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Presentation of the Sufferings of Dalits (Untouchables) in Arundhati Roy's *The God Of Small Things*

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Abstract

The present study is an attempt of presenting the sufferings of dalits and their pathetic condition due to their lower caste that figure in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Untouchability and slavery symbolize the deprivation, disgrace, and inhuman oppression on a section of human beings. Men become hostile against one another. Social, political, economic, racial and cultural prejudices are seen at many places. All human beings are born equal but there discrimination among them is created by people with vested interests. The need to define the social, moral and ideological perspectives leads to concern the social dilemma of the underprivileged and exploited in society. Roy's *The God of Small Things* is published after Independence. *The God of Small Things* (1996) is her first novel. The novel is a set in Kerala. The story is simple. It articulates the dalit Christen voice. Overall the novel is psychological presentation and observation of very small things of life. The novel deals with the problem of untouchability and social harassment. It is about the class and caste issues in southern India. Upper caste Christianity is presented in the novel in connection with socio-political changes.

Keywords- Dalits, Untouchability, Inhuman Oppression, Cultural Prejudices, Ideological Perspectives, Underprivileged, Social Harassment, Upper Caste Christianity, Socio-Political

The matter of untouchables in the field of literature, sociology or cultural anthropology finds a different mode of expression. Literature permits freedom of expression but other academic fields cannot. Caste and class system is deeply rooted in Indian society. It has become a theme in an Indian English novel. Untouchables in India are an oppressed section and they are treated with religious prejudices in India. Such inhuman treatment was given in different ways. Economic misery is one of the causes behind their social dishonor and humiliation. The social group of Indian untouchables changed the pattern of human living by reason of their caste, class and racial oppression.

There are only two kinds of people in the world; the rich and the poor. There is no connection between them. The differences have created a wall between them. They are divided into two different classes on the basis of their economic conditions. As an effect the

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pattern of ruling class and the ruled class were formed. The ruling class became the masters and the poor people became slaves. The rich people became the owner and the poor depended on them. Due to this, exploiter and the exploited sections have emerged. They have their different attitudes to look at each other.

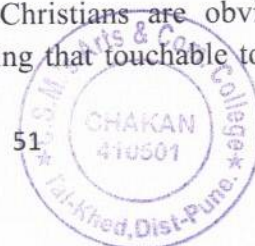
Class is visible in people's attitude to life, religion and God. Most of the poor people have fatalistic approach to life. Unfortunately they do not plan for their future. Consequently most of the poor people have a large number of children born in their family. They believe that the child that is born in the family is an additional labor available to them. Hence they avoid the family planning. They do not worry about growing number of mouths in the family. This prevents them from better education, shelter and clothes. Opportunities are snatched away from the poor people because of the continuous birth in the family. This does not mean that upper class people do not have more children. But there is a sharp difference between the purposes of life of children in two different classes of society. Poor children are expected to work for the others. Whereas the children in the upper class society will be needed to cater to the growing needs and services of their own business.

Social interaction on the basis of caste continued in the post-independence era. It changed due to the work of social reformers and some constitutional rights. The lower caste people get more educational and economic facilities today which uplift their standard of living. Though attitude on the basis of caste is not thoroughly eradicated the attitude to interact with such people has changed.

The God of Small Things has been a famous novel. The novel brought prestigious Booker Prize award for Arundhati Roy. The novel was received well in India and in other countries outside India. The book was praised by readers from different areas of the world. The novel shows her sense of social and intellectual commitment. Today Arundhati Roy has emerged as a campaigner of social justice for the lower class and caste people. She is well known for her anti-establishment voice. She wrote against the BJP government's nuclear policy. She also protested against Narmada Irrigation Scheme. In many ways she proved a liberator of the exploited people.

Untouchables were the converted Christians in Kerala. It was the story after the arrival of British to Malabar. A number of low caste people including Velutha's grandfather Kelan became Christian. The conversion into Christian then meant the hope of being free from the curse of untouchability. But soon they realized that conversion did not improve their social status. They were still discriminated against and treated as before within the Christian community. Roy tries to reveal the different approaches of the lower castes towards the upper caste Syrian Christians.

