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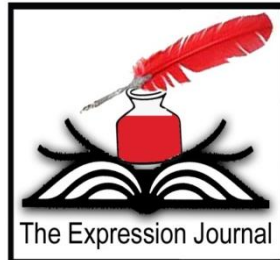
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## **VELUTHA AS AN UNTOUCHABLE: REREADING ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS***

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**Department of English**  
**RKSD College, Kaithal, Haryana**

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### **Abstract**

Untouchability is one of the major problems in Indian society and many lower caste people are facing this problem. Many social reformers and dalit activists have tried to eradicate this problem but even after many constitutional laws, this problem has not been uprooted because its roots are very deep. Many dalit writers have depicted about this problem in their novels, poetry, plays, short-stories, songs and autobiographies but several non-dalit writers have also taken the same theme in their works. Among these, Arundhati Roy's name comes at the forefront. She has taken Velutha as a mouthpiece of all the untouchables who have to face the tyranny of caste discrimination in Indian society. There are many people like Velutha in our society who have to face the injustice, discrimination and exploitation in their life without no fault. These people always remain at the target of the upper cast people and they leave no stone unturned to bring their daughter back. Through this paper, it has been tried to explore how untouchability remains as a core theme behind other social evils and crimes. As the main character, Valutha is an untouchable, the whole story revolves around him, his oppression, suppression, exploitation and finally, murder.

### **Key-Words**

Dalit Literature, Indian Writing in English, Mulk Raj Anand, Untouchability, Caste Prejudice.

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Arundhati Roy is an acclaimed feminist novelist winning the prestigious Booker Prize in 1997 for her debut novel *The God of Small Things* (1997). She has gained name, fame and acclaim worldwide just because her works deal with the burning issues of the society. She was born in Shillong, Meghalaya to a Keralite Syrian Christian mother and a Bengali Hindu father. She spent her childhood in Ayemenem in Kerala and after that she went to Delhi for her higher studies. She has also won the Sahitya Akademi Award for her collection of essays *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* but she declined this award.

*The God of Small Things*, having contours of caste, feminism, gender discrimination and class differentiation, sheds light on a conservative patriarchal world where the women are kept segregated from the main roles of the family and all the bold decisions are taken by the men of the family.

Arundhati Roy is an acclaimed feminist author who won the prestigious Booker Prize in 1997 for her debut novel *The God of Small Things* (1997). She has gained worldwide popularity, fame and admiration simply because her work addresses appalling and appealing issues in the society. She was born in Shillong, Meghalaya, to a Syrian Christian mother from Kerala and a Bengali Hindu father. She spent her childhood in Ayemenem, Kerala, after which she went to Delhi to study.

She also won the Sahitya Akademi Award for her essay collection *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, but she declined to receive this award. With its contours of caste, gender discrimination, feminism, untouchability, etc, *The God of Small Things* sheds light on a world of conservative patriarchal society where women are given secondary treatment

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even in their own home. There is no chance to get equal status in the society. Moreover, this novel encompasses the issues of caste discrimination at the broader level through this novel. There are few characters through which Arundhati Roy has depicted all these issues. Ranga Rao calls that this novel is a novel of protest, "Roy's book is the only one I can think of among Indian novels in English which can be comprehensively described as a protest novel. It is all about atrocities against minorities, small things: children and youth, women and untouchables" (*The Hindu* n. pag. 13).

Casteism has been attacked by Arundhati Roy through this novel. The novel revolves around the central theme how Indian society does not allow an inter-caste marriage especially an upper caste person's marriage with an untouchable. Dr. Sunil Kumar also writes that "Untouchability is an important topic in the God of Small Things" (Kumar 1603). Women have been depicted as sub-humans in this novel and they are not given equal status like men in the society. However, the life of untouchables has been depicted through the character of Velutha, Vellya Paapen's younger son. He is the best friend of Estha and Rahel. He is quite older than his friends. He is merely three year younger to their mother. He was introduced to readers in 1969 when the whole family was going to see a movie in the cinema. He marched with other communists. A few years ago, he disappeared and no one could know his whereabouts. People spread rumours about him. He was born into a low-caste family. He had been living in Ayemenem for five months and works as a carpenter in a factory in Mammachi. Other factory workers are jealous of him simply because he was getting good respect from others. His life is shaped by his social status and political beliefs.

The relationship between Velutha and Ammu also plays an important role in this novel. Velutha used to make wooden toys for Amu, but he knew he was an outsider, so he gave them the toys in such manner that he wouldn't touch them. It was Ammu herself who broke social norms, and she allowed Velutha to touch her. Ammu finds out that she has fallen in love with Velutha getting attracted by his well-built physique:

She saw the ridges of muscle on Velutha's stomach grow taught and rise under his skin like the divisions on a slab of chocolate. She wondered at how his body had changed—so quietly, from a flat-muscled boy's body into a man's body. Contoured and hard. A swimmer's body. A swimmer-carpenter's body. Polished with a high-wax body polish. He had high cheekbones and a white, sudden smile. (Roy 80-81)

Velutha likes Ammu's smile, especially her dimples. When he holds her in the light of the lamp, his body glows as if were polished. Ammu regards Velutha as the god of the little ones, "If he touched her, he couldn't talk to her, if he loved her he couldn't leave, if he spoke he couldn't listen, if he fought he couldn't win" (Roy 217).

