

Death as the Byproduct of Defiance in *The God of Small Things*

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Throwing down the gauntlet to the establishment has been a covert propensity of the people who are crushed and exploited by the establishment. The people of marginalized section always tend to question the status quo which has kept them deprived of what is their rightful due since time immemorial. In other words, questioning the status quo and the establishment has been a very latent desire of the people from periphery of the society ever since the society was created. People living on the margin of the society are not allowed to tamper with the laws laid down by the people occupying the centre. If they dare to defy the norms and customs of puritanically patriarchal and hierarchal society, they must pay the price with their lives. Ammu and Velutha are such characters in *The God of Small Things* whose intrepid defiance results into their harrowing death. This is what this paper proposes to study.

The God of Small Things, the debut novel, by Arundhati Roy, deals with the plight and persecution of women as well as the untouchable. The novel deals with multiple marginalizations – marginalizations at the level of class, caste, and gender. Roy is a postmodern novelist who advocates the revolution and revolt as a means of bringing about social and cultural equality. Velutha, the protagonist of her novel, therefore, protests the oppressive system of society. Ammu also wants to release herself from the circumscription of patriarchal society. Roy, like Mulk Raj Anand, Anita Desai, does not view the novel as an isolated piece of writing, devoid of any sociological concerns. Roy has clearly emerged as a vociferous spokesperson for the Dalits, the children, and the women. Roy subtly combines art and social concern. ‘Marginality’ and suppression of Dalits and women form the focal interest of Roy’s art, the art of writing fiction as well as non-fiction.

Roy’s *The God of Small Things* centres around the relationship between Ammu, Syrian Christian. The novel centres around the relationship between Ammu, Syrian Christian young woman divorced from a drunken, Bengali Hindu, and Velutha, an untouchable Paravan carpenter. Both of them live a rebel’s life and die as a rebel. At a time when the untouchables were not allowed to touch those belonging to the upper strata of the society, Velutha ventures to cock a snook at upper caste authority by engaging himself in passionately

intimate physical relationship with Ammu. He never gives up his courage and even when he realizes that his life is in danger, he never turns panicky.

Velutha like a true hero, accepts death and it is a heroic death at the hands of the Kottayam police. He is such a character who can be broken but not bent. The way he was tortured to death for his brutal act of defiance is possibly one of the breathing descriptions in any fiction. When Velutha is found at the back of the History House, he is “smashed and broken” (Roy 309) by the policemen. He remains lain semiconscious in a pool of blood. He is handcuffed and brought to Kottayam police station. It is here that police hear from the twins that they had gone of their own volition to the river. Sophie Mol’s boat had capsized and it was an accidental death. As per the law, the Paravan is an innocent man. But when ruthless forces like Baby Kochamma and the policemen join hands then we see the heightening of “Man’s subliminal urge to destroy what he could neither subdue nor defy” (Roy 308).

Velutha raises certain questions which our society should answer. A carpenter with a German sensibility continues to be ill - treated for the single reason that he is an untouchable, marginalized fellow. The party which should stand to protect the interests of the workers fails in its duty. The higher ups in the society are able to do all kinds of damage to those who are in the lower strata of the society. In this sense, Velutha is not a mere character, he stands as representative of a group of people who have been traditionally ill-treated and will continue to be treated so.

Moreover, marginalization of women, which is a global feature, can be seen in the portrayal of Ammu’s life. Ammu’s childhood memories are far from being pleasant memories. She has perfected herself in the art of insubordination and defiance of her restrictive and thwarting social environment. Although she is denied college education and her role in life is only perceived as waiting for the right match, she flouts this rule by finding her husband on her own. Later on, her sexual affair with Velutha is an act of transgression of “Love Laws” framed by upper strata of society. Ammu also has to very tacitly accept the death which is the upshot of all kinds of non-observance of the patriarchal customs and conventions. Thus, death follows defiance and transgression is followed by torture and trauma in the case of all those like Velutha and Ammu who raise their voice from the margin.

The God of Small Things brings out the issue of marginality through the heart-wrenching portrayal of historically, socially, and politically marginalized character Venutha. The novel presents Venutha as a

dauntless dalit who lives his life on his own terms. By presenting him as a defiant and dauntless figure, Roy has enabled this character to acquire an iconic status as a Dalit similar to that of Bakha in Anand's *Untouchable*.

Velutha is an untouchable or a "Harijan" (for its religious connotations Gandhi's word for the depressed caste group meaning 'Children of God' has been rejected by them and the preferred term is 'Dalit', 'the oppressed' which has socio political implications). He is compared to a God, "God of Small Things", when he is murdered, his toenails are painted red bringing him closer to the figure of Jesus, son of God. Just as Jesus died for man's redemption after being punished for preaching a new religion, Velutha died for preaching and practising equality.

Velutha, like Jesus, is not daunted by his looming death and unflinchingly decides to die for his abiding belief in oneness of humanity. He breaks into a fortified castle of upper caste people and plays with their hegemonic rules and dictates and finally remains undaunted and uncompromising with the laws of humanity even in the face of death. He responds warmly to the biological need, that is to say, the sexual urge of an upper caste woman, Ammu, and thus shows his intrepidity and courage to brush aside the long-established conventions and taboos of a stratified society along the lines of caste and community. Through Velutha's representation Roy longs for a new dawn of human society governed by humanitarian values.

The novel deals with the ravages of caste system in South Indian state, Kerala. The fundamental and core feature of India's social structure is its caste system. Even after nearly seventy years of India's Independence, caste and the entrenched caste hierarchy still remains the symbol and essence of Indian society, differentiating it from other societies. This hierarchy, which accords some caste the privilege and power to dominate over other castes, has been present in Indian history since time immemorial. The dominant Brahminical cultural code accords the so called lower caste, a highly inferior position in society and has drained them of dignity and self-respect in every domain of their lives. The lower caste, or Dalits as they prefer to be called, have always been marginalized by upper caste who have forced them to remain within the confines of their lowly- birth based menial occupations. The caste system has frozen the mobility in social structure and socio-economic relations with no space for political rights and public sphere.

This is exactly what we find in Roy's *The God of Small Things* which portrays the sad and horrid predicament of the untouchables like Velutha, Vellya Paapen. The untouchables like Velutha can never co-exist peacefully with the "touchable" communities for so long as the stigma of untouchability remains attached

to him and countless others like him. When any of the untouchables like Velutha goes against the norms and laws made by upper caste society, that untouchable is rewarded with death as we find in case of Velutha. Defiance posed by the Dalits against the inhuman laws of dominant upper caste society results into death of the untouchables.

The novel also portrays the struggle of a woman (Ammu) trying to have accomplishment in life in a patriarchal society. Ammu also defies the norms and rules of patriarchal society by choosing her husband on her own and thereafter divorcing him. Later on, she shows utter disregard to the patriarchal and caste – ridden society by having physical relationship with Velutha, an untouchable. Her defiance and disregard to the patriarchal and caste-based structured society results into her unmourned death.

Thus, the novel, through the delineation of Velutha, a dauntless Dalit, and Ammu, a non-conformist woman, hints at the fact that death is the byproduct of defiance in the society governed and controlled by the hegemonic rules of patriarchy and caste-conscious community. Death is inevitable for the Dalits and the women if they tamper with the laws of patriarchal and caste-based stratified society.

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