The novel looks like a simple story of a family and a village. The happenings in the village are symbolically presented. Tragic story of a helpless man and his discrimination and exploitation by members of upper caste Christians are obviously seen. The converted Christians were not allowed to touch anything that touchable touched. Crawling backwards



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with a broom, sweeping away their footprints were the old rules which have to be followed by the untouchables. Roy presents a living picture of untouchable's sufferings and the injustice faced by them.

The Christian in this time enjoyed certain human rights and the same were denied to lower caste Hindus. Upper caste Hindus in the 18th and 19th century in Kerala treated poor people belonging to the lower caste badly. British authority tried to stop the cruel treatment given to low caste Hindus. That encouraged mass conversion to Christianity. Christianity tempted and motivated oppressed castes to adopt that religion. This disturbed the upper caste people and they formed a strong voice of request to cancel the rule but that could not happen. Christianity at that time allowed more concessions to the converts.

Convert Christians residing in Kerala are proud of their new religious identity. They have forgotten their original class and caste status. The Malayalee Christians who migrated from their native place to another state also have this maniac. Christians in other Indian states do not enjoy the social status which they feel their natives in Kerala happily enjoy. Christians form minority and recently converted lower caste people are treated equally in some Indian regions. The well-equipped Malayalee Christian in north India is humiliated and treated as lower caste.

Velutha, the son of Vellya Pappen, Paravan could be taken as the representative of the lower castes in the novel. His ancestors had converted into Christianity. He is dark colored young man. Though his appearance in the novel is very ordinary, slowly he becomes the prominent figure in the novel. He represents his aggressive nature against dominant culture. The untouchables were made to suffer from humiliations at the hands of the caste Hindus and Christians. Velutha, the young rebel in the novel was a carpenter, a master craftsman. He was a committed party worker who actively took part in the protestation marches of the party. He was also a rebel and within him there was a volcano ready to burst any time. When his life was in danger, the Marxist Party never stood by him. The Ayemenem family also came forth to destroy him completely. The death of Sophie Mol added fuel to the fire. The police tortured him in all possible ways. The end of his life was a symbol of social injustice that existed in India.

The relationship put Velutha in the prison due to rigid caste and class system. The Police Inspector, Thomas Mathew was also against Velutha because of his low caste origin as a Parvan. His duty was to protect Velutha but instead of doing that he mercilessly killed Velutha in the custody. Velutha ended up his life due to the harassment and ill-treatment in prison.

Velutha was trying to come out of trap of caste. His ancestors created a platform through conversion to Christianity, but his attempt was foiled by the rigid caste and class system. He was expert in mechanical field, but he was ignored because of his caste. His anti-social act of having affairs with Ammu put him in trouble.



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Vellya Paapen had two sons. The elder son was Kuttappan, Velutha was the younger one. Kuttappan lies alone with the company of a black hen. He lost his mother Chella who died in miserable conditions. It was a terrible experience for him to watch his mother's death. He had no sensation in his feet at all and occasionally he poked at them with a stick. He often wondered how long he would take to die.

An untouchable grandson of a grandfather who was converted to Christianity was Velutha's identity. The legacy was received from his father. Vellya Paapen and Chella were insulted by the caste Hindus and Christians. His brother Kuttappan was the worst sufferer. His life was equivalent to death. But Velutha tried to come out of the shell that was prepared for him by his ancestors. As an untouchable boy he had been in the habit of going to the Ayemenem house with his father to deliver coconuts plucked from the trees in the compound. These Paravans were never allowed to enter the house. They were not allowed to touch anything that the touchable consumed but Velutha at a later stage dared to touch the forbidden.

Velutha had a special eye for machines apart from his skills in carpentry. He repaired radios, clocks, water-pumps and a variety of other contrivances. He looked after the plumbing and the electrical gadgets in the house. Thus Velutha, was unparalleled carpenter, mechanic and also as an engineer. He was even referred to as Dr. Velutha by Baby Kochamma when her garden Cherub's silver was dried up and Velutha fixed its bladder for her. He never had the feeling that he was an untouchable especially when it came to his profession. He easily surpassed his fellow workers. He did not pay much importance to what others said or thought about him.

