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The Conflict between Human Nature and the Human Culture in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract:

Arundhati Roy's magnum opus work, *The God of Small Things* is an artistic portrayal of the social realism of an Indian society in which women and the people of lowest social standing are callously treated. Roy as a sensitive writer voices her concern against the fettering and usurpation of the free expression of natural tendency of love and individual liberty of such marginalized people. She lashes out at the hypocrisy of those who sanctify and legitimize this brutal oppression. The novel presents the catastrophic conflict between human nature and the culture which causes storm in the lives of oppressed people. This confrontation becomes the root cause of the disintegration of Ayemenem family in the novel. Ammu and Valeutha are the central characters who display the spirit of rebellion in transgressing the cultural norms of the sterile social structure. The paper aims to analyze how the cultural ethos of an Indian society of Kerala plays an instrumental role in ruining the lives of subaltern groups by denying them the right to love and express their psychological needs and aspirations. Besides the focus will also be on how the rebellion of human nature puts a limitation on the socio-cultural arrangement which tries to condition it.

Keywords: Oppression, Marginalized, Lethal, Subaltern, Human nature, Conflict, Voiceless, Patriarchy, Untouchable, Psychological disintegration.

Culture and the human nature are the two important dimensions of human existence which substantially influence the development of one's character. So far as culture is concerned, it represents the specific modes of behavior and thought, the practice of social ideals and institutions. Human nature on the contrary, symbolizes the feelings of love, natural impulses expression of individuality and freedom to do all for which man has an innate power. Broadly speaking, a culture strives for perfection in all aspects of human life. It facilitates the harmonious development of human personality. Therefore, for the smooth functioning and unconditioned expression of man's inner aspirations and capabilities, a culture should not be in conflict with human nature, otherwise the social fabric of humanity becomes unstable without any peace and prosperity. David Bidney endorses the same when he says, "A stable society requires a cultural system so organized as to provide a maximum of opportunity for the development of human potentialities and perfection of the individual with minimum social constraint" (144). But the cultural set up in *The God of Small Things* deviates by adopting certain prohibitions, initiating a

war with spontaneous, inner nature of a man. These politically motivated prohibitions are referred by Roy as 'love laws'. The irony is that these laws are exclusively used against women and untouchables in order to keep them subservient. Mamachi, Ammu, Estha, Rahel and Valeutha, all suffer terribly. Mamachi becomes the victim of patriarchy, she suffers silently. On the other hand, Ammu and Valeutha by developing the cementing forbidden love relationship, cross the socio-cultural boundary. Their inner nature wages a retaliating war against the orthodox and myopic cultural frame work which restricts its freedom. The novel has become the metaphor of culturally sponsored oppression of women and untouchables. It presents symbolically Aymenem family where innate human nature and human culture are at incessant lethal war with each other as a consequence, bringing about the tragedy of women and those who are labeled as parvans. Therefore, such a culture working on unprincipled dogmas, beliefs and constraints result in chaos and anarchy in a society.

In *The God of Small Things*, love laws, an oxymoronic term Roy uses with her sharp wit, unmasks the cultural basis upon which Indian society premises its traditional and uncompromising established control of caste segregation and gender bias. This culture is not only rigid but also sterile and decayed. Love laws as prohibitions, have thus become integral component of Indian culture and caste as a cultural brand. The novel centers round the socio-cultural history of South Indian state of Kerala. It symbolizes the gender oppression and caste discrimination in India in general. The feelings of love, human freedom, free expression of thoughts, dreams, longings and respectability, are mercilessly trampled upon in such a stringent cultural set up. Bidney calls this culture far from being realistic and conflicting to human nature:

A society may fail in its cultural objective because its culture may be grounded on inadequate, unscientific knowledge of man's nature and cosmic environment and therefore appears unable to satisfy basic psychological needs and aspirations. Such a culture may then be said to be unrealistic or "contrary to nature" (144)

The repression of psychological needs and aspirations in *The God of Small Things*, are not the result of man's ignorance of nature and cosmic environment but the outcome of the reign of terror that is let loose on the weaker sections of the social spectrum in India. They are given sub-human treatment and nobody cares for them as their voices go unheard.

