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DEMYSTIFYING SOCIAL TABOOS IN INDIAN MILIEU: A CRITICAL STUDY ON ARUNDHATI ROY'S  
'THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS'

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**Abstract**

Arundhati Roy plays the role of a social critic in *The God of Small Things*. She does not isolate herself from the society, the system, the violence and the injustices around. Roy has mingled history and imagination with sheer artistry to document the crude realities of the society. This paper is an attempt to study the characters in Roy's novels that become the mouthpiece of the writer herself- herself thoughts, ideologies, attitudes and sometimes her experiences emerging from the events, incidents and problems visible in their social milieu. Indian society is commanded by taboos, which at times tend to corrupt the social equilibrium. To worsen the scenario, it is sometimes backed by politics, political rivalry and an uncompromising ambition for power. The results are obviously predictable. Higher power and social status give ample reason to dictate and sway the oppressed, making their lives susceptible and defenseless. This paper is a sober attempt to ascertain a study of the socio-political conditions and the vulnerability of human lives.

**Keywords:** Social Taboos, Caste Discrimination, Social Stratification, Politics & Power

**Introduction**

**"A simple story set against the backdrop of social discrimination, communism and the caste system" – The Guardian, International Edition**

Arundhati Roy's debut novel, *'The God of Small Things'* (1997) vividly creates a mise en scene of the society she grew up in. Arundhati Roy voices herself, "My fiction is an inextricable mix of experience and imagination." The Booker Prize winner exposes her personal combat with the machinery of caste discrimination, political manipulations, gender bias venting through the narrative of Ayemenem House near Kottayam in Kerala. The autobiographical elements are being posed loud and clear, when she claims, "My mother say that some of the incidents in the book are based on things that happened when I was two years old. I have no recollection of them. But obviously they were trapped in some part of my brain... Ayemenem is no longer the old-fashioned village of the sixties in which the novel is set. It is now a bustling extension of Kottayam town, with 7100 houses and rash of dish antennae. Paradise Pickles still exists." The locale and circumstances have been chronicled in picturesque fine points. The smoothness in detailing the Meenal river, the buzzing jungle, painting pictures of life in nature with lucid words, the Communist demonstration when Chacko takes his way to Cochin Airport accompanying Ammu, her twins and Baby Kochamma, to receive Margaret and Sophie Mol, the operation of Paradise Pickle factory and police atrocities. These precedence confer the mood of an eerie narrative when Rahel returns back Ayemenem after a long span of twenty-three years to convene with her twin soulmate, Estha, who was returned by their father.

Taboos are a part of every society; however modern it is. Taboo can be spelled out as constrained and forbidden on something positioned on a cultural, social or religious sense, which is excessively offensive or too sacred for ordinary people. Indian society, since time immemorial have been engulfed under various social taboos restricting and imposing the age-old beliefs and customs, which include inter-religion marriage, sex, divorce, incest, homosexuality etc. Sigmund Freud, an Austrian neurologist, figured out that patricide and incest were the two universally recognised taboos and constituted the fundamentals of civilization. Violations of taboos are scorned as it constitutes a general belief that it earns social displeasure for the doer, at the same time incurs bad omen. Thus, it is very evident that breaking a taboo is considered objectionable. Indian society if not everywhere or at every level, but is yet succumbed to an array of taboos. Roy has vouchsafed the yellow pages of novel as the near-compact medium of presenting such socially practised taboos. This essay will largely brood on these taboos that Roy jotted down as a social scientist and resisted the same as social activist, making *God of Small Things* as her most desired focal trumpet.

