

The Caste System in India and its Representation in *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy



Literature

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Mustabshira Siddiqui

Assistant Professor, Department of English Language & Literature,
Taibah University, Saudi Arabia.

Abstract

Theoretically, we all are equals. The same species – Homo Sapiens. But in the real world, dividers are nearly endless – whether it is the color of someone’s skin, the community they were born in, the religion they practice or not, the gender they conform to, the age group they belong to, and the kind of work they do. These dividers are almost inevitable – but trouble ensues when they get out of hand. All the low caste communities that were tortured in India for centuries, all the African Americans who were enslaved and sold, the thousands of Jews who were slaughtered mercilessly, the way women were (and still are) tortured in endless ways, they all were the victims of discrimination that existed on a vast scale. Even in the 21st century, these dividers continue to infest human society, and no one can claim that they will be completely extinct in the near future. The present paper deals with one such divider – casteism and its representation in Indian Author and activist Arundhati Roy’s magnum opus “The God of Small Things”.

An Overview of the Caste System

The word ‘caste’ has been derived from the Portuguese word ‘casta’, which means pure. “Its European etymology should immediately make us suspicious of definitions of ‘caste’ that rely exclusively on ideas of purity and defilement.”¹ Also known as *caturvarna* (which literally means four colors), the caste system is an ancient practice of the social stratification of Indian society on the basis of hereditary occupation. The hereditary nature of the caste system inhibits upward social mobility. The members of the lower caste are punished, ostracized, and humiliated for their caste; something over which they had absolutely no control. This heinous social system is mentioned in various sacred Hindu texts including the Rigveda, an anthology of Vedic Sanskrit hymns deemed to be the oldest Vedic religious text. The Rigveda claims that the universe and the various castes emerged as a result of the sacrificial dismemberment of Purusa, the cosmic Man; “When they divided the Man, into how many parts did they apportion him? What do they call his mouth, his two arms and thighs, and feet? His mouth became the Brahmin; his arms were made into the Warrior, his thighs the People, and from his feet the Servants were born.”²

As defined in the aforementioned myth, each level of caste hierarchy had a hereditary occupation. The Brahmins, being the priest, were in charge of performing religious ceremonies, reciting, and learning the holy books. They commanded great respect from each section of the society. The Kshatriyas were associated with military and warfare, the Vaishyas indulged in commerce and business. The Shudras, being the ‘servant’ community performed menial jobs such as agriculture and sanitation. The untouchables were at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. Devoid

¹ Alex Tickell, *Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 23.

² Wendy. Doniger. *Hindu Myths*. (New Delhi: Penguin, 1975), 22.

of basic human rights and condemned to perform menial jobs such as cleaning streets, gutters, and disposing dead bodies, the untouchables were economically dependent on the upper-class people.

“Caste may be defined as a small and named group of persons characterized by endogamy, hereditary membership...”³ One of the greatest champions of a casteless society and the law minister of India, Ambedkar aptly defines caste as “an artificial chopping off of the population into fixed and definite units, each one prevented from fusing into another through the custom of endogamy.”⁴ Caste is much more than just the hierarchical classification of society, and division of labor. As Wilkerson explains; “it is a state of mind that holds everyone captive, the dominant imprisoned in an illusion of their own entitlement, the subordinate trapped in the purgatory of someone else’s definition of who they are and who they should be.”⁵ Casteism establishes the people on the highest rung of the caste ladder as the epitome of perfection and greatness. Casteism “deadens, paralyses, and cripples the people...”⁶ Dalits are publicly humiliated by the centuries old practice of untouchability, which refers to “...the avoidance of physical contact with persons and things because of beliefs relating to ritual purity and pollution.”⁷ It is a hard-to-believe fact that a practice as illogical and ignorant as preventing contact on the basis of the caste a person was born into was prevalent in India for centuries and still is, in some parts of the country.