To start with, Mamachi and her daughter, Ammu are the main victims of exploitation. They don't have any social recognition and depend totally on male members. They are made to follow the love laws as binding cultural norms and transgression of these meant an open invitation to wrath. Mamachi, the first generation woman sufferer, suffers silently. She does not dare to turn her back to the patriarchal culture. She endures her husband's torturing and painful company because on him she is dependent for her social recognition. There is pathos in it that a woman alone has no significance and no status in a male controlled society. At her husband's funeral she was seen beating her chest because she lost her symbol of social recognition. She is least bothered to have lost her husband as he never happened to be the source of joy and love to

her. His pride takes myriad forms and his mind is very much conscious of patriarchy and makes unbridled use of it to beat his wife and daughter unreasonably and violently. Papachi, Mammachi's husband, was obsessed with success, honor and power to such a degree that anything posing danger to these was retaliated violently. He acts as a brute like Heathcliff in Emily Bronte's 'Wuthering Heights' who inflicted lot of pain on his wife. Papachi is a male chauvinist, a misogynist, who could not reconcile himself to the success of his wife. This is sheer irony that instead of being happy with his wife's managerial skills, he gets very much disturbed to see her handling things and successfully managing the pickle factory. This remains a source of trouble and pain to him which ends in severe torturing and beating of his wife. He does everything, stooping too low to tarnish her image as is pointed out by the author herself:

In 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 create the impression that Mammachi neglected him. To some small degree he did succeed in further corroding Ayemenem's view of working wives (47-48).

He gets infuriated when Mammachi's violin teacher appreciates her musical talent and then he immediately stops her musical lessons as well. His brutish violence comes to the fore when he hits his wife with brass flower vase and throws the violin into river after breaking it. Her spontaneous natural talent of music gets suppressed and crushed by her husband in a cultural set up which is patriarchal through and through.

Baby Kochamma, Papachi's sister, is another female character whose outward confidence and satisfaction is in reality a mask to hide her inner torment and the frustration of her failed love in her youth. Love has now no significance for her. That is why she gives harsh treatment to Ammu and her children. Had she enjoyed the real love and peace she would have treated the children of Ayemenem family kindly. This speaks volumes about her internalization of love laws. Amitab Roy makes a fine assessment of her character. To quote him, "It is a pity that she submits in the name of decency and honor to the very sexist, casteist and communal prejudices that have stood in her way and denied fulfillment to her" (62). Like Faustus in Marlow's drama, Dr. Faustus, Baby Kochamma sells her inner soul to the devils and enemies who freeze the individuality of the womenfolk and squeeze their naturalness. Thus, she contracted a cheap bargain of suppressing her real individuality and identity as a woman in exchange of outward honor and dignity. She proves herself to be weak, endorsing the Shakespearean dictum 'frailty thy name is woman'.

Ammu happens to be the most pathetic victim of the nature- culture conflict. Her free expression of individual freedom was usurped even when she was a little baby. She had to face a violent resistance and suffering at the hands of patriarchal set up. Instead of showering love and affection on his daughter, her father beats her severely. She was even denied the right to continue her education further because Papachi, Ammu's father, considered money spent on female education as a mere waste of money. His hypocrisy surfaces when he willingly sends his son,

Chaco to Oxford for higher studies. Sunaina Singh puts across her strong view that, "In India a woman's life is governed by tradition and family customs. A good woman is one who is a good daughter, wife and mother. To be good means; sacrificing, self-abnegating, meek... (27). But it was against Ammu's nature to follow these traditional prescriptive norms. She raises her voice against the culture which stifles the freedom of women. Here she feels suffocated and choked as her natural impulses and freedom of expression were snatched away from her by patriarchal system, shattering her inner strength and self-esteem. When one's psychological needs go unfulfilled, one is bound to lose his inner strength and becomes psychologically disintegrated. This is demonstrated logically by Maslow:

Satisfaction of the self-esteem need leads to feelings of self-confidence, worth, strength, capability, and adequacy, of being useful and necessary in the world. But thwarting of these needs produces feelings of inferiority, of weakness, and of helplessness. These feelings in turn give rise to either basic discouragement or else compensatory or neurotic trends. (46)

Ammu finds herself in the same situation which squashes her inner strength and contentment. On the face of it, she continues her search for identity and unadulterated love. She took a bold decision of leaving her home in order to find solace outside her domicile where she could breathe peacefully as is clear from Roy's account:

All day she dreamed of escaping from Ayemenem and the clutches of her ill-tempered father and bitter, long-suffering mother. She hatched several wretched little plans. Eventually, one worked. Pappachi agreed to her spend the summer with a distant aunt who lived in Calcutta" (38-39).

In Calcutta she gets an opportunity to marry an Assistant Manager in the Tea Estate. This marriage though gifted Ammu with two children, Estha and Rahel, but she gets soon disillusioned as her husband was debauched and profligate and was no better than Papachi. For a simple promotion, he stoops too low to force his wife to sleep with his boss, Mr. Hollick, who had an evil eye on Ammu. She resisted it which infuriated her husband and he immediately, "lunged at her, grabbed her hair, punched her and then passed out from the effort" (41). She left her husband's home and came back unwelcome to her parental home where her sufferings as a divorcee now swelled. The divorced woman is not treated gently at her parental home. Baby Kochamma, Papachi's sister, had strongly believed in this theory. She believes that, "a divorced daughter from an inter community love marriage was simply unbearable for her. That is why she never tolerated the presence of Ammu" (Surenderan, 18)

