RESEARCH ARTICLE

CULTURAL CONTEXT IN THE NOVELS OF ARUNDHATI ROY

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ABSTRACT

Arundhati Roy's novel captures many social values of Indian society. A literary work is amenable to varying interpretations and evaluations people view it from different angles and their assessments are related to their approach. Their opinions in usual circumstances complement rather than contradict each other. The novel clearly confronts Indian society and is set after the colonial era. This novel is very deftly describing the discrimination of class, culture, gender and caste. The present book seeks to evaluate the novel sociologically. It places *The God of Small Things* with numerous sociality committed novels that Indian English has produced. The world view of the author is brought to the fore and her concern for Small Things like the neglected section of the society and environment is revealed. It shows that Arundhati Roy listens to the voice less and reacts too.

Keywords Amenable, Assessments, Confronts, Captures, Social values.

INTRODUCTION

The novel focus upon the social relationship and a diverse relationship which has somehow moulded it in to class relationship. It also highlight the diverse nature of India religiously, ethnically, culturally, socially and of course economically. We see the diversion through religion and cultural point of view we will find that culture has effected the life of many Indians.

Arundhati Roy's novel is unusual compared with other South-Asian fictions in English because it deals with one of India's smallest religious minorities, the Syrian Christians. The basis of this story is a fourth-century church text. *The Acts of St. Thomas,* which tells us that St. Thomas was purchased as a slave by the Indian king Gundaphorus, who commissioned him to build a palace. He promptly gave the King's money to the poor, explaining to Gundaphorus that he had constructed a residence for him in Heaven, rather than one on Earth.

If we try to summarize some of the main points of this long and involved history, we might locate a dual process of cultural accommodation and exclusion as the central feature of the Syrian-Christian community. One historian describes this as the 'two worlds' of church and wider Indian society, in which the Syrian Christians have lived 'with no consciousness of tension between them or disharmony within themselves'. In other words, members of the community have always been 'Christians of Mesopotamia in faith

and worship and ethic and Indians in all else'.' In many ways, this ability to 'blend in' culturally am yet maintain control over their own faith and religious traditions has been essential to the survival of the Syrian Christians in South India. Local Hindu expectations that early Syrian Christians would conform to the existing caste system would have reinforced their strategy of selective, partial assimilation, and it the unusual social balance of caste groups that developed in Kerala, favouri non-Hindu communities such as the Syrian Christians, that we will turn to now;

The caste system or *caturvarna* literally, four colours is an ancient four-part division of Hindu society that arranges the human world in the context of a socio-cosmic order *dharma* that existed from the time of creation. The concept of caste appears in some of the earliest creation myths of Hinduism. In the *seven Veda,* a sacred hymn composed between 1200 and 1000 B.C. and the earliest of the Vedic religion, which forms a major foundation of modern Hinduism, caste is associated with the creation myth of *Purusa,* the primeval cosmic man from whom the universe is formed. The creation of humankind and its differentiation into four different castes relate to the sacrificial dismemberment of the cosmic being:

When the gods divided the Man, into how many parts did they disperse him? What became of his mouth, what of his arms, what were his two thighs and his two feet called? His mouth was the *brahmin* [the priest class], his arms were made into the nobles *ksatriyas,* his two thighs were the populace *vaisyas,* and from his feet the servants *sudras* were born. The moon was born from his mind; rhe sun was born from his eye.

As we can see from this creation myth of caste, the fourfold division of *varna* enrailed different duties and obligations for each of its groups: *brahmins,* as the revered priest caste, officiated at temples and religious ceremonies and were authorized to learn and recite holy scriptures. The *ksatriya* caste group traditionally associated itself with warfare and military service and the *vaisya* gtoup involved itself in trade, business and agriculture. The low-caste *sudra* group was designated as a 'service' caste and performed agricultural labour and menial tasks. These broad caste groupings do not represent the whole of Hindu society, however, and 'outcaste' or 'untouchable' communities exist at the bottom of the *sudra* group, on the margins of the caste system. Always economically and socially dependent on higher castes, these untouchable communities trad-itionally perform dirty, spiritually polluting activities such as leatherwork, street-sweeping, rubbish collection and disposing of the dead. As a *paravatt,* Velutha in TG5T belongs to this stigmatized 'untouchable' group, and it is this fact that makes his affair with Arnmu - and their mutual erotic 'touching' - such a transgressive act.

The outline of caste divisions in the *Rig Veda* should not lead us to assume, automatically, that excluded or stigmatized outcaste groups existed in the society of the early Vedic period. Some historians of caste have argued that, in fact, neither the *Rig Veda* nor later Vedic texts indicate that any group was tabooed or socially restricted and chart untouchability as a gradual social development that started in the first Christian millennium and reached its peak in the thirteenth century. Others have claimed that, although caste is clearly an ancient social division within Hinduism, its observance has fluctuated over time and argue that the concept of rigorous, exclusive caste hierarchies can be dated from relatively recent reassertions of Brahminical power in central India in the eighteenth century. In these models, caste observance could vary across different regions and gain or decrease in political importance in relation to numerous other factors.

What most historians and theorists of caste agree on, however, is the importance of caste identification with different occupations in ancient India, and the consequent multiplication of numerous sub-castes to cater to the growing complexity of Hindu society. As K. M. Sen states,

The division of the society into four castes has, in all probability, always been theoretical, for, from the earliest times, we find references to a much more complicated caste structure for the occupational divisions with which castes were associated give us a better view of the role of castes in the working of society.

In order to understand the significance and social stigma of untouchability fully, we must remember that the caste system is linked to the Hindu cycle of reincarnation and the regulatory workings of *karma* accrued ir past lives. The three upper or 'twice-born' castes, so named because the process of caste initiation involves a second, ritualized 'birth' into the caste community, are eligible for religious rites and represent different levels of spiritual purity in the cycle of karmic rebirth rituals of caste initiation are the precondition of

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spiritual purity. The lowest *sudra* caste is destined to serve the other castes and is designated as such because its members have to atone for sins committed in past lives. The gradual progress towards *moksha* a transcendent escape from the cycle of reincarnation is also, then, a process of increasing spiritual purification, a progression that is threatened by the unclean nature of the outside world and the innate impurities of the body itself. Higher castes can alleviate the temporary pollution of bodily products such as blood, sweat, semen, urine and faeces, with baths and ritual purifications. Untouchables, on the other hand, are born polluted and cannot purify themselves except through death and rebirth.

The word 'caste' derives from the Portuguese *casta,* meaning pure or unadulterated sharing a Latin root with the word 'chaste', and its European etymology should immediately make us suspicious of definitions of 'caste' that rely exclusively on ideas of purity and defilement. This is not to deny that concepts of pollution are used to justify untouchability, and one of the defining studies of caste, Louis Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus* 1967, sees the opposition between purity and pollution as a central feature of caste hierarchies. However, more recently sociologists have criticized Dumont's model, arguing that it repeats forms of colonial thought that 'essentialized' and fixed Indian society around a specific, historically static concept, thus presenting India as the reverse mirror image of a 'rational', progressive and enlightened Europe. It is useful to quote a 'post-Dumontian' definition of caste at this point:

We can think ... of caste in terms of a system of action ... To look at caste as something which people 'do' rather than something which they 'are' appears to go against the grain of modern interest in identity, but the two perspectives are complementary if we regard identity as something which emerges in certain situations.

Work cited

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[4].   Roy, *Public Power in the Age of Empire,* pp. 57-9.

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