

A Brief Critique of Omprakash Valmiki & Arundhati Roy: On Caste Question

Abstract

Om Prakash Valmiki and Arundhati Roy both have dealt with the theme of casteism with subtle insight and discussed the problem from various standpoints. Valmiki himself has been a victim of the obnoxious stigma thought his life from his village Barla in Uttarakhand where he received his primary and high education to various parts of India. Later he discovered that there was no solution of the evil system. It is a tale of unspeakable miseries that the hard working low castes have to undergo. For him it is not a tale heard from someone else but a direct first hand experience. Arundhati Roy has written a single novel 'The God of Small Things'. The novel is a tale of suffering and broken hearts. The novel depicts the story of a family of Ayemenem in Kerala. Various themes like child abuse, corrupt state machinery, dirty politics, domestic violence and a general sense of loss pervades the novel. However the key issue here too is casteism. The low caste Velutha is an able and efficient carpenter. All his proficiency, talent and being a Christian could not redeem him. He is mercilessly tortured and murdered by the police for loving Ammu a high caste woman who has divorced her husband.

Keywords Uttarakhand, Carpenter, Casteism, Mercilessly

Introduction

Caste system is the very identification of Indian society .In India the caste is not a matter of religion but that of culture. It has existed since times immemorial in the form of Varna among Hindus. Though new and new religions both coming from foreign lands and sprouting in India have preached against it and its evils but its has existed and survived with all its ignominies cutting across the centuries, religions and boundaries of north and south Indian as well as foreign writers have worked on the theme of caste question and its manifestations in various customs. Mulk Raj Anand in his very famous work 'Untouchable' has depicted the character and life of Bakha with all the insult and injury that he has to suffer at the hands of caste Hindus. Among the more recent writers who have worked on the theme of caste based injustice and tyrannies are Arundhati Roy and Om Prakash Valmiki particularly in their works 'The God of Small Things' and Joothan respectively.

Om Prakash Valmiki in his autobiographical work Joothan narrates his heart wrenching and harrowing experiences as a Hindu **dalit** in north India while Arundhati Roy's character Velutha in 'The God of Small Things ' is the delineation of the ignominy of a south Indian pariah Christian. Both suffer at the hands of cruel caste system and realize that there is no escape from this stigma; and that it is same for an untouchable wherever he may belong to.

The only aim of Valmiki's father was to get his son educated so that the dirty stigma of belonging to the caste of sweepers may be washed and his son might live a life of respect and honor. But when young Valmiki went to school to receive education the hell broke upon him with all its fury. The students and the teachers addressed him not by his name but by his caste 'abhe chuhre ke' i.e. 'hey! you sweeper's son'. The teachers are full of contempt and disgusted at his entry in the school. They simply can not digest the idea that they have to teach a sweeper's son. The innocent school going child is deeply hurt and cannot understand why all this is happening to him. But soon he is to discover that it is only the beginning and just the tip of the iceberg. The teachers hit the low caste students in there wounds and boils ;would abuse them; and use dirty tricks to make the low caste students abandon their education. The very head of the school, whose duty is to maintain discipline and to ensure all round development of young minds, stoops down to dirty castiest ploys with such shamelessness that he asks Valmiki to sweep the school campus and its rooms.



Sonu Devi

Assistant Professor
Deptt. of English
BPS University,
Sonapat, Haryana

'all right... see that teak tree there ? Go, climb that tree and break the twigs and make a broom .And sweep the whole school clean as a mirror. It is after all your family occupation'P-4

In the same way in "God of Small Things" Baby Kochamma spews venom against Velutha in her police report to inspector Thomas Mathew saying that he was educated by her family in a school for untouchables. The Marxist leader comrade Pillai holds study circles on Marxist philosophy and ideology which is the most radical and progressive way of thinking but this dubious man does not do any thing to stop his wife from observing casteism who would not allow the Paravans (the untouchables in Kerala) enter their house. Pillai showing the true colors of a high cast cunning Brahmin says that he has no authority at home and his wife is the mistress of house. Though Velutha is a party member but Pillai washed his hands from the responsibility when the former told him about his love affair with Ammu saying that party was not responsible for the indiscipline in personal life of a member. He gave Velutha a cold shoulder just because he was an untouchable and she a high caste Syrian Christian girl. In his meeting with inspector he does not trash Baby Kochamma,s allegation of rape though he is well aware of it being fabricated and fake. His connivance is to some extent responsible for Velutha's doom. The keeper of law and order and protector of justice inspector Thomas Mathew calls Ammu "veshya" for her love affair with an untouchable and says to Kochamma.

"These people, carry them about on their heads like trophies, then when they misbehave you come running to us for help". P-261

Actually the educated high cast Christian is trying to tell that the proper palace of Paravans is at the feet and they should not be given any respect of admiration. He seems to be more responsible to the maintenance of cast system then that of law.

Om Prakash Valmiki's mother is told her limits and real position when she asked for some sweets for her children, having worked old a long in a marriage function. But the chowdhariji thundered:

"You are taking basket full of joothan (leftovers) and on top of that you want food for your children. Do not forget your palace. Chuhri, pick your basket and get going".P-11

The very word Joothan means food leftover in some one's plate. The Chuhras or the sweepers clean the village and the houses of the well to do cast Hindu families in north India and in return get Joothan to fill their stomachs. The life in such conditions is a total ignominy, and totally dehumanized. The Hindu high caste people worship cows; feed the insect and animals; give sweets and bananas to monkeys; but look up on human beings contemptuously.