“Every sixth human being in the world today is an Indian, and every sixth Indian is an erstwhile untouchable, a Dalit. Today there are 165 million Dalits (equal to more than half the population of the United States) and they continue to suffer under India’s 3,500-year-old caste system, which remains a stigma on humanity.”⁸ Although most people, especially those who belong to an upper caste, have been in denial of the discrimination against the lower class, the harsh reality is that casteism is very much alive. Every other day we come to know of the atrocities committed on a person from the Dalit community, Dalit girls are raped and no one bats an eye. Jadhav, satirizing the people who negligently deny the existence of the caste system, states; “Yet open the matrimonial section of any newspaper, and you will find an unabashed and bewildering display of the persistent belief in caste and subcaste.”⁹

Fortunately, the Indian constitution legally abolished the caste system on January 26, 1950. The bitter truth is that though the caste system is not as strict as it was a few decades ago; the low caste people no longer have to announce their arrival so that they don’t accidentally touch the touchables, they are no longer forced to do menial jobs and clean feces, but even in this day and

³ A. Beteille. *Caste, Class and Power: Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village*, (California: U of California P, 1971), 46.

⁴ B.R Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches*, (Maharashtra: Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Govt. of India, 2014), 9.

⁵ Isabel Wilkerson. *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent*, (New York: Random House, 2020), 263.

⁶ Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches*, 547.

⁷ Ghanshyam Shah, et al. *Untouchability in Rural India*.(New Delhi: Sage, 2006), 13

⁸ Narendra Jadhav. *Untouchables*. (New York: Scribner, 2005), 1.

⁹ Jadhav, *Untouchable*, 3.

age, “Consciously or subconsciously, Indians, whether in their own country or abroad, still make judgments based on caste. Over the years, the caste system has taken on sophisticated dimensions; it has become subtler, though no less pernicious...”¹⁰ Even in the most educated urban households, the cleaners, and the workers who usually belong to the untouchable caste are considered polluted to the extent that they have separate dishes and utensils to eat and drink. They are supposed to eat sitting on the floor because they are deemed unfit to eat with the family members. Wilkerson compares the plight of the Untouchables to that of the Blacks and the Jews.¹¹ Despite the laws that have been formed to safeguard the interests of the marginalized castes, such as the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, the crime rates against Dalits have substantially escalated.

Five Indian States with the Highest Crime Rates against Dalits

S.No	State	2018	2019
1	Rajasthan	4607	6794
2	Madhya Pradesh	4753	5300
3	Bihar	7061	6544
4	Gujarat	1426	1416
5	Telangana	1507	1690

Table 1. Source: 2019, National Crime Records Bureau, Government of India

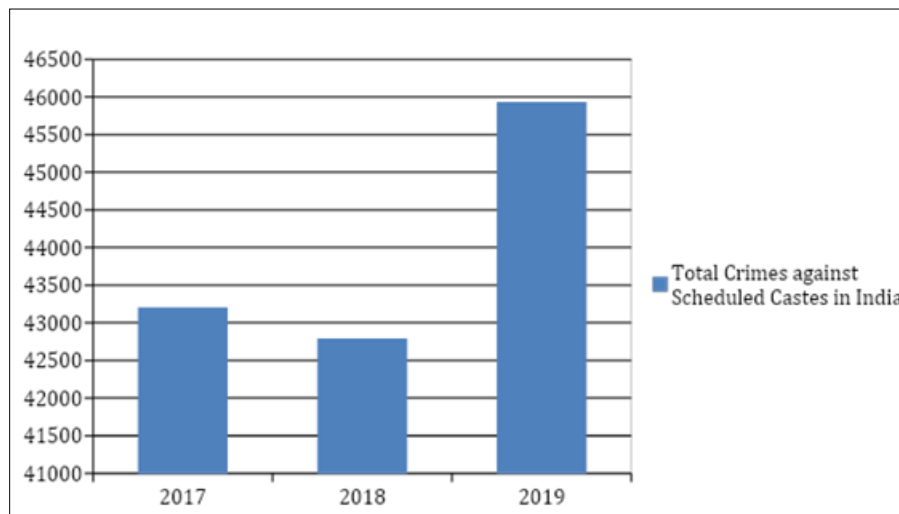


Figure 1. Source: 2019, National Crime Records Bureau, Government of India.

The privileged class ensured that the Shudras and the Untouchables remained meek servants by various means and methods. One of these infamous methods was denying them a

¹⁰ Ibid. 4.

