

Internalised Oppression and Social Taboos in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract : Arundhati Roy is celebrated as one of the most famous and talented Indian writers in English. A major part of her career has been devoted to giving a voice to the marginalised section of people and standing against injustice. Arundhati Roy brings out how society conditions people into accepting certain behaviours as the ultimate truth. In *The God of Small Things*, Roy talks about social conditioning, along with the impacts of patriarchy and caste discrimination. The novel details these themes through the experiences of several generations and diverse characters. The present research paper explores how social stigma and inherited prejudice reinforce conformity and punish people who resist. The researchers have also referred to many feminist and sociological theories to argue that Arundhati Roy has exposed the invisible mechanism through which society sustains oppression. Ultimately, the novel can be understood as a very powerful critique of caste, patriarchy, and the psychological consequences of social conditioning in contemporary Indian society.

Keywords: Oppression; femininity; social conditioning; caste hierarchy; patriarchy; gender norms; internalisation; social taboo.

INTRODUCTION

Indian English fiction is known all over the world for its constant association with Indian society. It has rarely concerned itself with luxury. It has always operated as a mirror that reflects the complex nature of Indian society. It has been used as a tool by multiple writers to expose the structures of caste, patriarchy, religion, and social hierarchy that regulate human behaviour. India has been the home to some of the most brilliant literary minds. A name that shines among them is that of Arundhati Roy. Arundhati Roy is praised for her fearless attitude and her ability to speak up even when she is being targeted. For her work *The God of Small Things*, she

was also honoured with the Booker Prize. This novel is so much more than just a story of different members of a family. It concerns many important social issues, including feminism, patriarchy, casteism, and social taboos, and how these affect the life of a person. The mechanism of social conditioning plays a crucial role in the preservation of discriminatory practices, as it makes people believe that discrimination is not man-made but that it is natural and inevitable. It makes people think that it should be accepted without any questions. The characters of Velutha, Ammu, Baby Kochamma, Vellya Paapen, Chacko and Mammachi highlight how people start internalising discrimination and inequality because of social conditioning. People start keeping a check on themselves, their desires, and their identities because of this conditioning.

Indian English fiction became very popular in the second half of the twentieth century. During this time, many writers did not just write fiction that could be enjoyed by the masses, but they produced a body of works that touched upon various social issues and challenged the ideas of the dominant group in order to create a more equitable society. There were many writers who emerged during this time, like Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Shashi Deshpande and Amitav Ghosh. Among all of these writers, the works of Arundhati Roy stand apart. This is because of their intense political consciousness and lyrical narrative style. In the words of Aijaz Ahmad, this novel offers, “...a political reading of social inequality and caste society” (Ahmad 103)

The novel *The God of Small Things* exposes the ground reality of Indian society and how it struggles with evils like caste discrimination, social hypocrisy, and patriarchal oppression. The novel also highlights the emotional and psychological consequences of these structures. This research paper focuses on how societies regulate individuals through certain mechanisms of conditioning and conformity, which might not be visible to people. Social conditioning simply means the process by which society trains individuals to internalise norms, values, beliefs, and behavioural expectations. It takes place from a very young age as little children are taught what is socially acceptable and what is not through mechanisms of reward, punishment, shame, and fear. Over time, these socially imposed ideas become so internalised that they start appearing as natural and inevitable to people. In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy highlights how oppressive structures exist in society not because they are enforced but because of internalisation. The characters in her novel are socially

conditioned to an extent that they start accepting, reproducing and ultimately enforcing the very system that oppresses them.

The concept of internalised oppression is very important in analysing the present novel. Internalised oppression usually occurs when marginalised people are so exposed to prejudices and discriminatory beliefs that they start accepting and absorbing them in a manner that they also view themselves through these oppressive frameworks. Roy has talked about both patriarchal conditioning and caste conditioning. Velutha is an example of how people start accepting oppression. He is untouchable by caste and this appears to be a part of his identity which determines the kind of treatment he deserves in society. Similarly, Ammu also portrays this as she is a woman in a patriarchal society and her life is essentially controlled by patriarchal structures. Because of being divorced, her identity becomes a big stigma. In a way, she also accepts this. She is unhappy not because she is being treated unfairly but because she feels getting divorced leads to all of this and this can not be changed. She starts accepting the oppression just like Velutha. This highlights how even the victims accept their fate through social conditioning and consider it as their rightful fate. Her own mother, Mammachi subjects her to very bad treatment while supporting her son, who is in the exact same situation. This highlights the contradictions of society. Gender inequality appears to have been internalised within Indian society to a scary extent.

