

A Study of Social Evils as depicted in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

Dr. Abhisarika Prajapati

Asst. Professor (English), School of Arts & Humanities, Reva University, Bengaluru, India

***Corresponding Author:**

Dr. Abhisarika Prajapati

Email: abhisarika15@gmail.com

Abstract: The name of Arundhati Roy is a renowned signature in voicing emphatically social evils of our contemporary postmodern and post-colonial world. Her debut novel is a prominent signature in the realm of Indian writing in English. In her novel *The God of Small Things* she has meticulously depicted the social evils which are really dangerous and causing real nuisance in society. Individualism, individual freedom and human rights are at stake. Social evils have numerous faces and can happen in a variety of ways as well which is really harmful for our society as a whole ranging from physical harm to financial, social and even psychological. Basically, in broader sense, social evils are anything that could be harmful or dangerous for the entire society and community. Social evils are issues which affect members of society in one way or other, directly or indirectly and are often considered problematic and controversial in terms of moral values and as stigma on humanity. My paper is an attempt to study and propagate Ms. Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* as a mirror to social evils crawling in our society around us and ready to devour all of us one by one. This novel calls for collective effort to eradicate those evils from our society as we rooted out sati-pratha, johar and child-marriage from our society in Indian context specifically.

Keywords: evils, caste, discrimination, suppression, social, society, alcoholism, prostitution, parenting, child abuse.

INTRODUCTION

Arundhati Roy is not only a novelist but she is moreover a social activist. She has written more books on social and political concerns than novels. Undoubtedly, her name is a renowned signature in voicing emphatically social evils of our contemporary postmodern and post-colonial world. Her debut novel is a prominent signature in the realm of Indian writing in English. Though her novel *The God of Small Things* is the debuted fictional work to her credit yet she wrote many non-fiction books like *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* (2014), *Listening to Grasshoppers* (2009), *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (2001), *The End of Imagination* (1998), *War Talk* (2003), *Power Politics* (2001), *Walking With the Comrades* (2011), *War is Peace* (2001), *Broken Republic* (2013) and many more to raise her concern related to the health of our society, community and country as well. Indeed, she is a champion of social reform. In her novel *The God of Small Things* she meticulously depicted the social evils which are really dangerous and causing real nuisance in society. Individualism, individual freedom and human rights are at stake. Social evils have numerous faces and can happen in a variety of ways as well which is really harmful for our society as a whole ranging from physical harm to financial, social and even psychological. Basically, in broader sense, social evils are anything that could be harmful or dangerous for the entire society or community. Social evils are issues

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As we try to define what exactly is social evil I would like to argue that inequality is the root cause of every social evil. Social evils are like social problems which annoys and hinder one's path of individual development as being a social creature. It is enemy of fundamental social human rights. Social evils pose certain situations as context where every human being is not considered and treated as equal being but opts for another maltreatment of human in inhumane and wild ways. Feeling of inferiority and superiority and power to dominate and rule, are another cause of social evils. Every individual entity is a social construct of good and evil, virtue and vice but when one side overpowers, it affects other social beings and turns into dirty game of power play and power politics. Christopher Butler [5] remarks, "...they could side with those who didn't 'fit' into the larger stories-the subordinated and the marginalized-against those with the power to disseminate the master narratives" (15).

To begin with untouchability which is a curse to our society. It is disgusting when one human being hates another or reluctant to touch or to be touched by some specific class of people. In the novel *The God of*

Small Things Arundhati Roy has extensively and sensitively showcased the issue of untouchability which is deeply rooted in our society and does not let our society come out of this cancerous evil. Velutha who is a god of small of things for Rahel and Estha and for Ammu as well, belongs to that so-called predefined and prerequisite class of society and he has to eventually lose his life at the altar of untouchability. This is an evil which could not let the love of Ammu and Velutha flourish. Maltreatment of human beings and their social excursion is deceitful. The situation is a matter of great concern that some section of society is being treated as untouchables and destined to be treated with hatred and malice though Indian government has already declared it unlawful act.

