

Multiculturalism: A Sociological Critique of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract

As in a forest each and every flora and fauna have their unique importance and unitedly, they represent the forest as a whole, similarly in a multicultural society every community holds its unique culture or creed and cannot be suppressed by other. Multiculturalism is meant by the coexistence of distinctly different racial, ethnic, and cultural groups which cannot accept fusion into a common culture. It is a very vast concept which includes human differences like ethnicity, race, religion, culture, occupation, caste, national origin, age, gender and socio-economic status. In Indian context multiculturalism is found in the very concept of 'unity in diversity'. However, in postmodern era, religious, cultural and socio-political conditions of various groups in India doesn't appear up to the mark. In post-independence Indian literature, one can go through enough instances which create doubts about integrity of Indian culture. Arundhati Roy's masterpiece *The God of Small Things* is one of such books which talks about the importance of multiculturalism. Present paper discusses the loop holes in Indian multiculturalism as represented in the novel and further tries to find the way-out to make a better society.

Keywords: multiculturalism, post-colonialism, patriarchy, inter-caste relation, hegemony.

Multiculturalism is meant by the coexistence of distinctly different racial, ethnic, and cultural groups which cannot accept fusion into a common culture. The term was initially used in the

U.S.A. in context of the black and other minor communities who demanded for equal representation in the American society. Over a period of time, this demand took shape of a movement which insisted that American society had always been multiracial and diverse in culture. It is a very vast concept which includes human differences like ethnicity, race, religion, culture, occupation, caste, national origin, age, gender and socio-economic status. As a theoretical concept, multiculturalism is quite useful for all those people who represents various cultural background. Simultaneously it is a relevant tool which may be used as standard for accessing one's beliefs, perceptions and values regarding their rights, cultural diversity and privileges.

Like other concepts, multiculturalism also has both positive and negative traits of its own. It is not a garden of unicolour flowers or an orchard of same kind of fruits, rather it is a forest which is known for its wilderness. As in a forest each and every flora and fauna have their own uniqueness and importance and unitedly, they represent the forest as a whole, similarly in multiculturalism every community holds its unique culture and cannot be suppressed. According to Turner Terence, "Multiculturalism is one manifestation of postmodernist reaction to the delegitimization of the state and the erosion of the hegemony of the dominant culture in advanced capitalist countries" (419). Postmodernism seeks to celebrate the rights of all races and ethnic groups. Therefore it emphasises on the rights of African-Americans, women, Dalits etc. It further makes use of religion, culture, beliefs and knowledge of different cultural groups across the globe for defining the human rights. As stated by Ziauddin Sarkar, "Postmodernism seeks to give voice to all cultures, decentres the 'centre' while making the 'periphery' the centre of all cultural action and gives 'voice' to the 'voiceless', it is projected as a new and great force of liberation." (236)

Indian multiculturalism is found in the very concept of 'unity in diversity'. In India, there are various groups which belongs to different religions, castes, sects and tribes and they respect each other's faith. As Rasheeduddin Khan says: "India has been one of the greatest confluences of cultural strands, a laboratory of racial intermixing, of cross-fertilization of religious ideas and secular

thought, of coexistence of language and dialects, a veritable microcosm of the globe” (35). It implies that people of different religions and beliefs are intermixed with each other without giving up their own customs and habits. It is widely acknowledged that Indian culture is deeply rooted in age old ethos. In this respect R. Sudarshan affirms:

Unity in diversity, an oft-repeated aspiration in India, seeks to accommodate differences within a framework of shared basic values and common interests. Such a framework requires the conviction that unity is best fosters by tolerating diversity, that dissenting views should freely coexist with the dominant values of society, and interaction among diverse peoples, ethnic and religious groups, cultures and sub-cultures is a positive force for creativity, innovation and change. (101)

However, in postmodern phase, religious, cultural and socio-political conditions of various groups in India appears strange. There are so many provisions in Indian constitution which protects rights of minors and marginalised people despite of that suffering of such people is the ground reality. In post-independence Indian literature, one can go through enough instances which create doubts about integrity of India. Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* is one of such books which talks about the importance of multiculturalism.