Velutha was a risk for Comrade Pillai as a party leader. Of all the workers at Paradise Pickles, he was the only card-holding member of the Party. Other workers had complaints against him basically to do with his caste. Though Velutha had stood by Comrade Pillai both as a party worker and a trade unionist, he had been most unkind to him in his hours of trouble. Velutha had taken part in the workers march. It had created ripples in Ammu and others in the Ayemenem family. When Chacko, Baby Kochamma, Ammu and the twins were on their way to see the movie *The Sound of Music*, Rahel suddenly saw Velutha. She became restless when he marched with a red flag in a white shirt and mundu. Next day he ignored the fact by telling that he who was there was his twin.

Things took a different shape and one day he disappeared. For full four years nobody knew where he was. A rumor was spread that he was working on a building site for the Department of Welfare and Housing in Trivandrum. There was also news that he had become a Naxalite. Some went to saying that he had been arrested. But some others claimed that they had seen him in Quilon. But the fact remained that Velutha had become rebellious.

Velutha lived a rebel's life and died as a rebel. At a time when the untouchables were not allowed to touch the belonging of the upper class people, Velutha did something unique in the normal circumstances. He never gave up his courage and even when he realized that

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his life was in danger he never turned panicky. Like a true hero he accepted death which was heroic at the hands of the Kottayam police. Velutha lived the life of a lover also. The important thing was that he travelled into an area which was considered to be the rights of the rich and higher classes. That heightened Velutha's heroic status.

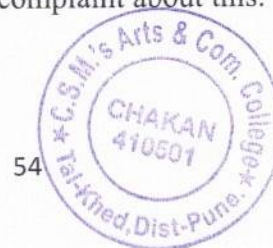
Ammu made Velutha a lover. She was attracted towards his hidden qualities. Velutha knew what she expected from him. The day it all began Velutha glanced up and caught Ammu's gaze, holding her daughter in her arms. Then the curtain was raised. Velutha did pay the price and it was not a small one. The fact was that Velutha was attracted towards Ammu, the sex starved divorced woman for a long time. Vellya Paapen reported Mammachi about the Velutha-Ammu affair. The end of Velutha's life began shortly. He was asked to appear before Mammachi and the rest of the incidents expose the evil effects in Velutha's life.

Sophie Mol's death brought coffin to Velutha. He was implicated though everyone knew that it was an accidental death. Baby Kochamma made Estha depose before the police that Velutha had a hand in kidnapping them which ultimately led to the death of Sophie Mol. She also told the police that he had threatened them to shut her mouth.

The police arrested Velutha and continued to torture him. Velutha was tortured to death in an inhuman way. Apart from the police, Baby Kochamma and Comrade Pillai would not escape from the responsibility of killing of an innocent human being. It was ironic that when he was about to breath his last, Estha appeared before his eyes. The same Estha was made to give false evidence against Velutha before the police.

Velutha's sexual adventure must be looked at as a bold step towards asserting himself. It was not that he was not aware of its consequences. He knew that it would kill him. Yet he dared it. Arundhati Roy has shown in this novel that the poor people do not have a chance to uplift themselves economically. The protagonist strives hard to get free from caste generated barriers. He was dreaming about the equality while rich people on the other side were enjoying. Roy's hero suffered and died. It is purely a tragic death of the protagonist at the altar of caste consideration.

The problems of untouchables still continue in modern India. It is really against the human rights in civilized democratic country. The harassment and exploitation of the lower class still continues without change. We find the serious problems like male domination and upper class hierarchy over the poor, untouchable, the lower class workers and illiterate people. Velutha suffers for changing his figure from the lower caste to upper caste. For that, he developed a secret sexual affair with upper caste woman. Consequently his crime of sexual affairs in the eyes of upper caste resulted in his death. His act shows the possible change to some extent but the modern upper caste society does not accept it. Their mindset is not ready to change immediately. Now we can see such affairs taking place into inter-caste marriages. Today upper class society has no complaint about this.



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