India is now of course a free land where postcolonial voices are roaring even though caste discrimination has become like DNA of our society. It is not only deeply rooted but sometimes seem inefaceable as it has brutal face of caste politics. India's politics itself is moreover based on caste. It has its roots deeply buried in Indian history. It was designed to (so-called) allocate works to heterogenous society and in the long run it narrowed down to conservative thoughts which produce evil way of treating people only based on their caste regardless of their potentials. Human are supposed to be behaved as humans as entire lot of society and not as specific section of society being born in some particular caste prerequisite as unequal by the power politics in society. Velutha in the novel is an illustrative of caste discriminated category who is kept aloof from the mainstream and allowed to have an affair with a girl of so called high caste. If he does he has to lose his life in the long run. Arundhati Roy has focused primarily on this social evil of our Indian society when she says, "They all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tampered with the laws that they lay down who should be loved and how. And how much" [1].

Again, issues concerning women's subjugation and oppression seem the foremost subject in the novel as Ms. Roy has meticulously designed the narrative of women's suppression in all the three phases of feminism. Baby Kochamma who is the representative of internalized voice of andro-centric ideology where there is no voice of 'she'. She is taught to behave and act according to the taught lessons of male dominated society to be like prerequisite image of woman. Ammu, though is a struggling voice of 'she' who suffocates in the system and tries to come out with her protest though she dies in a 'viable-diable age'. Estha is strong voice of 'she' who does not care 'who should be loved, how and how much'. She completely breaks the shackles of chained authority and throws her predefined identity.

Kate Millet rightly said, "If one takes patriarchal government to be the institution whereby that half of the populace which is female is controlled by that half which is male, the principles of patriarchy appear to be twofold: male shall dominate female, elder male shall dominate younger. However, just as with any human institution, there is frequently a distance between the real and the ideal; contradictions and exception do exist within the system" [2].

Women suppression has been narrated in such a way that they point out violence against women. Prostitution is another social issue which is directly related to women's identity and excruciating experience to subjugate them. "When they left the police station Ammu was crying, so Estha and Rahel didn't ask her what *veshya* meant.... Ammu's tears made everything that had so far seemed unreal, real" [1]. Ammu by her own husband has been asked to go to his boss in his company-which is a kind of imposed prostitution though she protested strongly. Why woman is considered male's private property with whom they can play with like toys. This is nothing but male-generated biased images of women which has been misinterpreted and manipulated for their own purposes. Ms. Roy has very boldly delineated this very issue in her work. Woman is no one's legacy and no longer a legacy this is what has been accentuated through Ammu's reaction to that demand.

Simone de Beauvoir remarks: There is a unanimous agreement that getting a husband-or in some cases a 'Protector'- is for her (woman) the most important Undertaking... She will free herself from the parental home, from her mother's hold, she will open up her future not only by active conquest but by delivering herself up, passive and docile, in the hands of a new master [3].

Actually, this kind of inhumane violation of personality exposes domestic violence towards women. She is not only subdued and subjugated but her identity has been constructed by the outside world and imposed forcefully. Domestic violence does not only mean physical violence but it unfolds layers of emotional and verbal violence too of which a woman becomes victim of. Ammu was not supposed to get higher education as her brother was sent abroad for education. Ammu being a woman is not considered to avail education in our andro-centric society. Why a girl child is treated as unequal when it comes to education, the very issue has been highlighted by Arundhati Roy to point her finger towards this unequal division and moreover gender-biased perspective of our society particularly in India. Again, Kate Millet these words are worth quoting when she states,

“For the gravest distortion in Freud’s theory of female psychology stems from his incapacity, unconscious or deliberate, to separate two radically different phenomenon, female biology and feminine status. By inferring the latter is as much, the product of nature as the former, and somehow inevitable, rather than the product of a social situation, he seems eager to convince us that what a man’s world has made of woman is only what nature had made of her first.” (190)

In connection to this one more issue is entangled that is dowry. Ammu is not supposed to get higher education since her identity and entity have already been predefined by this male dominated and male politicized society. Ammu is destined to get married and she must marry but to make her marry her parents are supposed to give away a handsome dowry to the groom’s family which is indeed an ironical and ridiculous act in our society but it is indispensable. It is not being allocated extensively by the novelist though she has mentioned this burning social evil which is one of the social problems of our so called modern and post humanist contemporary India. Dowry has actually become a deeply rooted custom in our society which is directly related to marriage where a woman is still considered as a legacy of our patriarchal society whose destiny and identity is defined and described by our male dominated ideologies.