Both the upper cast Hindus of north Indian and Christians of south India exploit the untouchables and **dalits** economically and take forced labour from them.

The Tyagi Brahmin farmers subsist on the labor of chuhars and chamars. In the burning heat they harvest the crops and get minimal wages from the miserly Tyagis. The chuharas clean dung from their cattle's places and can be forced to do any type of dirty job.

Velutha's story is no different. He is an able, talented and proficient mechanic and carpenter. The whole factory "Paradise Pickles and Preserve" depends upon him for mechanical and repair work to say in a nut shell for its smooth functioning but he was paid less wages to keep the other touchable mechanics happy. Mammachi did not want him to enter the house except only when some mending was needed even his entry in factory campus was considered a favour upon him.

The caste bindings are at their strictest in the matters related to sex and love affairs particularly if the girl is from upper caste. In north India the dominant **khap** groups kill the lovers on breaching the social code of caste. Only incaste marriages are looked upon as normal. The fear of being caught and murdered always hunts the lovers of different caste backgrounds. The high caste Hindus have been having undercover illicit relations with untouchable women for centuries. Their mistresses in the **dalit bastis** have been open secrets. The same social structure that gave the dominant castes unlimited authority to touch, to molest; to rape the dalit women in the darkness; also gave them the right to observe untouchability publicly. This is total hypocrisy and inhuman exploitation. In the school the teachers and students would make fun of eating habits of sweepers. The teachers drag him by the shirt and ask:

"Abhe chure ke how many pieces of pork did you eat today?" P-18

On such occasions his heart would shriek and he would think of all the Tyagi Brahmins that came to bhangi basti to eat pork in the dark of night.

Velutha- Ammu love affair shows the same venomous casteist mentality among the high caste Christians of Kerala. Both of them are Christians by religion and hence casteless. However things are not so easy and straightforward in the caste ridden Indian society . Velutha is a Paravan by caste i. e. an untouchable Christian whose ancestors embraced Christianity not because of their belief or understanding of the religion but just to get rid of the embarrassment of Hinduism . But Ammu is from a family of Syrian Christians who trace their descent to the Saryuparin Brahmins. The Christianity has changed their place of worship but not their positions on the social ladder. Velutha is brutally butchered for his audacity of having affair with a Syrian Christian girl. The women of Kochamma family can not imagine how Ammu could tolerate his typical Paravan smell and the touch of his naked body slithering on her. Ironically enough Chako's escapades with the low caste laborer women are not only accepted but also justified as "men's needs". This is a shrieking example of double standard and hypocrisy among the high caste people:

" She thought of her naked, coupling in the mud with a man who was nothing but a filthy coolie she imagined it in vivid detail: a Paravan's coarse black hand on her daughter's breast..... His particular Paravan smell. Like a dog with a bitch on heat. Her tolerance of 'Men's Needs' as for as her son was concerned, became the fuel for her unmanageable fury at her daughter. She had defiled generations of

breeding..... and brought the family to its knees.....Mammachi lost control". P-258

Both Velutha's father and that of Valmiki have known even worse days and in the end both realize that there is no escape from the invisible chains of cruel caste system. Vellya Pappen father of Velutha is 'an old world Paravan'. He is always panic stricken. On learning of his son's nightly adventures on the banks of Meenachal river he strains his relations with his son. Miserably he goes to the Ayemenem house groveling and crying in the rain. He removes his artificial eye and puts it on her benefactor Mammachi's hand. Mammachi, on learning what it is, goes to the kitchen sink to wash her palm with soap to remove his smell. When he reveals the love affair of Ammu and Velutha he is abused and spat upon:

"Baby Kochamma, walking passed the kitchen, heard the commotion. She found Mammachi spitting into the rain, THOO! THOO! THOO! And Vellyan Pappen lying in the slush, wet, weeping, groveling. Offering to kill his son. To tear him limb from limb. Mammachi was shouting, Drunken dog ! Drunken Paravan liar". P-256

Vain are his apologies and pleadings; actually he has spelt doom for his son by revealing the affair and his son is butchered by the caste police with such impurity.

Valmiki's father's dreams to get rid of caste are shattered .His favorite phrase, "Munshiji the caste must end" sounds hollow in his ears as Valmiki's high post education and fame in literature have not proved sufficient to wash this dirty stigma. Frustrated he starts to use the title Valmiki with his name. All is relatives are unhappy and disgusted with this step as their association with him also revealed their caste connections.

People have suffered miserably through the ages because of this bestial inhuman practice. The experiences of caste system have been harrowing and agonizing, most of them accepted as natural and God given and some suffered and died with a blistered soul. More or less these humiliations still continue throughout India in all the state; in all the cultures and in all the religions. No remedy so far has been discovered to eliminate or to remove this evil system that one is entrapped in not for any of his faults but for just being born to the parents of a particular caste. The religion like Buddhism, Sikhism, Christianity, and Islam could not cure it; the education and reservation policies have failed; Progressive ideology like Marxism has proved inadequate. There needs to be some sort of tremendous social and economic upheaval to root out this age old evil that has clutched humanity for centuries the sub-continent.

References

1. Joothan references have been taken from English translation by Arun Prabha Mukherjee Feb.2003 publication by Samya, an imprint of Bhatkal and Sen Kolkata.
2. The God of Small Things from Penguin Book Edition 2002