The God of Small Things is set in Ayemenem, a district in Kerala. The fragmented narrative of the novel oscillates between 1969, when fraternal twins Rahel and Esthappen are in their early childhood, and 1993, when they are reunited strangely. The plot of the novel is constructed by a forbidden love affair between Ammu, a divorced Syrian-Christian lady, and Velutha, a carpenter from so called low caste or more specifically an ‘Untouchable’. Most of the narrative of *The God of Small Things* is presented through the twins’ perspective, Rahel and Estha who may be considered as the protagonists of the novel because the decisive incidents- the inter-caste love affair, the conspiracy of Velutha’s murder and the death of Sophie Mol due to drowning- are revealed through their

communication over the time as the novel progresses. The time and the background of the novel is neatly chosen by Arundhati Roy as it shapes the plot and the meaning of the text. The keen observation of Indian caste system and its in-depth representation reveals the skills of Arundhati Roy as a novelist. During the time span of the novel caste has been a menace to Indian society and the novel examines it quite carefully.

The God of Small Things works as a double-edged sword; on one hand it condemns the evil of caste system and gender discrimination in post-independent India and on the other hand it promotes multiculturalism through the inter-caste love affair of Ammu and Velutha. First sign of multicultural society in the novel is witnessed in establishment of school for untouchables by late Reverend E. John Ipe which can be considered a positive step towards social equality and an equal opportunity for all castes. But Reverend Ipe had a patriarchal and male dominating thinking who wants to control the females of the family. He had always been conscious about his family reputation and caste status. His wife, Aleyooty Ammachi, is shown as victim of his patriarchal thinking. Her dissatisfaction and submissive nature are shown in one of the portraits of Ayemenem house:

Aleyooty Ammachi looked more hesitant. As though she would have liked to turn around but couldn't. Perhaps it wasn't easy for her to abandon the river. With her eyes she looked in the direction that her husband looked. With her heart she looked away.
(30)

Like his father, Pappachi, the present head of the family, has a rational and scientific life but only outside Kerala, at home he is equally patriarchal or male chauvinist. He treats ladies of the family as slaves and restricted their lives to the boundaries of Ayemenem house. He harasses his wife, Mammachi, mentally and physically as evident in the novel: "Every night he beats her with a brass flower vase. The beatings weren't new. What was new was only the frequency with which they took place." (47-48)

In a multicultural society, Mammachi must have rebelled against the patriarchy but it didn't happen so because she had a

conventional way of thinking and her silence supported brutality against her. Whereas her daughter, Ammu, didn't accept male chauvinism and rebels against the patriarchy. Mammachi and Ammu are juxtaposed in two different time frames. Mammachi is the representative of old generation who accepts her fate as women in male dominant society whereas Ammu represents the post-modern generation who resists all kind of oppressions whether it is based on caste or gender. A multicultural society is the amalgamation of the peaceful coexistence of all the differences in terms of interests, status, opinions, talent and beliefs, because diversity and heterogeneity are essential features of humanity. Ammu seems to promote multiculturalism by challenging the age-old patriarchy and caste system of Indian society. She doesn't step in the shoes of her mother rather she challenges the very taboos and restrictions which are imposed on her as a woman in male dominant society, for instance, "She wore backless blouses with her saris and carried a silver lame purse on a chain. She smoked cigarettes in a silver cigarette holder and learned to blow perfect smoke rings." (40)

As a theoretical concept, multiculturalism respects internal plurality of different cultural ethnicities and simultaneously celebrates the diversities of the same. But in the novel, the dominant culture of Syrian Christians doesn't seem to recognize the status of minorities and even marginalised women. The two fundamental institutions- marriage and religion- which help in developing a multicultural society are shown in the leading role. Ammu's inter-caste love affair is significant step in the direction of bridging the gap between two communities. But the dominant caste system doesn't accept to recognize this fusion. After her marriage, she tries hard to fight against the patriarchal and inhuman conventional values, but soon she faces the harsh realities of sacred institution of marriage. Her alcoholic husband brutally harasses her and even tried to hand her over to his boss, Mr. Hollick, to fulfil his sexual desires, which is considered as ultimate abuse in Indian society. Physical exploitation of Ammu by her Bengali husband shows the inherited male superiority complex which needs to be deconstructed. As a result, Arundhati Roy portrays Ammu as a rebellious lady who is determined to shatter all kinds of male superiority assumptions:

