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## **Political Backdrop in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss***

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### **Abstract:**

The recent writers in Indian English Literature are more conscious to the political happenings in the country. A clear shift can be seen from the earlier theme of Independence struggle to the other political aspects which influence, hinder and damage the image of the nation. Works of the writers like Rushdie, Ghosh, Tharoor were great steps in this direction. Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai are the two more valuable additions to the list. Roy's 'The God of Small Things' and Desai's 'The Inheritance of Loss', winner of reputed Man Booker Prize, are novels of socio-political realism highlighting the world around them with great insight and precision. The remote places in the rural areas, in their respective novels, are the representations of the nation at large.

### **Keywords: communism, class and caste politics, GNLF Movement, immigrants**

The recent writers in Indian English Literature are more conscious of the political happenings than their predecessors. Indian freedom struggle was the sole inspiration in the writings of the earlier writers who gave more prominence to the events happened in the era of British rule and talked more about Gandhi and the Gandhian principles. The other factors of the politics were untouched by the writers and they maintained a distance from the political scenario. But in the works of 70's and 80's, we start finding the political voice heard with a new vigour and with a different approach. There is no doubt that Indian English Literature changed a lot in the past few years. The political posturing which was centred around the Indian Independence Struggle moved itself to the aspects which influence, hinder, damage the image of the nation. It is also good to see that these writers are extremely straightforward in their approach and are not afraid of expressing themselves in spite of multiple political pressures. Works of the writers like Rushdie, Ghosh, Tharoor were great steps in this direction. Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai are the two most valuable additions to the list.

Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai are the shining stars in the firmament of Indian English Literature who gave a new identity to India in the field of literature by winning the most prestigious Man Booker Prize for their novels. Roy's 'The God of Small Things'(1997) and Desai's 'The Inheritance of Loss' (2006) are novels of social-political realism highlighting the world around them with great insight and precision. Roy becomes the first "true Indian" to receive the prize. Her great success as a writer brought recognition to Indian English Fiction and opened up a global market for Indian writers. Her book took the literary world by storm. Roy in her maiden literary venture surprised the world with her unique kind of literary style. Being herself a social activist, Roy gives expression to her sensibility and touches the social, Political and cultural fabric of Indian society. Though the novel moves around the personal world of Roy and the common reader could match the characters from the novel with the people in Roy's life, the novel represents the universal picture. Another equally talented lady who further extended the rich tradition of Indian English Fiction and who could achieve the

landmark of winning the Man Booker Prize only at the age of thirty-five is Kiran Desai. What the mother could not achieve is finally achieved by the daughter. Being the daughter of one of the greatest Indian woman writers, Anita Desai, Kiran possessed the art of dealing with words since her childhood. In spite of being an 'outsider', as she does not live in India, readers could smell the strong Indian connection of the writer.

Both the novels are set in the period between 1960 and 1990. The remote places in the rural areas, where the novels are set- Ayemenam a small place in Kerala and Kalimpong in West Bengal at the foothills of Himalayas- are the representations of the nation at large. Kerala and West Bengal, strongholds of communism, are the centres where novelists peep into the lives of common people affected by the entry of class and caste politics. Roy's childhood days in Kerala in the sixties and seventies and Kiran Desai's teenage years in the mid-nineteen eighties in West Bengal are reflected strongly in their respective novels. The publication and distribution of the novel 'The God of Small Things' was opposed by the hard-line communists in Kerala attacking it for 'bourgeois aesthetics' and anti-communists sentiments. E.M.S. Namboodiripad, one of the strong communist leaders, whom Roy indirectly mentions in the novel, criticises it for tarring the image of the party.

Velutha, the 'untouchable' from Roy's 'The God of Small Things', with an expectation of making his position better, joins the communist party. But his painted picture of Communism doesn't last long and he finds that the party which exposes the high ideals of oneness, is actually suffering from the same age-old custom of caste discrimination. The impact of class and caste was so dominant in Kerala that communism could not keep itself away from it. The double standard of communism is exposed by Roy through many incidents and characters in the novel. The communists seem extremely confused about the principles of the revolution and are caught in their own cobweb. The communists are also very insensitive to the common problems of the people.