¹¹ Wilkerson, *Caste*.

chance to get any education at all or even read the scriptures. The massive role of caste in the Indian Society can be understood from Arundhati Roy's statement; "Caste was implied in people's names, in the way people referred to each other, in the work they did, in the clothes they wore, in the marriages that were arranged, in the language they spoke. Even so, I never encountered the notion of caste in a single school textbook."¹²

Representation of the Caste System in *The God of Small Things*

Published in 1997, *The God of Small Things* is a bildungsroman and a social novel by Arundhati Roy. This was her debut novel and won the Pulitzer Prize in 1997. The novel explores serious issues such as casteism, the plight of Indian women in general, and divorcees in particular. It also depicts the far-reaching impact of traumatic events on kids, especially on those from broken homes - like Rahel and Estha. Set in Ayemenem, South India in the latter half of the twentieth century, the novel is narrated by the protagonist Rahel. The novel revolves around the two twins Rahel and Estha, the death of their Anglo-Indian cousin Sophie Mol, the romantic affair of their divorced mother Ammu, and Velutha, an Untouchable. "The God of Small Things is a book which connects the very smallest things to the very biggest. Whether it's the dent that a baby spider makes on the surface of water in a pond ... or how history and politics intrude into your life..."¹³ The novel also presents the social norms and the horrifying plight of its transgressors through the character of Ammu and Velutha.

The God of Small Things has been submerged in controversies and opposing views ever since its debut, as it revolves around the forbidden love affair of a Syrian- Christian, Ammu, and an untouchable, Velutha. Both are the victims of evil and oppressive social customs. Ammu was abused by her alcoholic husband, and even after she leaves him, her own family members have little respect for her. As Roy states in the novel; "Ammu left her husband and returned, unwelcomed, to her parents in Ayemenem. To everything that she had fled from only a few years ago. Except that now she had two young children. And no more dreams."¹⁴ What makes the novel so different from others in the genre is its depiction of Syrian Christian communities. Despite belonging to a different religion altogether they have been practicing many Hindu customs. As Tickell points out; "Traditionally, the community has preserved its high social standing by a custom of strict endogamy (marriage within the community) and a careful observance of many of the social restrictions of upper-caste Hindus."¹⁵ Transgressors were ostracized and excommunicated by the Syrian-Christian church. "It is this power of spiritual sanction, and its wider implications, that Mammachi fears when she learns of Ammu's affair with Velutha."¹⁶

¹² Arundhati Roy. *The Doctor and the Saint*, (Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2017), 1-2.

¹³ David Barsamian. *The Checkbook and the Cruise Missile: Conversations with Arundhati Roy*, (Massachusetts: South End Press, 2004), 11.

¹⁴ Roy. *The God of Small Things*, (New York: Random House, 2008), 50.

¹⁵ Tickell, *Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things*, 19.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 20.

The God of Small Things can also be analyzed as a melancholic romantic tale, Ammu longs for her lover Velutha. Neurologist and the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud believed that dreams are the manifestation of our thoughts and suppressed wishes. One can analyze Ammu's unconscious mind on the basis of her dream about Velutha. In her dream, he seems too out of her reach, distant and otherworldly: "If he touched her, he couldn't talk to her, if he loved her he couldn't leave, if he spoke he couldn't listen, if he fought he couldn't win..."¹⁷ Even in the dream, Velutha leaves without a trace, and this, in a way foreshadows his subsequent death and disappearance from Ammu's life; "The one-armed man blew out his lamp and walked across the jagged beach, away into the shadows that only he could see. He left no footprints on the shore."¹⁸ Velutha is also a victim of the caste system. Roy uses the character of Velutha to depict the plight of the oppressed and "as a means to show how the powerful forces of caste, colonialism, and communism play vital parts in inflicting injustice on the powerless."¹⁹ The novel refers to the low-caste people by the lesser known term Pariah which is an alternate term for Dalits. Nowadays, the word Dalit is also used to refer to the Untouchables. The word Dalit has been derived from a Sanskrit word which literally means 'oppressed'. The term was first used by Indian activist and social reformer Jyotiba Phule to refer to the untouchables. Arundhati Roy explores the ever-widening gap between the victims and the victimizers, the exploiters and the exploited, the "touchables" and the untouchables. "Dalits comprise about one-sixth of the entire population, yet bear a disproportionate share of its socio-economic burdens."²⁰

