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Velutha: The Abject¹

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Abstract

Arundhati Roy situates the story of *The God of Small Things* in Ayemenem — a village in Kerala, in the south-west of India. It is a case study of Velutha, the untouchable whose very name smacks of loathing and nausea one feels at the mention of it let alone sight of him. By focusing on the cross-cultural caste system, Arundhati Roy takes up an issue of social, cultural and universal significance. It apparently deals with the identity of Velutha, a paravan, which is at stake. He is the one who is expected not to leave any footprints on the earth and any image in the mirror. His identity is an issue and at issue because social, cultural and “Love Laws” (33)² do not favour him or acknowledge his right to be. A closer analysis of the novel directs the reader’s mind to a series of underlying ‘lacks’ or voids at the core of formation of his subjectivity. The society constitutes a body from which Velutha is excluded as an undesirable or unhygienic element; he is objectified to which he retaliates. He seeks unconscious identification with the system from which he is expelled. .If Velutha is neither a subject nor an object then what is he? Who is he? This study provides a valid ground that Velutha does not qualify for both. Velutha’s dilemma can be better understood if he is placed on the borderline of subject-object distinction³. This study takes him as a specimen for analysis and examines his borderline position from the viewpoint of Julia Kristeva’s concept of abjection. A psychoanalytical framework facilitates the reader to determine his position.

Keywords: Untouchable; Velutha; Ammu; Abject; Lack; God; Identity; Subjectivity; Subject; Object

Introduction

The God of Small Things encapsulates the story of insignificant people whose destinies are also determined by an insignificant God as is evident from the title. The story is unfolded in bits and pieces through the memory of an innocent child, Rahel, to whose eyes the world appears to be a magnified version of her small world. In order to tell it from a child's perspective, Arundhati Roy zooms in the lens of her artistic sensibility to focus on petty and inconsequential events but certainly crucial in the lives of the characters as they determine their future course of action. The significance of choosing Rahel to tell the story through flashbacks and flashforwards is how 'Big Man, the Laltain' hushes 'Small Man, the Mombatti' (88). The narrative runs like a mathematical formula in which Arundhati Roy defines things by referring to them as number one and number two. The thing number one is that the Big God does not have concern with petty issues, though they are detrimental to the life of petty people and the thing number two is that the Small God, convinced of his insignificance, is hushed by the Big God who 'howls like a hot wind' (19). The Small God is Velutha's God who is 'resilient and 'indifferent' (19). There is a perpetual reinforcement of a sense of contrast between 'Big Man and Small Man' (88) ; 'Big dreams' and 'Small dreams' (89) ; 'Big Things' and 'Small Things' (142) to justify the theme of the book.

The story revolves around Ammu, a widow; her twin children, Rahel and Estha, Velutha and Sophie Mol who is Rahel's and Estha's English cousin. Being twins, they assume that they are inseparable and have one identity of being 'we'. Ammu and a twin pair transgress the boundaries of culture by associating themselves with Velutha — the untouchable. Velutha is no insignificant being in the scheme of the novel, though he occupies a very insignificant place in the social set up. He lives in a 'laterite hut downriver' (78) that sets him apart from the people of superior social ranks. Everything about Velutha or his hut is a reinforcement of his being insignificant in social strata. His blackness is emphasized by his name 'Velutha' which ironically means 'White' in Malayalam (73). He is the son of Vellya Paapen, the untouchable, who detects the untamed instinct in his son long before it surfaces in his actions. It is the 'unwarranted assurance' and 'lack of hesitation' (76) in his manners which alarms him. It is the same instinct which 'stirs' something in Ammu 'when she listens to radio songs' (44).

From borderline existence to non-existence

Velutha exists on the borderline of non-existence. He works for Anglophile family whose social status makes them look down upon Velutha as a paravan. Their social superiority and prestige are reinforced by the factory they own and the blue Plymouth with 'Angry coloured' (197) factory's name, "Paradise Pickles and

Preserves” (1), inscribed on it in red colour. The family’s decaying sense of superiority is asserted by Baby Kochama who keeps reminding other family members of their being the privileged ones while a blue Plymouth is parked outside the house as a symbol of superiority. This Anglophile family is eager to retain the superiority which is actually slipping away gradually. They adhere to those old laws and customs which, no longer, seem to work and are inadequate to keep the crumbling system intact. Roy focuses on ‘the increasing chasm between rich and poor that splits the world’ and precipitates ‘the establishment of westernised, allegedly ‘cosmopolitan’ Third World elites inside the ex-colonies themselves (Schoene 127). The novel ‘suggests prejudice against untouchables’ as ‘Velutha’s story is like that of any number of people discriminated against in the U.S. culture. He represents the outsider in general’ (169).