Additionally, the novel also highlights how taboo is used as a mechanism of social control. Taboo functions by creating feelings of fear, shame, and stigma around certain behaviours, identities, desires and relationships. The relationship of Ammu violates many social taboos. She goes against the accepted ideas of caste, sexuality and female desire. Ultimately, she is also punished for the same. Arundhati Roy writes, "They all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tampered with the laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much." (31) These words highlight how society selectively disciplines individuals who go beyond the established boundaries even though most of us cross the boundaries at some point. Only the oppressed get punished, the oppressor gets away with most transgression. Ayemenem becomes a place where every action is monitored and controlled through the gaze of family, religion and community. Many critics have also said that her works operate as a critique of social hierarchy.

INTERNALIZED OPPRESSION AND SOCIAL TABOOS

The God of Small Things is not just a fictional story. It must be read and appreciated as a social novel. The author has used the characters to highlight the reality of patriarchy, caste system, social conformity and psychological conditioning. The author has talked about the social systems that partake in preserving these oppressive practices. Additionally, she has also highlighted how all of these systems may not be visible to the human eye. Most of them are internalised. Because of social conditioning, people start believing in these discriminatory practices as the way of life and start regulating themselves internally. This leads to internalised oppression, which can be seen in the novel as well, when Vellya Paapen had internalised caste discrimination so deeply that he became the reason for his son's death. He himself went to Mammachi and told her about Velutha and Ammu's relationship, "Vellya Paapen told Mammachi what he had seen. He asked God's forgiveness for having spawned a monster. He offered to kill his son, with his own bare hands." (40)

Internalised oppression is a very strong tool in the hands of any dominant group. They use it to make the marginalised communities believe that they are inferior and that the views of the dominant group must be accepted as the ultimate truth. With the passage of time, even the people who are discriminated against start believing that this is inevitable and that this is how things are supposed to be. People start regulating themselves and feel a sense of guilt or shame whenever they go beyond these ideas. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire has said, "The oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors." (Freire 45)

This observation is very important for the present novel. In the novel, individual characters start participating in preserving and enforcing the structures that subjugate them. This can be seen particularly through the characters of Mammachi and Baby Kochamma, both of whom end up becoming the agents of the same patriarchal and caste-based systems that have restricted their own freedom. This internalised oppression is built on the premise of social conditioning, which refers to the process by which individuals living in a society start abiding by the accepted norms, beliefs and behavioural expectations. This is enforced through a system of rewards, punishments, and repeated social reinforcement. From a very young age, people are taught what is considered 'normal', 'moral', or 'acceptable'.

Everything else is treated as wrong and undesirable. When an individual deviates from these acceptable ideas, he is either punished or made to feel guilty. On the other hand, when he does something that is considered right by society, he is rewarded. Years and years of this practice lead people to internalise it. They start believing in these ideas as the ultimate truth. This happens because of the fear of punishment in the beginning. Later on, this transforms into a way of life. The author has highlighted how caste hierarchy and patriarchy have also gotten internalised in the psyche of the people. While it is true that there exist external structures which support and enforce these ideas, what actually makes people follow them is the internalised acceptance. People have started to believe that this is necessary and that nothing can be done to change it. This happens to everyone who is a part of the system. Even the victims of the system believe it because of social conditioning. For them, inequality and discrimination become the norm. And the worst part is that they believe it to be their own belief system and not from external influences.

