

The God of Small Things: Caste Discrimination

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Abstract

In India, caste plays a very crucial role as it leads to unequal distribution of power and resources and affects and determines social, economic and political relations. In addition to these things, caste prejudice acquires an added importance in a caste ridden country like India which is trying to emerge with a postcolonial national identity. The warning given by Fanon to the African nations in respect of race applies to India in respect of caste. The rigid caste system is an obstacle in forming a national consciousness required to build the postcolonial national identity. It is said that in India people do not cast their vote, they vote their caste. In such a caste biased society it is but obvious that the nation is passed over for the caste. Hence, it is necessary to heal the internal fissures and cracks after gaining political independence. Against this background, partial and discriminatory treatment meted out to Velutha in the novel poses a big challenge to the formation of national consciousness and a new postcolonial national identity.

Keywords:- Caste, Gender discrimination, social, economic and political relations

Introduction:- It is a social construct conceived by a perverse section of Hindus which was superior in social status. Though they are the majority community in India, they cannot be said to form a society or a nation since they are divided into several castes. And in every Hindu, the consciousness that exists is the consciousness of the caste. Caste system in India is thus a formidable social institution which has been dominating Indian society from the ancient times to the present day India, striving for postcolonial modern identity. Untouchability in the name of caste is the hideous social rigidity which is prevalent in the Indian society even today. Roy's novel was published in 1997; it is exactly when India was celebrating the Golden Jubilee of the Indian Independence. But despite these more than sixty years of independence, the question still needs to be addressed whether we could give a sense of freedom, equality and justice to the people of all the sections of Indian society. A sensible mind is still impelled to interrogate whether we could really create a secular nation where everybody is governed by the principle of equality of the law and equal protection of the law. Rabindranath Tagore's dream of independent India in his poem "Where the Mind Is without Fear and Head Is Held High" is still to come true even after sixty five years of our independence.

The Indian caste system is historically one of the main dimensions of social stratification of Indian society. Not that India is the only country having social divisions and stratifications. But this division in society becomes a problem when it leads to an unequal access to valued resources like wealth, income, power and prestige. Ambedkar writes, "Though the existence of class is the de facto condition of every society, nevertheless no society has converted this de facto state of affairs into a de jure condition of an ideal society" (23). Ambedkar further says, "... no community has given the de facto state of class composition a legal effect by accepting it as a de jure connotation of an ideal society" (23). To analyze and posit the subaltern figures like Velutha and Ammu in the novel under the hegemonic caste structure, we must take into consideration the Indian caste system which will help us to analyze why and how Velutha and Ammu meet a pathetic and tragic death when they try to violate the monolithic values of this caste system which is very complicated and dictates the acts and fate of the subaltern, the downtrodden and the weak in the society. In Indian caste system people are hierarchically classified into four ranks called *varnas*¹. The people are classified into four ranks according to their occupations. While addressing the issue of the caste discrimination in India Ambedkar remarks: *Chaturvarnya* would have been a very innocent principle if it meant no more than mere division of society into four classes. Unfortunately more than this is involved in the theory of *Chaturvarnya*. Besides dividing society into four orders, the theory goes further and makes the principle of graded inequality the basis for determining the terms of associated life as between the four *varnas*. Again the system of graded inequality is not merely notional. It is legal and penal. (9)

At different stages many social reformers, leaders, thinkers and philanthropists tried to eradicate untouchability but to no avail. The thinkers and the social reformers got the ashy success in eradicating the problem of caste discrimination and particularly the problem of untouchability since it served the purpose of the upper caste and upper class people in retaining their power which the traditional hierarchical structure bestowed upon them. In the middle ages the religious leaders like Kabir, Nanak, Rohidas and Nabhadas and in the nineteenth century the organizations such as *Brahmo Samaj* in West Bengal, *Prarthana Samaj* and *Satyashodhak Samaj* in Maharashtra and *Arya Samaj* in Punjab made notable contribution in the area of annihilation of the untouchability. In the twentieth century Ambedkar and Gandhi advocated the cause of the untouchables and fought against caste discrimination, though in different manner.

Velutha, the most tragic figure in the story embodies the state of the untouchables in free India. He is the worst sufferer in the novel because he tries to defy age old traditions and rules imposed on the untouchables to exploit and oppress them. He tries to transgress the boundaries set by the historical metanarratives and history pays him back heavily. Velutha is Vellya Paapen's son. He is Ammu's lover and companion and Estha and Rahel's best friend. He is an intelligent craftsman and an excellent carpenter. Velutha who is just three years younger to Ammu is seen in the novel for the first time in 1969 when the Ipe family is going to Kochin. Rahel sees him participating in the communist march. It is also known that few years back, he had disappeared and nobody knew where he was during that period. One of the rumours was that he was in the prison. Before Velutha is seen in the march he had been back to Ayemenem for five months. Since then he has been working for Mammachi as the factory carpenter. Even in the household of the Ipe family, Velutha occupies important position due to his skills in repairing the machinery, making toys and setting things right. The other workers in the factory are jealous, envious and dejected to see an untouchable, one who is supposed to work under them, getting so much respect.