A thorough analysis of his character is undertaken to address the question of his identity; his position and the role he plays in the novel. Not only does his name indicate his loathsomeness but his repulsion is further emphasized by frequent references to ‘A lucky leaf, that made the monsoons come on time. A brown leaf on a black back. An autumn leaf at night’ (73). It is a stigma he is born with, and it cannot be erased by any means until he himself is erased by the system. It is the scarlet letter which he has to bear until his last breath. It is something unalterable so Roy refers to it not once but repeatedly on page 73, 174, 191, 294 and 311. There is an element of inevitability and fatality associated with the autumn leaf which is Velutha’s birth mark. As he is loathsome, he lives at a place away from those who are prestigious from worldly view point.

Velutha’s existence is a source of discomfort and resentment because he does not have any identity other than being ‘the untouchable’. How can the untouchable think of touching the touchable? Ammu, Rahel and Estha are the ones who bring about destruction by letting themselves transgress the boundaries. They are ‘the worst transgressors’ (31) who do not care a fig for laws ‘that make grandmothers grandmothers, uncles uncles, mothers mothers, cousins cousins, jam jam and jelly jelly’ (31). Velutha carries the seeds of revolt in his constitution which dissociate him from his own community but are not potent enough to make him a member of the Touchables with whom he mixes up. He violates ‘the Love Laws’ which determine ‘who should be loved and how. And how much’! (31).

Velutha’s very first appearance rings a bell of menace and threat to the established system. He is a non-existent entity who does not have any subjective identity but he lacks the proper requisite of being an object as he tries to violate the established social norms by being defensive. He disrupts the harmony of the entire social set up. The moment he falls in love with Ammu, chaos sets in though, initially, he stops

himself from getting close to her. He brings fruit for her and hands them over without touching the palm of her hand. He tries to hate her by reminding himself of her superior class. The role of red colour cannot be overlooked: from the outset Velutha is being associated with red colour. While commenting on the colour play in *The God of Small Things*, Sadaf associates red colour with the psychological inclination of characters; for example, “Ammu, Rahel & Estha, Velutha, and Comrade Pillai represent rebellion and change, with “red flags” (64; 65; 71; 79; 80; 81; 205) as their predominant insignia” (73+). Velutha’s revolt against the system can be detected in the colour of his nail paint which is red. There are frequent allusions to red colour and the role it plays in Velutha’s life. He paints his nails with red cutex that Ammu discards, which signifies the element of passion, warmth, revolt and fatality inherent in his blood — the blood which eventually spills from his mouth. This element surfaces when any external stimulus triggers it. “The red in Tess is a precursory symbol of Tess’s final sacrifice at the altar of the gods. So is Velutha’s blood symbolic of his sacrifice at the blue altar of the Ayemenem Police Station.” (Sadaf, 73+). Initially, Rahel is shown crushing red ants crawling on the yellow stones and, later, the family and social laws crush Velutha like an insignificant ant. It is a manifestation of the deep rooted hatred which they have for the Untouchables. This red colour gives us a clue that there is something menacingly unpleasant about him. The first indication of his revolt is his presence among the Marxists waving red flags. Chacko, Baby Kochama, Ammu and twins go to airport to receive Chacko’s Ex-wife, Margaret and his daughter, Sophie Mol, Rahel’s and Estha’s cousin. Their blue Plymouth gets stuck in the procession of rebels carrying red flags. Among them, Rahel recognizes Velutha who waves a red flag and stands close enough to blue Plymouth to be recognized. When she points out that she has seen a man like Velutha, Estha tries to guard him saying that he had seen Velutha busy with something at home when they left. Rahel’s ‘yellow rimmed red plastic sunglasses’ (37) turns the world red once she puts them on. Velutha cooks ‘red fish curry’ for Rahel and Estha; hence this red colour ties them to their ‘beloved Velutha’ (71). Red is the colour that ties these four characters in a string. Velutha’s revolt against social, cultural and love laws becomes more pronounced as he starts his journey from being an object — devoid of any identity — to subject with fundamental right to exist, live and love. Unfortunately, he neither becomes subject nor object.