The Reasons for the Origin and Spread of the Caste System

"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 in past lives."²¹ The Shudras were deemed deserving of the sufferings they go through, as the scriptures clearly stated that the low caste status was the outcome of sinful acts in one's previous life. "In consequence of (many) sinful acts committed with his body, a man becomes (in the next birth) something inanimate, in consequence (of sins) committed by speech, a bird, or a beast, and in consequence of mental (sins he is re-born in) a low caste."²² Isabel Wilkerson points out seven pillars that resulted in the origin and continuance of a social system²³ as heinous as the caste system:

¹⁷ Roy. *The God of Small Things*, 225.

¹⁸ Roy. *The God of Small Things*, 226.

¹⁹ Jacqueline N. Kerr. "Uniting Postcolonialism and Environmentalism through Historiographic Storytelling in the Writing of Arundhati Roy" M.A. dissertation, (U of North Carolina Wilmington, 2011), 19.

²⁰ Shah et. al. *Untouchability in Rural India*. 13.

²¹ Tickell, *Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things*, 24.

²² *Manu, The Laws of Manu, Sacred Books of the East*, transl. George Bühler, vol.25 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1886), v.12.9.

²³ Wilkerson, *Caste*, 95–153.

The Laws of Scriptures and Divine Orders

As already stated, the concept of the caste system was propounded in holy books such as the Manusmriti and Rig Veda. The profession of each caste was determined by the fragment they were created from; for instance, the Brahmins were priests and religious leaders, the Kshatriyas were the rulers and warriors, the Vaishyas were the businessmen, and the Shudras were the docile servants. The untouchables were not even mentioned in the creation mythology, because they were “deemed so low that they were beneath even the feet of the Shudra.”²⁴ These sections of the societies were considered an outcast and were known as Dalits. They were “not to be touched and some not even to be seen. Their very shadow was a pollutant.”²⁵

Velutha was also an untouchable, an outcast. It might be outrageous for any conscious individual to even imagine that a community that performs manual jobs that no one wants to do, workers harder than the people of other castes, is still disrespected by a community of individuals who consider themselves privileged and entitled to belittle and harm others just because of the family they were born into. The scriptures clearly declare the taking the place of a high caste, literally and figuratively a criminal offense, hence taking social mobility out of the question. “A low-caste man, who tries to place himself on the same seat with a man of a high caste, shall be branded on his hip and be banished, or (the king) shall cause his buttock to be gashed.”²⁶ Comparing the miseries of the untouchables with that of the African American slaves, Wilkerson states; “The United States and India would become, respectively, the oldest and the largest democracies in human history, both built on caste systems undergirded by their reading of the sacred texts.... In both countries, the subordinate castes were consigned to the bottom, seen as deserving of their debasement, owing to the sins of the past.”²⁷

Heritability of Occupations

Occupations were generally hereditary and passed on by the patriarchs. Individual differences and abilities were not taken into concern. Even in this modern age, no matter how educated a person becomes, how hard they work, and how much they have accomplished, they are still judged by their family surnames. In India, all you need is the family surname to tell a person’s caste. Regardless of how many miles away a person moves, they will still be judged by their caste. Wilkerson mentions such an incident, a Dalit student went to the US for higher studies, for the Americans, he was just another Indian guy, but he was harshly judged by high caste Indian students there. They treated him as a subordinate- an inferior being mistakenly placed among them.

²⁴ Ibid. 96.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Manu, *The Laws of Manu*, v.8.281.

²⁷ Wilkerson, *Caste*, 97.