Veluth's relationship with Ammu is the most important aspect of the plot of the novel. Ammu, after the unsuccessful marriage comes back to her parental home unwelcomed. She is ignored and sidelined in the patriarchal Ipe family where she is treated as an unwanted dependant. She remains uncared for. Velutha gives Ammu and her children exactly what her own family denies her. This humiliating neglect and alienation draws Ammu to Velutha. Velutha loves a high caste woman, a 'forbidden act' in the hierarchical caste system. When their relationship is disclosed, all the power structures work in alliance to destroy Velutha, a transgressor. Baby Kochamma wants her to be destroyed because of her niece's sexual liaison with him which has corrupted her family's reputation. But this is not the sole cause. Since the day Baby Kochamma was publically humiliated by some of the marchers in Cochin, she had focused all her fury on Velutha. She could not tolerate that a low caste boy like Velutha had grown to represent the march which had compelled her to wave the Marxist party flag. In the hierarchy of the caste system even the cry for rights by the low caste people is taken as a challenge by the upper caste and upper class people. It is viewed as insolence on the part of the people at the bottom. Since that day the infuriated Baby Kochamma had begun to hate him. She strategically and skillfully convinced Inspector Thomas Matthew that Velutha attempted to rape Ammu.

Velutha is the only male character in the novel that Roy has portrayed with almost all the positive traits of man's personality. He is a well built up man with an attractive physique. He is assertive and highly self confident. He has an extraordinary talent as a carpenter. He has a great craftsmanship in making intricate toys for Baby Kochamma's nativity plays or something to fix in the garden, mending machines in the factory. Roy goes to the extent of saying that Velutha would have been an engineer had he not been an untouchable. Chetan Bhagat defines talent as "...a special ability and aptitude that gives people an edge in a particular field" (144). Through this point of view Velutha is seen to be a very talented craftsman. Mammachi, Baby Kochamma and Chacko are well aware of his extraordinary talent and mastery. They also know that Velutha is indispensable in running the pickle factory. Nevertheless, Mammachi "paid velutha less than she would a touchable carpenter but

more than she would a Parvan” (TGOST: 77). Chetan Bhagat maintains, “...we do not put talent on the highest pedestal in our country. A talented person’s stature is below that of someone with connection, hereditary entitlement, pedigree or even experience” (144). Indian caste system is one of the important reasons for this disrespect of talent as Bhagat says, “It is difficult to say why we have this attitude, but there are many possible reasons .One, talent conflicts with the traditional Indian caste system” (ibid). Velutha’s plight in the novel despite his talent substantiates Bhagat’s views. Roy exposes the hypocrisy of the upper caste people in the Indian caste system. The repressive caste system not only blocks Velutha’s economic progress but denies him self-respect also.

Caste has been a system of exclusion and exploitation which hampers the progress and well being of the deprived section by denying them access to material resources. The *varna* system prescribes that all the *varnas* in the *varna* system should pursue their respective occupations only. The problem with Velutha is that he is more talented than the members of his caste are expected to be which is a kind of sacrilege from the point of view of the upper caste. But at the same time his services are indispensable for the upper caste Ipe family. Hence, the Ipe family avails Velutha’s services but continuously makes him aware of his low caste status by paying him low wages and denying him access to their household. Mammachi does not allow Velutha to enter the house except she needs Velutha’s help in mending something or repairing something. When she would let Velutha enter the house out of her own need and touch the things that the touchables touch, she would think it “a big step for a Parvan” (TGOST: 77).

The Ipe family does not mind using the dining table made by an untouchable Velutha but they would not let him touch that dining table. In his boyhood Velutha would make small gifts for Ammu and put them on his flat palm so that Ammu could take them without touching Velutha. It is remarkable that the Ipe family despite being Christian observes caste discrimination which is the result of the impact of Hinduism, the discourse of a majority community in India. Thus, in India, caste discrimination exists not only in Hinduism but also in Christians, Muslims and Sikhs as a result of impact of Hinduism on them. Velutha is thus the most useful person in the pickle factory as well as in the household of the Ipe family. To the twins Velutha is a beloved friend, a father figure, to Ammu he is a lover and a companion with whose emotional and moral support she wants to fight against the injustice. Velutha tries hard to assert his multiple identities i.e. an intelligent craftsman and carpenter, a beloved friend, a father figure, a lover and a companion, but the hostile world around him denies social sanction to these identities of Velutha. The society attributes Velutha with only one identity – Velutha as an untouchable, Velutha as a low caste man and any attempt to alter this identity is inexcusable. Thus, Roy depicts a struggle between the bourgeois elite on the one hand asserting their own territory while subaltern on the other, trying to transcend his territory by an attempt to alter his traditional identity. This confrontation ultimately leads Velutha to death. This reminds us of Mahatma Gandhi, Frantz Fanon and Ashish Nandy who harshly attack the bourgeois elite who according to them, “...continued the hegemony of the imperial rule” (qtd. in Abraham: 34). During the British rule this bourgeois elite class retained their position and power by “maintaining the interests of the colonizers for petty personal gains” (ibid).