Ammu took down the heaviest book she could find in the book-shelf. The Reader's Digest World Atlas and hit him with it as hard as she could. On his head. His legs. His back and shoulders. When he regained consciousness, he was puzzled by his bruises. (42)

As it is mentioned earlier, Ayemenem, one of the districts in Kerala, is in the background of *The God of Small Things*. Kerala has been famous for its cultural diversity and celebrates its plurality, but many critics and writers have revealed various loopholes in its society through their writings time and again. However, casteism is not clearly visible on the surface, but it emerges out again and again in multiple incidents. Whenever political strategies are made in Kerala, casteism plays a decisive role and it becomes a hurdle in implementing multicultural policies in the state. Dominant castes influence law and order with the help of state machinery and tries to harass the so-called lower class which is well demonstrated by Velutha's murder in the custody. Arundhati Roy has shown a realistic path towards a multicultural society from the age-old traditional thinking. She has not presented some fanciful plot in some kind of romantic sense rather she introduced Ammu and Velutha as rebellious figures whose sacrifice paved the way towards a holistic society where people of different caste and creeds can live together without giving up their original identity.

In one way or other, multiculturalism can be considered one of the branches of post-colonial theory. As in post colonialism, which seeks to empower marginalized section of society, multiculturalism also believes in the peaceful coexistence of multiple communities having equal rights and identity. According to Leela Gandhi: "Post colonialism has found itself in the company of disciplines such as women's studies, cultural studies and gay/lesbian studies" (42). According to Andrew Milner, multiculturalism and postcolonialism are related to each other because both disciplines respect the differences in multiple caste and creeds. During the colonial period, western writers favoured Europeans and their superiority but gradually post-colonial writers started pointing out it and as a result post-colonial theory emerged as a significant discipline. Arundhati Roy also criticises this European superiority multiple times in the novel. The drowning of Sophie Mole is a

metaphorical sign of the dominance of eastern society over western. In other words, it is not the Sophie Mole who drowned, rather it is the end of hegemony of western empire. Further in the novel, when Rahel and Estha are compelled by their aunt to speak in English only, it shows that they are denied to accept their own culture which becomes a hurdle in developing a multicultural society. Roy narrates this situation as following:

That whole week Baby Kochamma eavesdropped relentlessly on the twins' private conversations, and whenever she caught them speaking in Malayam, she levied a small fine which was deducted at source. From their pocket money. She made them write lines – 'impositions' she called them - I will always speak in English, I will always speak in English. A hundred times each. When they were done, she scored them with her pen to make sure that old lines were not recycled for new punishments. (36)

Further, Chacko Kochamma, the uncle of the twins, describes the colonized people as "prisoners of war", as a result of which their "dreams have been doctored" and they "belong nowhere". According to him, it is a kind of war that has occupied their minds that they "have won and lost. The very worst sort of war. A war that captures dreams and re-dreams them. A war that has made them adore their captures and despise themselves" (53). Frantz Fanon in his *A Dying Colonialism* (1965), argues that "the challenging of the very principle of foreign domination brings about essential mutations in the consciousness of the colonized, in the manner in which he perceives the colonizer, in his human states in the world" (Gandhi, 130). Seeing themselves inferior, the colonized people recognized that the only way to make their situation better is to become similar to the colonizer, and thus, they try to imitate the colonizers ideas, values and practices. They appreciate and value the colonizers way of living and try to imitate their culture in view of not having of their own. Roy in narrating Chacko's thoughts reports:

Chacko told the twins though he hated to admit it, they were all anglophile. They were a family of Anglophiles. Pointed in the wrong direction, trapped

outside their own history, and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swept away. He explained to them that history was like an old house at night. With all the lamps lit. And ancestors whispering inside. ‘To understand history, ‘Chacko said, we have to go inside and listen to what they’re saying. And look at the books and the pictures on the wall. And smells the smells.’ (52)

Finally, it can be accepted that Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* paved the way in the direction of a multicultural society in real sense. As a theoretical concept, multiculturalism resists the hegemony of one culture over other and simultaneously promotes plurality. In a healthy society, different sections are expected to tolerate, respect and co-operate with each other which is clearly demonstrated by Arundhati Roy. In case of Velutha and Ammu’s love affair, Roy points out that the dominant community has violated the code and conducts of a multicultural society. But their rebellious spirits oppose this violence and try to ensure that their sacrifice won’t go in vain.

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