted rape of Ammu and kidnapping of three children against Velutha. A sophisticated lady Mammachi’s behaviour and use of language to insult Velutha are unbelievable. She spits in the face of Velutha and screams: “If I find you on my property tomorrow I’ll have you castrated like the pariah dog

that you are! I'll have you killed!"(284). When he goes to Comrade Pillai for help, he denies on the accusation of "*Violating Party Discipline*" (287). So a question is raised whether the party is constituted to defend caste rules and further the ambition of Pillai who is a brute and hypocrite. Even he does not disclose to Inspector Mathew that Velutha is a card-holding communist leader. In a nutshell, he does not want to leave any stone unturned to remove his rival in the party. He must be opportunist, because he is the creature of that society "where a man's death could be more profitable than his life had ever been" (281).

History's two powerful agencies have been united, and now it is another powerful agency that with the approval of the former two will take the ultimate step to teach a lesson to one who distorts and disorders the history. Therefore, an army of touchable policemen pledged to virtues of politeness, obedience, loyalty, intelligence, courtesy and efficiency "were exorcizing fear..... After all, they were not battling an epidemic. They were merely inoculating a community against an outbreak" (309). Roy painstakingly describes the hypocrisy of the police and their inhuman and brutish torture of Velutha, a helpless creature in the grip of an octopus. This brutal torture is performed in front of the twins:

They heard the thud of wood on flesh. Boot on bone. On teeth. The muffled grunt when a stomach is kicked in. The muted crunch of skull on cement. The gurgle of blood on a man's breath when his lung is torn by the jagged end of a broken rib. . . . 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 his 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. Fresh. Frothy. His lower intestine was ruptured and haemorrhaged, the blood collected in his abdominal cavity. His spine was damaged in two places, the concussion had paralyzed his right arm and resulted in a loss of control over his bladder and rectum. Both his kneecaps were shattered.

Still they brought out the handcuffs. . . . One of them flicked at his penis with his stick. 'Come on, show us your special secret. Show us how big it gets when you blow it up.' Then he lifted his boot (with millipedes curled into its sole) and brought it down with a soft thud.

They locked his arms across his back. (308-11)

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" (336). Aida Balvannanadhan remarks on Velutha's murder: "He is savagely emasculated by the police both in an act of jealousy for his having had a sexual relationship with a high-caste woman, as well as a means of dissuasion for all Untouchables, for the mere potentiality of a hybrid child this short relationship has in it" (27).

Ammu's sexual relationship with Velutha may procreate a half-caste child that can cause chaos in the structure of the high-caste class. Taking reference from Manu, Aida Balvannanadhan says: "A man from a higher caste does not alter the purity of the offspring by marrying a woman of a lower caste while the contrary situation will alter the purity of the race" (29). So if a touchable man enters into a sexual relationship with an untouchable woman, it is not a social offence as it is in the contrary situation. Therefore, it is not a crime when Chacko sexually exploits the poor untouchable women workers in the factory. Even Mammachi defends him by considering it "*Men's Needs*" (*God of Small Things* 258) and makes an arrangement for his convenience. But untouchable Velutha's physical relation with touchable Ammu cannot be tolerated. History will not approve it. And Velutha must die in order to maintain the social

equilibrium. The touchable policemen beat him to death and Baby Kochamma justifies it as a divine retribution: “As ye sow, so shall ye reap” (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? The question has been echoing from generation to generation without an answer.

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