The theory of Michel Foucault is very relevant here. He talks about the relationship between power and discipline. He has also elaborated on the topic of social conditioning and its mechanisms. According to him:

He who is subjected to a field of visibility,
and who knows it, assumes responsibility
for the constraints of power; he makes
them play spontaneously upon himself; he
inscribes in himself the power relation in
which he simultaneously plays both roles;
he becomes the principle of his own
subjection. (49)

A very important feature of social conditioning that can be seen in *The God of Small Things* is that it is rare for the characters to be under someone's constant supervision. While it is true that some of them get called out once or twice, it is not that frequent. However, they themselves feel that they are being watched and observed by society and its institutions. To avoid confrontation and punishment, they start acting in ways that are correct according to society. This ensures conformity to social norms even when no one is explicitly telling them to do so. This can be seen in the relationship of Ammu and Velutha as well. They love each other. However, they know that this is wrong, not because someone has told them directly, but because of what they have been taught since they were children. With

time, their relationship becomes a problem for society, and it is subsequently destroyed. Even Ammu and Velutha feel guilt and shame. They feel so because they are in constant fear of social sanctions. Even when no one is saying anything, they keep thinking of ending the relationship.

This relationship between caste and society has also been explained by Pierre Bourdieu, who talks about the concept of 'habitus'. In his work, he has talked about the internalisation of certain patterns over the course of generations. A social structure, no matter how oppressive, is able to sustain itself, not because some powerful people force others to accept it, but because even the people who have been oppressed start believing in it because of years of conditioning. This gets to a point that the victims of the institution also join hands in preserving it. They reproduce it through daily acts and behaviours. Certain groups are treated as superior while others are treated as inferior and this is accepted by everyone involved.

The stigma theory also helps in understanding the social taboos in the novel. According to Goffman, stigma is an attribute that is responsible for deeply discrediting an individual and reducing them to a tainted and discounted person. The identity of Ammu as a woman who has divorced her husband makes her subject to social stigma within her own family and community. Similarly, Velutha's identity as an untouchable transforms into a permanent mark on his personality and social appearance that cannot be erased. Because of this mark, he is denied dignity and humanity. There are a lot of social taboos around caste, sexuality, and female desire. Ultimately, they internalise shame and silence in individuals as they start fearing social exclusion.

The idea of a social taboo is very important to the novel. A taboo is the result of socially constructed prohibitions that are structured to regulate the behaviour of human beings and preserve existing power structures. A taboo operates by assigning negative connotations to certain acts, relationships, and desires. In the novel, Arundhati Roy has repeatedly argued that society uses taboos to maintain the boundaries of caste and patriarchy. The relationship between Ammu and Velutha is portrayed as violative of the so-called 'Love Laws'. These laws are labelled as, "The laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much". (*The God of Small Things* 21)

These laws are a very good example of how society also regulates intimacy and desire. Even love is not safe from the prying eyes of society. It becomes political because it threatens the systems of hierarchy and control.

The feminist theory also finds a place here. Women are so deeply conditioned by patriarchal structures since their birth that they identify this pattern of inequality and discrimination as the harsh reality that they can not escape. Simone de Beauvoir has famously said, “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman.” (Beauvoir 283)

CASTE AND UNTOUCHABILITY

One of the most striking features of *The God of Small Things* is how it portrays caste oppression and untouchability in contemporary Indian society. Arundhati Roy does not make any compromises or try to make the situation look even the slightest bit better than the reality. She highlights how caste is not just a social institution, but it has become deeply internalised as a psychological system that controls relationships, morality, desire, and identity. The character of Velutha undergoes a lot of suffering simply because of the caste he is born into. In the social atmosphere of Ayemenem, caste hierarchy has become very prevalent. This is because of conditioning. The people of society have also internally accepted the discriminatory ideologies, which allow caste oppression to persist.