Marxism was a simple substitute for Christianity. Replace God with Marx, Satan with the bourgeoisie, Heaven with a classless society, the Church with the Party, and the form and purpose of the journey remained similar..... communism crept into Kerala insidiously. As a reformist movement that 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. They offered a cocktail revolution. A heady mix of Eastern Marxism and orthodox Hinduism, spiked with a shot of democracy.<sup>1</sup>

Roy criticises communism mainly through the characters like Comrade Pillai and Chacko. Comrade Pillai- "a professional omeletteer"- becomes the corrupt face of a caste-conscious party worker, engaged in showing the dreams of a classless society to the poor people. But his attitude and the way of living are quite contradictory to the principles of communism. Through the character of Pillai Roy presents the sorry picture of the communist party particularly in the state of Kerala. A fine contradiction of a Syrian Christian aristocrat becoming a comrade is nicely portrayed through Chacko. Chacko is shown as the follower of Comrade E. M. S. Namboodiripad, the Brahmin face of Marxism in Kerala, who became Chief Minister of Kerala of the first ever democratically elected Communist government in the world. Chacko's behaviour with the beautiful women of the factory is another example of hypocrisy prevalent among the communists in Kerala. In the name of lectures on labour rights and trade union law, Chacko sexually exploits the factory women. The Marxist party is ideologically known as a party of the working class where all the members forget the walls of caste and creed but it never appeared to Roy in her home state of Kerala. Even the

communists could not escape from the deep-rooted caste sense. Comrade Pillai is sensitive about the caste issues. In a conversation with Chacko, Pillai refuses to stand by the Paravan and asks Chacko to send him away from his factory.

...any benefits that you give him, naturally others are resenting it. They see it as a partiality. After all, whatever job he does, carpenter or electrician or whatever it is, for them he is just a Paravan. It is a conditioning they have from birth. This I myself have told them is wrong. But frankly speaking, Comrade, Change is one thing. Acceptance is another.<sup>2</sup>

Like any other so called 'touchable', he never allows untouchables into his base. In a police station, Comrade Pillai disowns Velutha as a party worker and provides a chance to the corrupt police officer to inflict torture on Velutha. Through this most tragic episode in the novel, Roy seems to satirize the hypocrisy and artificiality in Indian politics. Falsehood, deception are at the root of Indian politics. But after the murder of Velutha, he cunningly manages to take advantage of his death and delivers "high-pitched speeches about the Rights of Untouchables".

Pillai is not bothered about sacrificing his party workers and even Marxist principles for his political ascendancy. Comrade Pillai says,

He may be very well okay as a person. But other workers are not happy with him. Already they are coming to me with complaints.... You see, Comrade, from a local standpoint, these caste issues are very deep-rooted.<sup>3</sup>

He also manages to send his son to an English medium school to get a better education and a better job. His preference for the luxurious lifestyle for his son shows his distance from the Marxist principles. Even in the case of Velutha, he hides the information with the sole purpose of getting advantage from the unfortunate situation. Communist leaders try to attract both "Chackos" and "Veluthas" for their political gain- one a high ranked Syrian Christian and the other Hindu untouchable. Chacko's life is a perfect example of the Utopian Dreams shown by the Communism to the youths of Kerala and its ultimate failure.

Naxalite Movement, a cursed child of Marxism, also finds a passing reference in 'The God of small Things'. Roy calls the growing Naxalite movement "struck terror in every bourgeois heart". Roy mentions of Naxalites like Rajan who were ill-treated and killed by the police. At the same time her projection of Naxalites as murderers, damagers of the public property painfully exposes the misled movement and the inability of the Communism to bring a real revolution in the life of Naxals. Roy narrates:

That may there was a blurred photograph in the papers of a landlord in Palghat who had been tied to a lamp post and beheaded. His head lay on its side, some distance away from his body, in a dark puddle that could have been water, could have been blood. It was hard to tell in black and white.<sup>4</sup>

Kiran Desai's 'The Inheritance of Loss' is also a fine example of a novel with a political background. The novel is set in Kalimpong which is situated at the foothills of Himalaya. The story is of Sai, a young girl; her grandfather, Jemubhai; Gyan, Sai's love interest; the cook and his America-returned son, Biju. The complexities of their life are narrated against the background of the demand of a separate state by the Gorkhas of Darjeeling region in West Bengal. The time of action of the story is in mid-eighties when the demand for the separate state was more strong. The novel covers the Movement in the best possible way:

In Kalimpong, high in the north-eastern Himalayas....there was a report of new dissatisfaction in the hills, gathering insurgency, men and guns. It was the Indian Nepalese this time, fed up with being treated like the minority in a place where they were the majority. They wanted their own country, or at least their own state, in which to manage their own affairs.<sup>5</sup>

The characters in the novel are set against the political struggle in this region. Sai's twenty-one-year-old Nepali tutor, Gyan, is portrayed as an activist of the Gorkha National Liberation Front fighting for the freedom of Nepali Gorkhas. An awareness of their own rights filled them with a desire to make all aware of their separate identity. The real cause of their dissatisfaction was the treatment given by the government to them. The furious leader in his speech addressed his companions:

The Nepalese of India. We are labourers on the tea plantations, coolies dragging heavy loads, soldiers. And are we allowed to become doctors and government workers, owners of the tea plantations? No! We are kept at the level of servants. We fought on behalf of the British for two hundred years....Where would they be without the courage of our people?.....And have we been rewarded?? Have we been given compensation?? Are we given respect?? No! They spit on us.<sup>6</sup>