Another social evil which has been delineated in the novel is alcoholism which is shown as evil playing its part to shatter the relationship of Ammu and her husband. Ammu’s husband is engrossed in drinking liquor that it took over him and under the heat of alcohol he forgets that he is ready to send his wife to his boss just for his undisturbed consumption of it and for his inhuman and unthoughtful benefits. It is rightly said that excess of everything is bad if one is over drinking alcohol it becomes alcoholism which not only makes that person a prey of it but rather related people and society as well, has to bear the evil produced by alcoholism. This is again a bitter social problem of our 21st century Indian society. Probably the havoc caused by the issue has compelled the Government of Bihar to step forward to ban alcohol in its state territory. Heavy drinking does not only lead you towards homicide and suicide but eventually disturbs familial and social peace and order.

Arundhati Roy has further pointed her gaze at ill-parenting and child abuse as well. Parenting is broadly and basically accepted as a joint effort. Parenting differs from culture to culture as it is a cultural construction but to train child’s psychology in a healthy way is moreover, a matter of self-realization and accountability towards them in shaping their personality patterns and traits. The childhood memories always linger in one’s psyche which transmits and leads

one to undertake certain sense of responsibility towards society which may drastically change their behavior and attitude towards life. To probe in to child’s psychology is in fact not a child’s play.

Ranga Rao, in his famous article. “The Book of the Year” rightly observes, “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 fourth, woman and untouchable” [4].

Arundhati Roy has aptly raised the issues concerning parenting and child abuse as well. If Ammu fails to manage good parenting for her children she herself does not find support and emotional understanding by her own parents who do not welcome her return after breaking her relationships with her husband. When Velutha comes forward to as a god of small things for Estha and Rahel he is ill-treated by social apparatus of being an untouchable in the class ruled society. No one cares what should be told and how and how much before children rather they care who should be loved, how and how much. Child abuse is another annoying curse to our society which has been penned pathetically. Baby Kochamma’s irresponsible behavior towards Estha and Rahel and death of Sophie Mol all happens in the course of the narrative due to un-understanding the value of parenting and its importance in shaping child’s psychology and providing them a better stable emotional support to get adjusted in society.

Next social problems which have been seriously raised by the author of *The God of Small Things* are marriage and divorce. These two problems are mainly connected to human relationships and gender-balance. These problems become social evil when they begin to disturb social peace and erupts in to frictions of burning coal hitting related family members, children and individual freedom as well. “As though she had temporarily set aside the morality of motherhood and divorcee hood. Even her walk changed from a safe mother- walk to another wilder sort of walk.” (44) Why marriage is considered mandatory and why divorce is considered as repugnant in our society, why these things do not come as choice. The compulsion of marriage and restriction of divorce and maltreatment of divorcees have been put forward as major social evils by the novelist to discuss these issues seriously which is a great hazard to individual freedom and individual development. Human relationships matter only on which big building of any institutions can stand but when it starts producing anti-humanist waves it demands attention to make it a choice. Marriage is definitely a beautiful institution where two hearts agree to live their lives together but if there come cracks in

the agreement, there should always be a welcome rather a malice.

If we conclude the depiction of social evils as delineated by Arundhati Roy it seems to me that she is moreover, an active social reformer as a novelist who writes dutifully to create awareness to these issues in our society in general vying more attention. Every society has good and bad customs and conventions and old rules are not always right as they are not always gold as old. India has been a country where social strata and social system have been evolved for betterment of society in general. This is the land where (woman's burning with husband's dead body) sati-pratha, johar pratha, bal-vivah (child marriage) have been subsidized and eradicated since they were social evils and were cancers to the health of our society. What is the need to mention if our society is conscious enough to comprehend and act to root out social evils for the benefit of people living in society, as social creatures why we cannot change the face of these social problems as depicted by Arundhati Roy in her debut novel. It is indeed a novel of social cause focusing on the characters of social problems which is altogether harmful and disturbing.

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