**Caste Discrimination- A Major League**

Set up during 1960's, Roy's novel bequeaths the problem of caste and untouchability penetrating the Indian society. *The God of Small Things* is very much akin to the issues raised by the versatile Mulk Raj Anand in his novel *Untouchable* (1935). Roy's Velutha becomes a social extension of Anand's Bakha, suffering identical fate even after the dawn of Independence. Velutha, a Paravan, mirrors the plight of the untouchables. In spite of Velutha's inert qualities and physique, he is veined out of the touchable world created to seclude an extensive section on the name of caste, yet holds his self-made world. This torments Vellya Paapen, Velutha's father, who did not consign to oblivion his "sweeping back with a broom" days and retains heart filled gratefulness to



Mammachi for offering him glass eye. Vellya Paapen and Velutha underwent the most heinous reception any human could have got. Quoting Roy; “Pappachi would not allow Paravans into the house. Nobody would. They were not allowed to touch anything that the touchables used. During Mammachi’s girlhood Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that the Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally sweeping into a Paravan’s footprint.” Roy figures out the stratification distinctively and models ample instances of the plight of the ‘subordinates’ during Mammachi’s time, when they were not allowed to cover their upper bodies, walk on the public roads and carry umbrellas. The extent of dislike was such that the untouchables even had to cover their mouths while speaking to avoid polluting the air with their breath.

Velutha, on the other hand was the embodiment of an ‘unfamiliar’ and ‘unusual’ Paravan. Velutha received schooling unlike his elders, from the school established by Mammachi’s father-in-law. His afternoon was occupied with working along with Johann Klein, a carpenter from the Carpenter’s Guild in Bavaria and adapted his carpentry skill well. Velutha has a mastery over the machines too, and would aptly turn out to be an engineer if he was not a Paravan. Velutha’s presence thus became indispensable both in the Paradise Pickle and Preserves Factory and the House. Vellya Paapen felt, these gave Velutha “an unwarranted assurance... in the way he walked. The way he held his head.” Velutha had a quite way of offering his suggestions even if not being asked. Velutha had a strange way of showing rejection of suggestions without focusing himself as a rebel. The touchable would apparently construe these as insolence. Velutha was commissioned to work as the factory carpenter which was again a major leap as a Paravan.

The foregoing crisis were so convolutedly woven that it is strenuous to figure out the most compelling one that leads to the barbarous killing of Velutha. Baby Kochamma is inwardly furious about her niece’s sexual liaison with Velutha and stealthily wants him to be ravaged. For Baby Kochamma, Velutha plunders her social reputation and status but interestingly enough, this was not the exclusive intension. Baby Kochamma was publicly humiliated by a number of marchers in Cochin and since then she aggressively sheds her fury on Velutha. For her, Velutha became a subconscious entity analogous to the man who necessitated her to wave the Marxist Party flag. Her hate for Velutha became quite discernable since then. She engages Inspector Thomas Mathew and convinces him to conclude on Velutha’s attempted rape of Ammu, the sudden vanishing of the children and finally Sophie Mol’s death- all turned to be knitted on the same string. Baby Kochamma also cautions Mathew on Velutha’s Naxalite links. Mathew on his part makes sure if Velutha harboured a political support from Pillai. The latter, not only disowns Velutha as a party worker, but also does not completely quash the charge of attempted rape in Baby Kochamma’s FIR. These states of affairs gave Mathew ample reasons to act hastily and brutally. Velutha’s destruction leaves the readers with a sense of deep pain, anguish and ponders over how many Velutha’s cede their lives and fall a prey to gratify the social order.

The novel follows an interesting pattern where the ‘small’ becomes ‘big’ and the ‘big’ becomes ‘small’. Thus, very evidently Velutha becomes ‘the God of small things.’ Roy presents Velutha as a human god, who stepped down to this world for a purpose and left, leaving behind no trace. Velutha’s ‘smallness’ can be compared to Golding’s ‘Lord of the Flies’, where the little one shouts “Kill the beast! Cut his throat! Spill his blood!”