This class tries hard to retain the same power and position in the post-colonial Indian society under the garb of hegemonic structures of caste, class and patriarchy. And any attempt to challenge their position and power which is tantamount to transgression, ultimately ends in crushing the Veluthas ruthlessly. The way Velutha is brutally killed by the hegemonic power structures remarkably echoes Frantz Fanon who says in *Black Skin White Masks*: While I was forgetting, forgiving and wanting only to love, my message was flung back in my face like a slap. The white world, the only honourable one barred me from all participation. A man was expected to behave like a man. I was expected to behave like a black man— or at least like a nigger. I shouted a greeting to the world and the world slashed away my joy. I was told to stay within bounds, to go back where I belonged.... (qtd., in Abraham: 22)

This is the reason why Ashis Nandy remarks, “...colonialism began in 1947, when the outer

supports to the colonial culture ended, and the resistance to it is still continuing” (xvi). Nandy further says: ...colonialism as a shared culture which may not always begin with the establishment of alien rule in a society and end with the departure of the alien rulers from the colony. The example I shall use will be that of India, where a colonial political economy began to operate seventy five years before the full-blown ideology of British imperialism became dominant, and where thirty-five years after the formal ending of the Raj, the ideology of the colonialism is still triumphant in many sectors of life. (2)

It also reveals, as Abraham says, “the discursive effects of colonial, imperial constructions and how they continue to play themselves upon people ideologically, through different societal structures even after formal decolonization has taken place” (5). If the term postcolonialism implies a political/cultural space that is more conducive to democratic and egalitarian practices, the oppression and dehumanization of Velutha substantiate the view that the political sovereignty could not take us into the postcolonial world in a real sense. Robert Young claims:

Colonial and imperial rule was legitimized by anthropological theories which increasingly portrayed the peoples of the colonized world as inferior, childlike or feminine, incapable of looking after themselves (despite they have done so perfectly well for millennia) and requiring the parental rule of the West for their own best interests. (2)

The base of such anthropological theories was the concept of race. When the political sovereignty was gained, the idea of supremacy of the whites over the non-whites and the West over the non-West continued to exist in the Indian society with a slight change in the power structure and the power relations. In the European model of the colonization everything that is the West or the white was the *self* and at the *center* while the non-West and the non-white was the *other* and at the *margin* or *periphery*. In the post-colonial India, the metanarratives of the division of the West and the non-West and the white and the non-white on the basis of the race has been substituted by the metanarrative of the supremacy of the upper caste over the lower caste, the rich over the poor and the strong over the weak. Hence independence in many ways says Young:

...represented only a beginning, relatively minor move from direct to indirect rule, a shift from colonial rule of domination to a position not so much of independence as of being independence. It is striking that despite decolonization the major world power did not change substantially during the course of the 20th century. For the most part the same (ex)imperial countries continued to dominate those countries that they formerly ruled as colonies. (3)

As it has been discussed earlier, the metanarratives of the superiority and inferiority continued in Indian society in the name of hegemonic caste system with its own metanarrative of the superiority of the upper castes over the low castes. In the European model of colonialism the division between the white and the non-white had the base of race while in the post-colonial Indian society the division between the upper caste and the low caste has the caste as its base. Thus, the people at the *centre* and the *margin* might have been changed but the center-margin structure remained dominant. ‘Race’ as the basis of division has been substituted by ‘caste’. The base is changed but the division remained dominant. That is why Robert Young justifiably says that for many countries the political sovereignty represented only a minor move from dependence to independence since the hegemonic structures of oppression and subjugation continued to exist.

Conclusion:- The deep rooted idea of impurity has its pernicious influence on the destiny as well as the treatment meted out to Velutha in the novel. As per the metanarrative of the *Chaturvarnya* the Brahmins being created from the head of the *Purush* or the *Brahma* are considered as the most intelligent and the most powerful *varna*. Because of their wisdom and education they had the right and access to all the religious rituals. In order to do these rituals they have to maintain their purity and sacredness. To maintain the purity and sacredness of the Brahmins the mean and filthy jobs were assigned to the untouchables who were below the *varna* system.

These individuals perform occupations that were considered unclean and polluting, such as scavenging and skinning dead animals and were considered outcasts. They were not

considered to be included in the ranked castes. The idea or the belief of purity and pollution is one of the most striking features of the Indian caste system. Cleanliness is considered to be a very important value in Hinduism, and the caste system enforces this idea. Untouchability was thus a means of exclusion, a social device which was given a religious sanction. Therefore, it was believed that the higher castes were more pure and less polluted, while the lower castes were regarded as less pure and more polluted.

In the novel people address Velutha with the harsh and abject words. Baby Kochamma despises him because of his typical 'Parvan smell', the police consider him as an epidemic. In other words, he is treated as a despised object, an agent of dirt and defilement. In this way the people who are "small" by various means (Caste, class, gender and power) are seen every day and everywhere but they "...remain invisible as a social category of humanity. Of course we know what they do for a living — our knowledge is based on the caste system" (Krishna Kumar: 11).

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