Gyan, who is very proud of his heritage, stands as an epitome of freedom. His revolt against the present system and a treatment given by him to his love interest Sai is the result of his past experiences. Gyan's ancestors had come to Darjeeling leaving behind their own country Nepal in the hope of getting a better life. They had been used by the British government in the army. They had given their complete devotion to the welfare of the new land. But even after giving a service for years they never got the due respect and were not given the constitutional rights. This makes Gyan to revolt against the present system. In the midst of this rift, Desai symbolically presents the positive message given by Nature and how the Nature is against borders, and favours multiculturalism:

....the mist charging down like a dragon, dissolving, undoing, making ridiculous the drawing of borders.<sup>7</sup>

On one side when we find Desai sympathetically presenting the situation of Nepalis, on the other she is extremely critical of the terrorist activities in the name of ethnic identity. Even the puppy love story of Sai and Gyan suffers a great setback with the violent activities in the area. Gyan discloses to the GNLFF members that there are guns in Cho Oyu. A group of misled young boys enter the Judge's house, misbehave and takes away everything from the house. They even force the judge to say, "Jai Gorkha". Gyan prefers to continue with his movement and chooses to fight for separate land keeping aside his personal interests. Their demand was- Gorkha land for Gorkhas.

In 1947, brothers and sisters, the British left granting India her freedom, granting the Muslims Pakistan, granting special provisions for the scheduled castes and tribes, leaving everything taken care of, brothers and sisters- Except us. Except us. The Nepalis of India.<sup>8</sup>

The period of turmoil in the heart of Himalayas is handled by the writer with subtlety. When Desai sympathetically looks at the Movement as the struggle between resourceful and resourceless, with the same intensity she blames the Movement for losing its real purpose- the true seed of opposing the system. The foot-soldiers of the GNLFF look more insensitive when they stripped Biju off even the clothes on his body. Roadblocks, strikes, boycotts of

elections, burning of the Indo-Nepal treaty and such programs add fuel to the fire and the GNLFF men start attacking the people whom they think came from other parts of the country. They demand nothing less than the separate state. The Government's insensitivity towards people is certainly a matter of concern, but the leadership of the movement looks more short-sighted and insensitive. Desai here makes a statement that independence is not the answer to all the troubles, rather most of the time the power gets concentrated in the hands of the few. Change of mindset is the only solution.

The novel also touches the life of immigrants in the midst of this political turmoil. Biju, who returned from America, in search of a peaceful life finds himself entrapped in the upheaval prevalent in the valley. The discussion between Lola, Noni and Sai tells us about the entire northeast suffering from separatist movement. They do not want to be the part of this country and blames the government for political opportunism. Mrs Sen, Lola and Noni also discuss the problem of Pakistan. They discuss cross-border terrorism. Mrs Sen's hatred for Muslims and Pakistan is also again a matter of concern.

More Muslims in India than in Pakistan, they prefer to multiply over here...What sort of Muslim nation they have?<sup>9</sup>

She also laughs at the double face of the policy makers. The politicians for their own benefits make one set of rules and regulations for them and another set of rules and regulations for others. Strikes, commotions and slogans against the government disturb the atmosphere of the valley. Desai's description of the various events in the novel provides a current to the novel and helps it to make it more lively. The whole novel is full of descriptions of the strikes, agitations and various problems faced by the people. The novelist skilfully weaves these characters against the background of the troubled period of insurgency.

Both the novels, though set in the different parts of the country, has politics in its backdrop. When 'The God of Small things' lashes the communism in Kerala for its opportunism, "The Inheritance of Loss' brilliantly exposes the GNLFF movement at the foothills of Himalayas. Both the writers are very honest in presenting the political scenario. Though both the Movements had a very positive motive in bringing about a change in the present condition of the have-nots, the movements seem to differ away from their motives and lost their early high intentions. It is communism, which dreamt of bringing the power of a common man, becomes corrupt in the course of time and forgot the initial motives of the movement. They themselves start exploiting their own people. GNLFF Movement also looks losing its real intentions and gets involved in anti-social activities. Roy, who herself a staunch fighter in her own life, gives expression to her feelings and did not budge away and severely criticises the communist government in Kerala. Desai also shows her immense skill in weaving history with the story in an effortless way.

It is really a welcome change in Indian English Literature that the political voice is heard more clearly and it now touches the other areas which affect the life of the common people. The novelists are coming out of the circle drawn by the earlier writers and breaking bounds to give expression to their thoughts irrespective of the political pressures. They are more true and honest in the presentation of the things happening around them. Both Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai fulfilled the expectations of the readers in their respective novels. The novels are truly the representative novels in the portrayal of the political turmoil. The honesty with which the things are presented shows the mastery of the duo in touching the grass root realities.

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