Roy refers frequently to the series of ‘holes in the universe’ (82) to emphasize the ‘Lack’⁴ that Velutha and Ammu contain in their beings — the deficiency that triggers a movement towards fulfilment irrespective of the outcomes. As lack forms the basis on which identity or subjectivity is constituted so the existence of a series of holes in *The God of Small Things* becomes significant when ‘holes’ in Ammu’s and Velutha’s life are analysed. Ammu’s and Velutha’s existence in similar circumstances and controlled environment make them soulemates — the environment which does not

give them breathing space. Both bear the stigma that isolates them and cuts them off from a common lot. Ammu has a cross stitch mark on her cheek which signifies pressure and confinement. This sense of confinement extends to ‘cross stitch darkness’ (219) and ‘cross stitch roses’ (219) of Ammu’s afternoon dream. The reflection of ‘blue cross stitch’ (217) pattern on Ammu’s cheek through the window and ‘a brown autumn leaf’ is an indication of their being the victims of suppression. Velutha is the one who actually represents the ‘lack’ in his being. This lack seems to be at work in Velutha’s and Ammu’s affair. They exist on the auxiliary or peripheral position and can fill up the voids that each of them have. They cross their set boundaries to fill in the lack each of them has. They step out in the wilderness where they are lost and ultimately doomed. Ammu is labelled as a widow and Velutha as a paravan — the untouchable. Ammu does not have a husband and Velutha does not have an identity. Both strive to get what they don’t have. To exist or not to exist is comparatively easy rather than existing on the borderline of non-existence.

Among all family members, it is only Ammu who has some unknown affinity with Velutha and feels a strange pull towards him when he shows up whereas in others, he evokes a terrible repulsion. At the outset we are alarmed when the author describes her as ‘An unmixable mix’ who has ‘the infinite tenderness of motherhood and the reckless rage of a suicide bomber’. This ‘something in her’ gives her an edge over others and ‘eventually led her to love by night the man her children loved by day’ (44). Ammu has the same element which Velutha has; there is ‘something restless and untamed about her’ (44) — both of them are rebels. Rahel and Estha are the first ones who sense things before they actually happen or assume any visible shape. Surprisingly, twins and Ammu do not seem to realize what they are up to! Velutha himself does not realize as to what might happen to him as a consequence of this transgression. At one point when Ammu scolds them, Rahel suggests that Ammu should marry ‘Orangedrink Lemondrink Man’ (101), who abuses Estha, oblivious to the effect of words on Ammu — ignorant of the potential danger inherent in these words. Later, Velutha will replace ‘Orangedrink Lemondrink Man’ whom she should marry. This step will make people love Ammu less because she hurts them. Expecting such an unexpected daring step of touching the touchable from Velutha comes as a shock rather than surprise.

Velutha is neither a subject in his own right nor a passive object. He is non definable object who cannot be identified with certainty in a cultural sense. His situation is worse than Ammu because in his effort to transgress social boundary, he quits his zone and society refuses to integrate him in the new zone. By establishing an illicit relationship with Ammu, Velutha steps out of his assigned slot in a chain of being. He assumes a defensible position against the social assault and crosses a dividing line between subject and object. Despite his exclusion from social body, he permeates the

walls of a clearly defined social set up by loving Ammu. He disrupts not only environmental laws but natural laws too. Thus it is he who has to pay the price and restore the harmony. Being an abject, he must be expelled from the system. He must be eliminated and driven out of the domain which is not his. Velutha is a contagion that Ammu catches — a contagion which everybody other than Ammu avoids. He is an undesirable element which cannot be harmonized or synthesized with perfect ease for he contaminates the clean body; hence proving himself to be a part of the domain from where he has been expelled.

There exists a fatal attraction which forces Ammu, Rahel and Estha to assimilate him again in their being. Anything that has been expelled from a body must have been formerly a part of it before expulsion. Velutha is not born free but with a birth mark or stigma of being a paravan. He is not free to choose a woman from a superior caste. In his passive revolt, he proves himself to be distinct from those with whom he is classified. He lacks the characteristic of being an active chooser. Similarly, he lacks the timidity of being the chosen victim; hence he exists somewhere between the two — on the fringes of subject and object. Velutha is the abject: “The abject is everything that the human body excretes in order to live, all that might endanger our lives should we touch or ingest it; it is the things we must not do in order to be proper subjects in our societies.” (Fox 35+). The feeling he arouses among people is of disgust and repulsion. His presence stirs an air of discomfort: Baby Kochama particularly abhors him and alludes to it by mentioning that the untouchables have typical smell that nobody can stand while Mammachi pretends to be humane and neutral in her attitude towards him. Roy evokes the air of repugnance and indescribable unpleasantness by frequent references to ‘sicksweet’ smell ‘like old roses on a breeze’ (6). Mammachi employs him at home for general maintenance and allows him to work on the factory premises by paying him the amount less than what the Touchables get for the same piece of work or labour to calm them down. He serves them in multiple capacities due to his ‘natural skills’ (76). Ammu feels attracted to him when she looks at his ribs, raised like ridges — ‘burnished chocolate ridges’ — from under the skin. An autumn leaf of brown muddy shade does not annoy her which is hardly distinguishable from his black skin. For her it is something desirable; it mesmerizes her whereas for others it is the reminder of his being an outcaste or downcast — a reassertion of social laws sanctioned by divine laws. Before Velutha came in Ammu’s life, she always considered herself an unfortunate being — one who had lost the only chance of being happy by marrying ‘the wrong man’ (38).