#### **Social Stratification:**

Societal arrangement of human beings into classes is an archaic mechanism which the novelist craftily fabricates, infusing with subjective encounters. Democratic India institutionalised the very concepts of ‘Liberty’, ‘Equality’ and ‘Justice’ to all citizens ‘irrespective of the class, creed, colour, sex...’; the four-class system yet continues to reign. Roy here seems to be a critic of the prevalent socio-political construct. She expresses her bewilderment and the utter sensitive state and the recent shift of politics which fail to curb the atrocious clashes between the classes, to reap maximum personal benefits. The Chaturvarna Pyramid still burdens over the Indian society, an unwavering burden since ages. Roy feels protective discrimination is an additional form of reservation, worsening the scenario. There is discrete correctness in unearthing this milieu and fabricating it with the existence and survival of the characters in the novel. Velutha thus becomes Roy’s spectrometer in the process. Throughout the novel, Velutha suffers stock scorn of the upper caste people. The touchable workers in the factory were of the view that an untouchable cannot be a carpenter and seclude him. To add more to the misery, Mathew, the protector of justice shakes hands with Comrade Pillai, who seems to be the ‘crusader of the oppressed,’ but in favour of the false FIR documented by Baby Kochamma. Pillai skilfully escape to mention that Velutha is a member of the Communist Party and is seen conversing with Chacko, the owner of Paradise Pickles, to ‘send him off’. Velutha’s apparent ‘touchableness’ was not only scary but envious too; “But see, Comrade, 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 condition they have from birth.”

So was the plight of these Paravans that even religious conversions failed to uplift their social status. With the British colonization, a number of Paravans, Pulayas and Pelayas including Velutha’s father, converted themselves to Christianity and associated themselves with the Anglican Church to escape the curse of being an untouchable; “As added incentive they were given a little food and money. They were known as the Rice-Christians.” Unfortunately, this was not a life booster, but an actual jump to the



fire from the frying pan. They were provided with separate churches, priests and services. They landed into a separate universe after Independence, when they were documented as Christians and were not entitled to any government benefits, jobs or loans. They were marked not as 'Low castes' but as 'Casteless'.

### Politics and Power

Socio-political upheavals and the recent shift in its dimensions during the Post-modern age is a matter worth witnessing. Morality is ravaged under controversial and sensitive issues. The novelist actually features the role of power in the society. Power most often tends to victimise and deprive the depressed. She conscientiously shows how a nexus exists between party politics and administration, here Pillai and the local police. The conversion of religion is ironical too, since there is a steady discrimination between the 'original Syrian Christians' and the untouchables converted to Christianity. Roy shows her aversion in showing a different face of politics through Pillai, who uses Marxism for subjective aid. Pillai is not attentive and anxious for his party workers. Comrade Pillai is merely mirrored as a caricature of a politician, epitomizing all the deceptive and unpleasant ways of politics. Pillai promotes himself at the cost of his workers at the same time disowns them as soon as he feels necessary. Politics plays a pivotal role in the knitting of the narrative and targets to pageant local power. Keeping at par with the religion, politics too plays an ironical role. Pillai belongs to a party which advocates workers' interests and exists to protect their rights and dignity. Pillai in turn sabotages the ideologies of the party, the workers and protect his personal interests.

Pillai's leadership rests on loud slogans and protest marches to eradicate caste, class and inequality. The manipulative politician scores an easy win against Paradise Pickles and Preserves through his shrewdness against Velutha and Chacko; "did Comrade Pillai realise that what he really needed was the process of war more than the outcome of victory. War could have been the stallion that he rode, part of, if not all, the way to the Legislative Assembly, whereas Victory left him no better off than when he started off." Pillai keeps no stone unturned to position him into the world of politics. Pillai was an oil-smearing and lecherous man who goes to an extent in naming his son, Lenin, just to stream his Communism. He uses his treacherous brain to plot against Velutha, an underdog, to boost his political games. Doing this, he joins hands with the local police. Velutha thus remains to be mere pawns in the game of political chess. Pillai is so shrewd and shady that even Chacko falls short to grasp him. "Even Chacko- who knew that the fervent, high pitched speeches about the rights of untouchables delivered by Comrade Pillai during the Marxist Party siege of Paradise Prickles were Pharisaic- never learned the whole story." He even deceives Velutha to an unimaginable extent. While Velutha appears in Pillai's house after being humiliated and abused in the Ayemenem House, Pillai calmly replies that personal issues are not addressed by the party, and disappears.

