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Politics in Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things

Arundhati Roy is an Indian Keralite female writer in English. She gained prominence in the field of English writing by her debut novel *The God of Small Things* (1997) which got her the Booker Prize. The novel was launched in April 1997 in Delhi has got rave reviews and figures in the literary lists everywhere. The unprecedented popularity of the novel can be judged from the fact that nine million copies of the novel have been sold globally. As a social activist, Roy spearheaded the campaign of anti-globalization as she criticizes neo-imperialism. She powerfully opposed the global practices of industrialization including the project of Narmada Dam and the functioning of power company Enron in India. Her political and social activism gets reflected in her writings, speeches and in her condemnation of Indian democracy.

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In her novel, *The God of Small Things* Roy depicts the prevalent politics of suppression and oppression in India. The novel brings to light how powerful men use political power to crush the common masses. The novel equally deals with the problems of privileged class, the poor class, and the middle class. All are an equal concern to her. As a result, along with the middle class, the novel has been well received abroad by the well sophisticated educated elite class. The present paper attempts to probe her evaluation of the politics of the political parties, financially strong men, police personnel, and patriarchal society. An attempt has been made to scrutinize critically how Roy's protagonists Ammu and Velutha suffer due to the political system. The novel depicts the social, economic and political problems that the common masses have to face in the country termed as a democratic country. In a truly democratic country, the government is supposed to work for the welfare of masses and citizens are provided with rights and privileges. But Roy shows the real picture of the so-called democracy as she shows Velutha and Ammu, the

main characters of the novel fight for their survival in a gloomy, bewildering and politically distressing world.

The tone of the novel is primarily political. *The God of Small Things* is written at a time when there was an intense struggle for political dominance between the two major parties the Communists and the Congress. As such the fictional work that portrays realities cannot remain untouched by the political happenings of the times. There are references to the political personalities, political ideologies, and practices of the 1960's. Roy's novel heightens the awareness of the gullible masses and prompts them to rise against the dictatorial policies of the rulers. She wants to enlighten the people regarding the deceitful acts of the political leaders. Roy has tried to awaken the masses about the shrewd ways of the politicians. She has tried to represent the voice of the oppressed men and women who become the victims of atrocities of the rulers. There are several points of view in the novel *The God of Small Things* from which the author unfolds the plot. The unfolding of a variety of stories of political sufferers at first seems to have very little to do with one another. But the various encounters in the course of action depicts that they are interwoven into one another by way of many cross-references and slight contrasts. As such the novel produces an impression of a homogeneous and unified whole. Roy effectively combines intellect and emotion in a single novel. The novel brings to fore her brilliance as a political novelist. Harish Trivedi quotes Irvin Hoe's definition of a political novel:

By political novel, I mean a novel in which political ideas play a dominant role or in which the political milieu is the dominant setting... Perhaps it would be better to say: a novel in which we take to be dominant political ideas or the political milieu, a novel which permits this assumption without there by suffering any radical distinction and, it follows, with its possibility of some analytical profit”(qt. in Trivedi, 6).

From the above, it is clear that the writers of political novels give representation to their political ideas or beliefs. The novels target the political and social structures of the prevalent society. Chaman Nahal, a writer of political novels is of the view that a political novel must be structured around conflicts of ideologies and thinking and must present "two sets of political values in a polarized manner. The choice or the alternative of one set of political values in place of another

or a preference for one set of values in disregard of the other is a paramount quality of a political novel" (Nahal, 139).