Ammu warns Estha and Rahel not to spend too much time together just because it could cause them trouble. Velutha and Ammu's love affair was not possible as their society does not recognize inter-caste marriage. It was his caste that made him a scapegoat: he was

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brutally beaten by the police, and the novel tells us that a low-caste person like Velutha should not be mercilessly insulted or killed. B. N. Singh writes in this context:

Roy's exemplary protagonists—an upper caste woman and a lower caste man—struggle with oppressive social norms which denies them justice and dignity [...] how the double moral standard prevalent in the society has subjugated and reduced the women and the untouchable to a peripheral and precarious existence. (Singh 143)

Many people's lives become quite difficult due to their lower castes and they have to suffer humiliation also at many places due to their low caste. Their basic rights are also violated because upper caste people are reluctant to give them their due rights. There are many other examples in Indian Writing in English. Kalo from Bhabani Bhattacharya's *He Who Rides a Tiger*, Narayan from Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, Balram Halwai from Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, Bakha from Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, Chandri from U. R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara*, etc. are low caste characters who have to suffer a lot in their lives due to their low caste. Many dalit autobiographies also have been written in which dalit writers have depicted their stories of extreme poverty, hunger, deprivation, exploitation, harassment and torture. Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*, Gaikwad's *The Branded*, Madhopuri's *Changiya Rukh*, Limbale's *Outcaste*, Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*, Baby Kamble's *The Prison We Broke* and Bama's *Karukku* are its perfect examples in which dalit writers have narrated their harrowing experiences of life and readers get moved by reading them. Velutha is also the product of caste discriminated who is not allowed to live his life with liberty. Sunalini Kondapally also remarks about him, "Velutha is still a victim of caste system which is deeply rooted in Indian society" (Kondapally 160).

Velutha makes wooden toys and sells them. His job is very difficult. He has to climb up the tropical coconut palm trees. It is a very risky and difficult job because even a small mistake can take his life. It is generally seen that this type of risky works are assigned to the dalits people.

Velutha belongs to Toddy-toppers, but he prefers to become a carpenter. It is generally seen that Dalits are not generally allowed to do this work in Kerala. Velutha is involved in numerous jobs such as repairing and maintaining machines, appliances, and much more. He became a craftsman, working in a cucumber factory and in the neighborhood. After his father converted to Christianity, his family gained respect and his business prospered.

Apart from it, Velutha has to do numerous jobs, including repairing radios, clocks, and water pumps. He takes care of the house's plumbing and all electric gadgets. He becomes a trend-setter for other untouchables and also a member of the Communist Party. Velutha and his father represent two different generations of the untouchables.

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Arundhati Roy has depicted Kuttappen as Velutha's brother, who never attended school and remained illiterate. He also has to climb coconut trees like Velutha. One day he fell from a tree and damaged his spine. Arundhati Roy narrates about it, "One day, he fell off a coconut tree and damaged his spine" (Roy 77). He had to remain lie flat on his back. He kept thinking about his past and would "watch his youth saunter past without stopping to say hello" (Roy 206). Through these characters, Arundhati Roy has portrayed how dalits have to take many risky jobs for their survival.

Unlike his brothers, Velutha is educated and makes rattles, windmills, jewel boxes, etc. His father is also respected by people due to Velutha's talent and he never looked like an untouchable. The novel delineates how Velutha's father is very serious for Velutha just because he has fallen in love with an upper caste woman, Ammu. He is extremely frightened to know the consequences of this relationship that's why he tells about it to Mammachi. When Baby Kochamma comes to know about it, she asks Mammachi, "How could she stand the smell? Haven't you noticed? They have a particular smell, these Paravans" (Roy 257). Mammachi gets very angry and she curses her daughter for having her affair with an untouchable. She says, "His particular Paravan smell. Like animals. Mammachi thought and nearly vomited. Like a dog with a bitch on heat. For generations to come, forever now, people would point at them at weddings and funerals" (Roy 258). This incident shows that the upper caste people hate low caste people and do not want to have any relationship with them.

They lodge an FIR against Velutha and he is beaten so brutally that he dies. Estha and Rahel come to know that Velutha was being beaten. Velutha is beaten by the sticks; he is hit by boots on his bones and teeth. He is kicked on stomach and his muffled grunt is heard by everybody. It was an intentional act. Velutha was beaten so mercilessly that he was not in the position to move. Arundhati Roy writes about the story of his torture in the following words:

His skull was fractured in three places. His nose and both his cheek bones were smashed, leaving his pulpy, undefined. The blow to his mouth had split open his upper lip and broken six teeth, 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. His spine was damaged in two places, the concussion had paralysed his right arm and resulted in a loss of control over his bladder and rectum. Both his knee caps were shattered. (Roy 310)

Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, Pillai and policeman are responsible for Velutha's death. It can also be stated that caste discrimination prevalent in our society is also the cause of his death. The death of an untouchable does not make any difference in society. Arundhati Roy writes about it, "He left no foot-prints in sand, no ripples in water, no image in mirrors" (Roy 265). Thus, Velutha has been depicted as a god in this novel.

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After Ammu's death, the priest refuses to bury her dead body because she was having relationship with a low caste man. This incident reminds the readers of U. R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara* in which Naranappa's last rites are not performed by the Brahmins of his village just because he was living with Chandri, a low caste woman. In this novel also, Chaco had to hire a van to transport Ammu's dead body for the electric crematorium. She was wrapped in a dirty bed-sheet and laid out on a stretcher. In this way, this novel can be called an attack on the practices of untouchability and caste discrimination in Indian society. Sonia also writes about this novel, "*The God of Small Things*, quite in line with Roy's statement, acknowledges the condition of the world around and that without any distortions and aberrations" (612).

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