### Victims of the Gender

Our country grants both constitutional and legal rights to the women. The Constitution clearly states "The State shall not discriminate any citizen on grounds of sex along with any other ground." The Constitution of India provides various protection rights for women under- Protective discrimination in favour of women, Right of women against exploitation, Right to freedom of women, Rights of women under Directives and political representations of women. The Five-Year Plans also emphasises on to strengthen the submissive sections of our society.

Arundhati Roy presents a parallel existence- a dual existence of law and its 'violation.' The reality dwelling in our society is far more horrifying and devastating. Women are still versioned as 'objects', which can be bargained and possessed in the patriarchal society. The commodity like treatment ensures the frailty of the system. Roy evaluates that the contemporary consumer culture has further brought women into a more derogatory stature. Women are merely a part of the system, customised to play definite roles. Roy features each of these dimensions in her novel, *The God of Small Things*. Mammachi, Ammu, Baby Kochamma, Rahel and Margaret are all aptly placed to ensure completeness to these dimensions.

There is hierarchy in the treatment of gender in the house. Roy presents it as something existing since the beginning and being carried off by the next generation successfully. Pappachi always kept being jealous of Mammachi's prickle factory and the very fact that she was earning. He kept on deploring the fact, since accepting would make Mammachi's stature raised, which again was not deserved by her gender. Hence, the rest of the acts were quite obvious. Instead of offering help to Mammachi and assisting her in buying, salting, weighing and drying of mangoes, he ended up in hitting her with a brass flower vase every night. Mammachi is very much alarmed yet defenceless of the state. Ammu is also circumvented by her lot. She suffers violence from her drunken Assistant Manager husband. The repulsing husband is never ashamed of his loss of morality and possesses no guilt of it. Shamelessly he proposes his English Boss Hollick's indecent demand to Ammu. Hollick wishes to sleep with Ammu to which her husbands approves and hounds Ammu to gratify the Boss. Ammu receives violent blows for the same, but her declination of the proposal was natural. Ammu was tormented both at home and at work. She becomes Roy's illustrator of a modern corporate woman, dealing both the worlds with similar efforts and consequences. Chacko and Ammu both worked for the factory, yet the 'stronger' gender holds his foot better in possession of the place. "Though Ammu did as much work as Chacko... he always referred to it (factory) as my factory, my



pineapples, my prickles.” Chackoo behaved such since he had a clear mental construct that Ammu was the opposite gender, and henceforth no right over the property prevails. Chacko can be identified with stereotyped old zamindar mentality, concealed around an Oxford avatar. He is a self-proclaimed Marxist and takes intense pleasure in exploiting his women employees. Chacko would methodically call pleasant looking, women factory workers into his room and would pretend to lecture on labour rights and outrageously flirt with them.

Roy shares her much Bolshevik approach in the text. Quoting the *Sexual Revolution in Russia (1923)* by Grigorii Batkis: “Soviet legislation bases itself on the following principle; it declares absolute noninterference of the state and society into sexual matters so long as nobody is injuring and no one’s interests are encroached upon... All forms of sexual intercourse are private matters.”

That is how Roy turns her approach in looking into these aspects where personal consent and equality is a mandate. She disregards all barriers into personal relationships. And that is how in her novel, Rahel marries an American, Margaret marries an Indian and Ammu marries a Bengali-Hindu and later falls in love with a Paravan.

### **Divorce**

The concept of divorce is also accentuated in the narrative. The commoditization of women is definitely a very inference here. Pillai, the Comrade pronounces the word ‘divorce’ very differently and refers to Rahel and her morality. Pillai possesses a binary character. On one hand, he announces his Communist manifestos, talks about equality and to sweep off all discrimination. On the other hand, he secludes divorcees and is prejudiced about their morality. Astonishingly, a section of women also contributes to these distortions in thought. Margaret, a divorcee is considered ‘a whore’ in Mammachi’s eyes. Baby Kochamma is also prejudiced and typical about deserted Ammu. Her stereotyped views concluded that married daughters ‘had no position in their parent’s home’ while divorced daughters are not fit to survive ‘anywhere at all’. Baby Kochamma harboured deep anguish on Ammu getting married on her own that too, in a different community. For her, Ammu’s fate proved bitter since she chooses to rebuff the conventional ways of marriage, where family play a role in choosing the groom fitting into their status and community. Hence, “Baby Kochamma chose to remain quiveringly silent on the subject.” Ammu had been among those unfortunates few who have been unlucky twice in her life in two different relationships. Ammu’s tomentous relationships have its repercussions over the lives of her little ones, who were compelled to eat the sour grapes. This resulted into Rahel and Estha growing up into abnormal adolescents and later people of same kind in their youth, while Estha slowly ‘withdrew from the world’.