On the question, whether *The God of Small Things* may be considered a political novel, Manjari Shukla in an article entitled "Sting in the Ta[i]le: Patriarchy, Caste, and Politics in *The God of Small Things* writes:

True the novel has a political setting as any realist novel of that period would have had, but whether the novel polarizes two sets of political values is not very easy to establish. At the same time the pervasive presence of politics in the novel cannot be denied. It is, however, not the politics of ideology that runs through the novel. It is conflated with two other kind of politics- the politics of gender or sexual politics which works through a critique of patriarchy, and the politics of caste. In fact, patriarchy, caste and ideology are complicit with one another and only appear to be working through different human agents or institutions. ,Mammachi , Baby Kochamma and K.N.M Pillai use different registers to express their respective attitudes, but essentially they are one. (Shukla, 111)

Roy uses the diverse political material with great skill and fervor. The politics encompass in its fold all the characters irrespective of their age, sex, age, social or political status and inner qualities. The political parts the characters play may be short, but they leave an indelible mark on the reader's minds. The politics depicted in the novel seems to be true as it depicts the harsh political and social realities. Roy's genius as a novelist lies in her has the articulation of politics with powerful expression through her astounding intellect. The politically conflicting situations portrayed in the novel clearly inform the readers of what they are in themselves.

Critics have accused Roy of distorting the ideology of communists, but there are others who have showered praise on her for exposing the superficiality in the name of communism. One reason for the controversy raised by this work is the political impact of the story. Arundhati

appears to be anti-Marxist. Critics have criticized her for hurtful references she had made for the C.P.M, its leaders, and policies. Manjari Shukla in an article titled "Sting in the Tail: Patriarchy, Caste, and Politics in *The God of Small Things* writes:

Aijaz Ahmad.... has accused Arundhati Roy of pandering to anti-communism by distorting not only ideology of communism but also by making uncharitable references to communist politicians of Kerala, especially E.M.S. Namboodripad. But while mainstream communist politicians of Kerala have not concealed their hostility to the novel, Roy has found support from the ultra left. Kalpana Wilson has written a detailed critique of Ahmed's essay on the novel, specially on his remark that in her anti-communism Roy is the representative of the anti-communist cosmopolitan intelligentsia. This critique was published in the January 1998 issue of *Liberation* the organ of the CPI (ML). Wilson joins issue with Ahmed for reading *The God of Small Thing* as if it were a novel about class struggle. Instead she points out, it is not a novel about mass-struggle but about a woman's tragic struggle. Instead, she points out, it is not a novel about mass-struggle but about a woman's tragic struggle against the values of male-dominated society. (Shukla, 110)

Another important issue that the novel touches is that of identity. The identities of Velutha or Ammu as portrayed in the novel get reduced to non-entities. Roy's characters depict how the common men are crushed by the politically powerful men. These powerful men are devoid of any human feelings. Roy through her characters Velutha and Ammu depicts how the identity of an individual comes under threat from the politically powerful men. They face embarrassed as they are tortured and threatened by the powerful men. They become the target of political and administrative machinery. The use of coercion by the men in power to silence the voice of common men is a widespread practice in the political world of today. The use of force can in no

way be justifiable in the countries where the rulers claim to provide the democratic government. The use of force kills the strength of democracy as it interferes with the freedom of the citizens. The personal life of the individuals is under the scanner as political and administrative machinery targets the private affairs of citizens. In the novel characters are shown as direct or indirect targets of a certain political conspiracy. Roy's novel depicts her anti-communist stance as she targets the political practices of communists. Through the protagonists, Velutha and Ammu Roy targets the propagators of communism whose political actions does not match with their political ideologies. They, in fact, are responsible for the woes and sufferings of the lower class people. Velutha is a representative character of the oppressed class. He works at the Paradise Pickles and Preserves factory owned by Ammu's family. The other workers envy him for his being untouchable. Discrimination by the owners is evident as he is paid less money for his work. Velutha's presence in the factory is not liked by the majority as they feel that he acted above his class. Crime and tyranny have state support as the justice is administered keeping in view the benefit of those who hold authority. Although Velutha is a committed member of the Marxist Party, his untouchable rank comes in the way of his rise in the party as others in the party disliked him. As such, Comrade K.N.M Pillai does not need his services as he needed the support of the majority.