Velutha is a Paravan, an untouchable. He is a very intelligent, creative, and skilled man. However, all of his qualities are apparently useless as society refuses to recognise his humanity simply because of his caste identity. The author does not leave a chance to highlight how his social status is quite the opposite of his abilities. The author describes him as exceptionally gifted, commenting on his skills and talents. However, he remains confined in a system that defines him only through inherited caste hierarchy. The author remarks, “They were not allowed to touch anything that Touchables touched.” (*The God of Small Things* 45)

These lines highlight the dehumanising logic of untouchability and the reality of Indian society. Even physical contact has become socially criminalised. Velutha and other untouchables are not even allowed to touch something that a person of a higher caste might touch. The discrimination and oppression faced by Velutha have been described by B.R. Ambedkar as the graded inequality of the caste system, where cultural traditions and religion are used to normalise discrimination. The identity of Velutha is

limited to his caste. Everybody refuses to see beyond it. His identity has become a social stigma and it determines every aspect of his existence. The author also highlights how untouchability and caste prejudice continue psychologically and socially in everyday life despite many laws against it.

The author also highlights how caste has become a mechanism of social conditions which is deeply embedded in family and community life. From a very young age, people are taught that caste hierarchy is natural and unquestionable. In the novel, we can see how social institutions train people to think in a certain way. They are taught that upper-caste identity is associated with purity, morality, and respectability. On the other hand, the people belonging to lower castes are treated as impure and inferior. Ammu belongs to the Syrian Christian community in Ayemenem. This community has an outward appearance of being modern and educated. However, it remains deeply conditioned by caste prejudice. The author highlights how some people may claim to be morally superior while still reproducing discriminatory behaviour. Arundhati Roy highlights the hypocrisy of a society that publicly talks about standing against inequality while privately supporting caste discrimination. The conditioning has become so powerful that caste boundaries regulate social interactions as well as emotions, relationships, and desires.

Caste prejudices become so internalised in individuals that they do not even realise that they are preserving the very institutions that subjugated them. A very good example of this can be seen through the characters of Baby Kochamma, Mammachi, and Chacko. All of these characters start participating in upholding the caste system. They do it as a result of a natural habit. They do this despite their own experiences of personal suffering. While Mammachi does not have any negative ideas regarding Velutha and she also admires his talent, she gets furious when she finds out that he has a relationship with Ammu. This is a very good example of how caste conditioning overrides human compassion. At the same time, Velutha has also internalised caste inferiority. He is very aware of the danger that surrounds his relationship with Ammu. This is because he has been socially conditioned for many years and hence, he has learnt the consequences of crossing caste boundaries. His fear and silence are representative of the psychological burden of untouchability that he carries. Roy describes this as:

Mammachi told Estha and Rahel that she

could remember a time, in her girlhood,
when Paravans were expected to crawl
backwards with a broom, sweeping away
their footprints so that Brahmins or
Syrian Christians would not defile
themselves by accidentally stepping into
a Paravan's footprint. In Mammachi's
time, Paravans, like other Untouchables,
were not allowed to walk on public roads,
not allowed to cover their upper bodies,
not allowed to carry umbrellas. They had
to put their hands over their mouths when
they spoke, to divert their polluted breath
away from those whom they addressed.

(45)

The relationship between Ammu and Velutha comes forward as the ultimate challenge to caste hierarchy, as it is also violative of the ultimate love laws of the novel. The love between Ammu and Velutha is against the social order as it ignores the restrictions of caste and poses a threat to inherited power structures. Society does not tolerate their relationship and response with extreme violence in order to restore conformity. The brutal death of Velutha is a symbol of his punishment. He suffers because he goes against caste conditioning. He dies because of police violence, and this also highlights how the institutions of the state also collaborate with social prejudice to maintain hierarchy.

PATRIARCHAL CONDITIONING AND FEMALE OPPRESSION

Arundhati Roy has presented patriarchy as a deeply internalised system of social conditioning. It controls the identities, desires, and social worth of women. Gender roles are portrayed as very rigid in the novel, which is also true for a society like ours. Gender roles are often very strict and strip women of their individuality and autonomy. However, it is important to understand that just like caste oppression, the oppression of women is also not in existence solely because of men. But it is also supported by women who unconsciously reproduce patriarchal structures that are responsible for subjugating them. This can be seen through the experiences of Baby Kochamma, Mammachi and Ammu. Arundhati Roy has also comments on the emotional and psychological consequences of gender discrimination in Indian society.