Though getting caught between devil and deep sea, yet Ammu was not bogged down by the hostile attitude of Ayemenem house hold, she kept on giving free expression to her rebellious nature. She incessantly continues her search for identity and individual liberty which won her the love of male protagonist of the novel, Valeutha who was an untouchable who loved Ammu very

much. They would meet each other clandestinely and their love affair was the spontaneous one. After nocturnal meetings with Valeutha, Ammu realized for the first time that she was given something she needed badly. Her heart warming relation with Valeutha gave new direction to her life. His love acted as a balm to Ammu's bruised and love – starved heart. She cuts across the boundaries of caste by welcoming Velutha to touch her body. She hardly bothers for her caste purity, instead kept on enjoying the masculine touch she was craving for. He gave her sexual and emotional satisfaction. Their emotional and sexual compatibility create utopia for them which didn't however, last long as their secret liaison became public with the result they both had to pay the heavy price for such an act of transgression. Valeutha suffers because he was a parvan. He was the symbol of nature and the violence inflicted upon him in the name of social discipline and cultural upliftment, is in essence a culture's violent reaction to the transgression of love laws. He was master of many trades as Roy herself says that, "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 perfect boats out of tapioca stems and figurines on cashew nuts" (74). Besides, he was interesting in handling the machines. He would mend radios, clocks and looking after various electronic items. To top it, he gives new lease of life to Ammu's children, Estha and Rahel. He amuses and entertains them and brings smile on their face. To quote Roy again, "He greeted them with the utmost courtesy. He addressed them all as Kochamma and gave them fresh coconut water to drink. He chatted to them about the weather". (190). He became the great source of light for Ammu when everything was turning dark and void for her. Valeutha was murdered in police custody. He was severely beaten to death:

The blow to his mouth had split open his upper lip and broken sixtieth, 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 breathes bright red, fresh and fresh and frothy. His lower intestine was ruptured and hemorrhaged, the blood collected in his abdominal cavity" (310).

He thus met his terrible fate for defiling the so called purity of caste by developing the bond of love with Ammu. In this way cultural takes heavy toll on him. Surenderan maintains that, " the humiliation he suffered ... was simply unbearable for him... he is brave very well drawn out characters in the novel who lived to see that his dreams were smashed ever before their fulfillment" (31).

For Ammu her end is even more tragic. She died in Bharat Lodge and dead body was covered in a dirty cloth and there was nobody to weep over her death, except her children. This is how the forces of culture compel the people like Ammu and Velutha to keep their human nature and its inclinations subservient and suppressed.

The oppressive nature of culture does not even spare children who are too innocent to read cunningness in others. Estha and Rahel are Ammu's dizygotic twins who get trapped and

suffocated in the society which regards culturally constructed norms as divinely ordained. Secondly, they are deprived of parental love and care, which further alienates them both socially as well as psychologically. They represent the innocence in the world of experience. Their naturalness is plucked before its flowering. They don't have anything blissful to remember except the time they spent with Valeutha. Ammu's son, Estha suffers a great deal in unprogressive society. Psychological disintegration makes him a withdrawn, an introvert individual. He is afraid of the artificial world where one lives with insults and humiliations. He is so much frightened that he prefers to stay at home as he doesn't want to face the people outside his home. He is forced by Baby Kochama to give false evidence against Valeutha as an abductor. He had no option left than obeying unwillingly to his elders. Surenderan highlights his sufferings as: "Ever since he was born he was confronted with problems which were mainly psychological...The child had to part from his father at a very young age of two is itself something painful and it should take its toll" (45) .

Rahel, the daughter of Ammu, experienced the pangs of being the daughter of divorcee. Therefore, her suffering is twofold in the sense that besides being the daughter of the sufferer, she also becomes the victim of androcentric culture. Like her mother she rebels to some extent against the patriarchy. She was debarred from her college for her natural and rebellious thinking. Her voice for love and peace goes unheard. The resistance and struggle of liberation from love laws, gives her no solace, because the painful memories of her past life continue to haunt her .She is the live witness who saw her mother experiencing humiliation and discrimination in a set up where politically motivated cultural norms are implemented as gospel teachings.

Thus, Roy emerged to be the vehement spokesperson of those marginalized who have been rendered brutally voiceless by the androgenic and caste- ridden culture which does not give only uncurbed freedom to such forces but also puts on them a stamp of endorsement. The disastrous conflict between the culture and human nature in the novel plays havoc with many lives that are deemed inferior and 'other'. The substantial conclusion drawn, testifies clearly how conservative and dogmatic culture based on love laws, leads to the frustration of psychological aspirations which are the true embodiment of human nature. Regardless of it, Ammu and Valeutha sacrificed everything, even their lives in order to remain faithful to their inner nature besides showing loyalty to each other. The conflict between inner nature and socio- cultural design though ultimately claims their lives, nevertheless it stands unquestionably true that they were annihilated but not defeated, upholding Hemmingway's famous adage that 'man can be destroyed but not defeated' .

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