Roy is critical of the Indian patriarchal society. The novel depicts how the social apparatus is used by the men in power to marginalize the better half of the population (women). Roy's antagonism towards the "crushing and destructive effects of patriarchal oppression runs through the novel, making it explicitly political" (Wilson, 28). Roy depicts Church as a very authoritative institution. She targets the prejudiced functioning of the Church as it is partial towards men. Patriarchy is the influential element of Indian society. The patriarchal society prefers a son to a daughter. In the novel, she depicts how Ammu is disowned by her Christian family on her marrying a Bengali while her brother Chacko lives in delight by marrying a Roman Catholic, Margaret Kochamma. The church does not point a finger at him as he sleeps with the women of low caste. After Pappachi, his son Chacko begins to use power. His behaviour is approved by Mammachi and Baby Kochamma. He exploits the females who worked in the factory. His conduct is contrary to the communist party's ideology. Roy describes how Chako a self-proclaimed Marxist uses politics to fulfill his sexual lust: "He would call pretty women who worked in the factory to his room, and on the pretext of lecturing them on labour rights and trade

union law, flirt them outrageously. He would call them Comrade, and insist that they call him Comrade back. (65) Roy's satirical reference to the comrade's involvement in sexual exploitation points towards the declining moral values and ethics in Indian polity.

Roy's novel depicts the lives of three generations females of Syrian Christian family. Mammachi belongs to the older generation, Ammu to the second generation and Rahel belongs to the third generation. The text depicts how the social institutions are responsible for their discrimination as they are denied equal rights as par with the men. Whereas Mammachi has to bear the brutalities of her husband Pappachi, Ammu faces discrimination right from her childhood days. She is not given proper love and affection by parents keeping in with the tradition of patriarchal Indian society which considers girl child as an unnecessary burden. After schooling, she is not sent for further studies, as Pappachi considered her studies as "unnecessary expense" (38), whereas her brother Chacko is sent to Oxford for higher studies. Roy depicts the male chauvinist society as she writes:

Though Ammu did so much work in factory as Chacko, wherever he was dealing with food inspectors or sanitary engineers, he always referred to it as my factory, my pineapples, my pickles. Legally this was the case because Ammu, as a daughter, had no claim to the property". (57)

The above reference shows the domination of men in the patriarchal society in which the women has a little say as regards to the right to property.

The marriage of Ammu with a man who worked as Assistant Manager at a tea estate in Assam added to her woes as he was alcoholic. Frustrated with her married life she returns to her parental house with twins Estha and Rahel. Her return was unwelcomed as a divorced woman has no place in the traditional parents' house. No one offered her help; instead she and her children are cursed and neglected. Divorced Ammu's love affair with Velutha, the Paravan adds to her sufferings as the society rejects the illicit affair. Roy depicts the atrocities committed by the police personnel on the females. The harshness of the so-called law protectors can be judged from the statement of the police inspector to whom Ammu approaches to defend Velutha. Instead of giving her a proper hearing, he insults her by saying: "Kottayam police does not take

statement from Veshyas (prostitutes) and their illegitimate children."(8) The tragic death of Ammu after she was exiled from home and separated from children, points towards the unsympathetic attitude of the society towards the females. Velutha was charged with a fake charge of raping a woman and was brutally murdered by the police. The brutal act of police depicts the unconstitutional functioning of the law protectors.

To conclude it may be said that Arundhati Roy has been successful in raising the political issues in her satirical novel. Though her novel has the setting in Kerala and the political happenings, political characters match with the actual political personalities, but it may be said that politics in all the states is similar. The nature and character of politics as practiced by the political men are more or less similar. The sayings and doings are poles apart. Talks of liberty are just political slogans but in actual practice one may witness denial of rights, individuality, and identity. In the democratic countries oppression, suppression and bigotry have become part of the political system. Education and awareness have not helped India to move ahead as patriarchal traditions are still prevalent. Roy's novel is satirical of the prevalent Indian political and social system which denies the rights of its citizens so that they may be able to exhibit their identity and liberty.

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