Ammu's life is a very good example of what a woman is forced to go through if she deviates from socially accepted ideas of gender identity and roles. She is a divorced woman and because of this, she becomes marginalised in her own family and society. The author has also highlighted how a woman's identity is defined by social and patriarchal conditioning through marriage and male protection only. As soon as Ammu decides to separate from her abusive husband, she becomes a burden in her own family. She is not given any dignity or respect. At the same time, her brother, Chacko, has also had a failed marriage. However, he does not receive the same treatment as her and he continues to enjoy his social freedom and authority while his sister faces constant judgement :

Though Ammu did as much work in the factory as Chacko, whenever 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. Chacko told Rahel and Estha that Ammu had no Locusts Stand I. Thanks to our wonderful male chauvinist society, Ammu said. Chacko said, "What's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine..." (35)

These double standards expose how gendered hypocrisy has become embedded within patriarchal society. The narrator observes how Ammu has no right or legal claim to property or independence in this patriarchal society. She depends on her family and society for her finances as well as her emotional well-being. This reflects how, in patriarchal structures, women are stripped of power and autonomy. The suffering faced by her is not because of some biological reason. It is the result of socially conditioned expectations surrounding obedience, femininity, and respectability.

Another character that represents the internalisation of patriarchal values is that of Mammachi. She has been a victim of domestic violence by her husband, Pappachi. Despite facing the problems of patriarchy, she still supports patriarchal norms and carries forward the patriarchal discrimination against women, as she treats her daughter differently from

her son. Arundhati Roy highlights how even she starts internalising dominant ideologies. They start behaving in the same manner that had once oppressed them. She is also very tolerant and in fact, supportive of her son's sexual relationships with different women. This is because she has internalised the values of a society that allows sexual freedom to men but not to women. She does not even care whether her son is with a woman of their own caste or not, but Ammu's relationship becomes immoral and unacceptable to her. Her behaviour highlights how patriarchal structures force women to start thinking in ways that make them want to control other women instead of challenging male privilege. She is unable to empathise with her own daughter because of the internalised gender oppression within traditional society.

The character of Baby Kochamma is symbolic of emotional repression and unfulfilled desire. She was raised in a conservative and moral-based society where she was denied personal happiness. She has been conditioned by this society, and because of this, her frustration has transformed into bitterness and cruelty. Because of her failed relationship with Father Mulligan, she feels emotionally isolated. She is also not allowed to openly express her desires because of the restrictive gender norms imposed upon women. She is the result of patriarchal conditioning that suppresses female individuality and emotional freedom. However, she does not start resisting these restrictions, instead, she becomes an active participant in maintaining them. It appeared that she believed that whatever happened to her was inevitable and the same must also apply to all other women. She also makes false accusations against Velutha, which directly lead to his death. This highlights how patriarchal conditioning and repressed emotions can lead to violence and hatred.

In the novel, female desire has been treated as a socially forbidden subject. In a patriarchal and conservative society, women remain actually passive and morally obedient. They treat female desire as something very dangerous and shameful. The relationship between Ammu and Velutha goes against these expectations because it establishes her emotional and sexual autonomy. While it is true that their love goes against caste boundaries, it also challenges patriarchal control over the bodies and desires of women. Another example of how society tries to regulate intimacy and sexuality in the lives of women is through the reference to the famous Love Laws in the novel.

CONCLUSION

The God of Small Things is one of the most powerful and bold novels authored by Arundhati Roy. This novel exposes the reality of Indian society, where women are still discriminated against and caste violence is still present. They become so internalised that people stop protesting against the injustice, as it is understood as the ultimate truth of life. Social conditioning influences even the victims of oppression to support the institutions that are responsible for this oppression in the first place. The author has presented a very bold critique of Indian social structures by depicting a very realistic image of gender and caste violence. Every part of an individual's life gets controlled by these structures, that use social conditioning to survive for ages. The tragic death of Velutha and the isolation faced by Ammu reveal the violent consequences that people have to face for violating caste and gender expectations. Additionally, the characters of Baby Kochamma and Mammachi also highlight how people who have been with them in these social systems also start unconsciously reproducing the same through internalised prejudice and moral conditioning. This novel has been celebrated as an act of resistance against silence, conformity, and inherited social inequality.

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