### **Brutality of the Police**

The police had a climactic role to play in the Velutha-Ammu liaison. Roy brings the guardians of law under a light where they are exhibited as callous, cruel and unscrupulous. Baby Kochamma’s draft of the FIR against Velutha, charging him with molestation and attempted rape of Ammu. Here, we are introduced to Mathew, the Inspector, who shares a touchable police station. He is prejudiced about the untouchables. He is very sure that people like them are already spoilt and teases Baby Kochamma; “spoiling these people, carry them about your head like trophies, then when they misbehave you come running to us for help.” interestingly enough, Baby Kochamma is nevertheless helped by him and he fabricates the case against Velutha. Mathew later was concerned with Velutha’s possible political support and thereafter, calls on to Pillai for verification, who denies any Marxist association with Velutha. Both shared a brief talk yet understood each other, without explaining; “They did not trust each other but understood each other perfectly...But in their own way truly terrifying adult. They looked out at the world and never wondered how it worked, because they knew. They worked it. They were mechanics who served different parts of the same machine.”

Following Velutha’s disappearance, the police began hunting for him. He was found, tortured brutally and dragged to the police station. Estha was made to identify him as their abductor following the rowing incident, in which Sophie Mol was drowned and their mother, Ammu molested. Velutha left his breath unable to bear the atrocities. Ammu reaches the police station along with her children for a possible record of the statement. Mathew disrespects Ammu saying the police does not take statements from the ‘Veshyas or their illegitimate children.’ Ammu showed understandable disagreement to the behaviour which results in more humiliation; “Then he tapped her breasts with his baton. Gently. Tap, tap. No thought he was choosing mangoes from a basket. Pointing out the ones that he wanted packed and delivered. Inspector Thomas Mathew seemed to know whom he could pick and whom he couldn’t. Policemen have that instinct.” This left an everlasting aftermath on Ammu’s mind and she dreamt frightfully the night before her death about the horrors and police atrocities; “...policemen approached her with snickering scissors wanting to hack off her hair. They did that in Kottayam to prostitutes whom they’d caught in the bazaar- branded them so that everybody would know who they were. Veshyas.”



## Conclusion

The God of Small Things is such a novel which achieves genuine, tragic resonance. Just as every committed writer, Arundhati Roy seeks to achieve a reformed world around herself. Doing this every writer, aspires to vehicle into Gandhian or Marxist philosophy. Arundhati Roy here is an exception too. She tends to be a non-conformist, who cannot be identified with any precise reservations. She shares her own views, her own explorations and presents more of a humanistic approach. Being a woman of vision and imagination, Roy shares her urge to see a world which believes in equality of the sexes and rebuff discrimination. While she shares her Gandhian approach in patronizing non-violence, at the same time she is quite Bolshevik in her notion towards sexism. Roy's novels tend to share hope and commitment and a very much more humane-future. She finds beauty yet, in this damaged, brutal world of ours- beauty that is uniquely ours and which we have received from others. All we have to do is to seek and nurture it. Roy's testimony regarding socio-political issues is critical and evident since she employs her own encounters with the society. There is humanity, willingness, longing and a desperate need for an ideal order. Sunday Observer quotes:

**“The God of Small Things has it all: echoes, calls and the cries of the Earth. But more importantly, an intellectual daring. This...is not just an extraordinary novel, but an uncoiling spring of human fore bonding and inevitability. It is quite simply unbeatable.”**

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