Velutha is on the borderline of subjectivity because he is a component of both worlds — worlds that exist on either side of Meenachil river. His I-ness violates borders, and his unconscious encroaches upon the consciousness which is why he has an affinity

with Ammu. He is the excluded other, yet he is a part of both worlds. The first requisite to establish identity is to sever connection with the body that produces it. An abject poses a threat to the system that has produced it. Velutha has the germ to reject the very system of which he is the product. Kelly Oliver, a philosopher who has written extensively on Kristeva, writes: “The not-yet-subject with its not-yet, or no-longer, object maintains ‘itself’ as the abject (McAfee, 48). Ammu and Velutha are from two different worlds and there exists a gulf between them which cannot be bridged. The idea is reinforced geographically as river that flows in Ayemenem separates the two worlds — Ammu’s and Velutha’s worlds. The two extremes of the river can run parallel but can never meet. Either Ammu has to wade through it to become a part of his insignificant world or Velutha has to transgress boundaries to invade her being. The earth or heaven does not contain a place for them to be taken as members of the same community. The community would love to have a Velutha ‘shaped hole in the universe’ (82) rather than letting him have the privilege of being acknowledged anything other than what he is — The God of Loss (217). He has to pay the price of stepping into forbidden territory. He is the one who invades Ammu’s being and makes her conscious of her existence wherever he touches her. In the love scene, Velutha realizes that he may lose everything he has by touching Ammu, who feels herself coming into being though “for each tremor of pleasure they would pay with an equal measure of pain” (335). The entire nocturnal scene bears witness to their desire for each other which propels them to sail through unknown storms before landing on the destined shore — an inevitable death. Before death embraces them and puts her claws on their agitating existence, they fill in each other’s lack and relish fulfilment by assimilating the undesirable elements. Hounds of conventions chase them to death.

Conclusion

Velutha is an undesirable character of the story who has to be eliminated physically to restore the former harmony. His journey is from being the abject to non-existent entity or a lump of clay. The path that he chooses does not take him anywhere. Stepping out of his insignificant world to become a part of Ammu’s world is a sure step to self-annihilation. Being the untouchable, he is not acknowledged socially; this negation leads to his ultimate physical obliteration. He is the other, who despite expulsion could not become a subject in his own right because he does not renounce his connection with the system and repeatedly seeks assimilation into a system by his love for Ammu. His unconscious propels him to encroach upon consciousness (society); hence causing the breakdown of the established system. His ambiguous placement between two worlds blurs the boundaries. Being unable to be an architect of his destiny, he loses control over his life. His small God is unable to protect him amidst his misfortunes; he is hushed. Thus, he sinks into oblivion by the God of big things.

Notes

- ¹ Abjection is a concept taken from Julia Kristeva, a French philosopher of 1980s and 1990s, works to signify anything that is non definable due to its ambiguous state. It exists on the borderline of self and not self. Kristeva relates it to those entities which cause nausea, loathing, disgust and repulsion e.g food, filth or waste. It is neither a subject nor an object but it has only one characteristic of an object that of being opposed to I. It is a non object on the edges of primal repression. According to Judith Butler, it can be termed as the excluded OTHER that conventionality creates. Objects are created through the constitution of viable subjects and through the corollary constitution of a domain of unviable (un) subjects neither named nor prohibited within the economy of the law. For further detail consult Jeremy Hawthorn's *A Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory* .p.1 (listed). Linked primordially to the body excretions, object is something rejected from which one does not part, a horror that violates identity, system, order. For further detail consult Michael Andr Bernsteins *Bitter Carnival: Ressentiment and the Abject Hero*.p. 29 (listed)
- ² Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* (New Delhi: Indialnk, 1997) p. 33. All subsequent references are to the text of this edition and are incorporated parenthetically into the text of the paper by page numbers unless stated otherwise.
- ³ Melanie Klein (1882-1960) is a pioneering psychoanalyst who developed work on melancholia and identified the loss of object as something internal even before the subject-object distinction occurs. The lost object is an internal not external and the subject immerses himself in grief to make up for that loss and the subject seeks identification with that. For further detail consult Noelle McAfee's *Julia Kristeva* p. 60 (listed)
- ⁴ Nick Mansfield refers to Lacanian Lack that is vital to the constitution of subjectivity and subject always tries to fill in that lack by perpetual identification with the object of desire and subsequent alienation. For further detail consult *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway*. P.45 (listed)

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