The same was true in the case of Velutha – had he been a citizen of a casteless society, he would have been able to gain higher education and become an architect, or an engineer, and the privileged touchables also acknowledge this fact; “Mammachi (with impenetrable Touchable logic) often said that if only he hadn’t been a Paravan, he might have become an engineer.”²⁸ But being a Paravan; an untouchable – he was forced to toil at the Ipe Paradise Pickles and Preserve factory as an underpaid laborer, because “...membership in either the upper or the lowest caste was deemed immutable, primordial, fixed from birth to death, and thus regarded as inescapable.”²⁹ Despite being more skilled and hardworking than other workers, Velutha was also paid less “than she (Mammachi) would a Touchable carpenter but more than she would a Paravan.”³⁰ In addition to being underpaid and humiliated, he was also expected to be “grateful that he was allowed on the factory premises at all, and allowed to touch things that the touchables touched. She (Mammachi) said that it was a big step for a Paravan.”³¹

Intercaste Romantic Relationships: A Blasphemous sin and Endogamy: the ‘Righteous’ Path Romantic Relationships were prohibited in order to maintain the purity of the bloodlines of the upper caste families. The Hindu religious texts severely condemned any romantic, sexual or marital relationship with any member of the lower castes. “The virtuous don’t praise the birth of offspring through shudras. If a Brahmana has offspring through a shudra, penance is recommended.”³² Intercaste marriages were deemed a violation of religion and destruction of caste hierarchy; hence almost impossible. “This is an ironclad foundation of any caste system, from ancient India, to the early American colonies, to the Nazi regime in Germany. Endogamy was brutally enforced ... and did the spade work for current ethnic divisions.”³³

That’s the reason why Vellya was so horrified to learn about his son’s romantic affair with an upper-caste woman; “He asked God’s forgiveness for having spawned a monster. He offered to kill his son with his own bare hands. To destroy what he had created.”³⁴ Had exogamy been an option, Velutha could offer Ammu a good life and be the caring father to Rahel and Estha that they never had. The irony is, if instead of Ammu, a privileged man like Chacko had consensual intercourse or even raped a low caste woman, no one would have said a word. As Roy states; “Men of the privileged castes had undisputed rights over the bodies of Untouchable women. Love is polluting. Rape is pure”.³⁵

By restricting marital and romantic relationships between people, a firewall was erected between the various castes, which further increased the emotional distance between people of the various societies. “Endogamy, in fact, makes it more likely that those in the dominant caste will

²⁸ Roy, *God of Small Things*, 81.

²⁹ Wilkerson, *Caste*, 100.

³⁰ Roy, *God of Small Things*, 83.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Vyasa, *The Mahabharata*. Transl Bibek Debroy, (New Delhi: Penguin, 2015) Ch. 1725(44).

³³ Wilkerson, *Caste*, 102.

³⁴ Roy, *God of Small Things*, 84.

³⁵ Roy, *The Doctor and the Saint*, 27.

see those deemed beneath them as not only less than human but as an enemy, as not of their kind, and as a threat that must be held in check at all costs.”³⁶ It further increased the chasm between the privileged upper class and the less fortunate lower castes and untouchables. Ambedkar considers endogamy as the main reason behind the genesis and continuance of the caste system.³⁷

Purity of the Upper Castes and the ‘Polluted’ Existence of the Lower Castes

“The fourth pillar of caste rests upon the fundamental belief in the purity of the dominant caste and the fear of pollution from the castes deemed beneath it.”³⁸ In India, the upper caste citizens took pains to maintain their “purity”. The lower castes were not allowed to drink from the same water. They were supposed to maintain a certain distance from the ‘touchables’, “they had to wear bells to alert”³⁹ the upper caste people. “A person in the lowest subcastes in the Maratha region had to ‘drag a thorny branch with him to wipe out his footprints’ and prostrate himself on the ground if a Brahmin passed, so that his “foul shadow might not defile the holy Brahmin.”⁴⁰

The scriptures assigned the only way to freedom by meek submission and silently serving their “superiors”; “...by performing the acts associated with virtuous conduct, a shudra can obtain the status of a brahmana and a vaishya that of a kshatriya. Following the law and the ordinances, a shudra must make efforts to serve and attend to the needs of the superior varnas.”⁴¹ This might be the reason why the Dalits never rebelled or raised their voice as much as they should have. They kept on serving the upper castes, bearing each humiliation silently in the hopes of a better future and redemption from the punishment of being untouchable. Roy argues that “...they are living out a prison sentence. Acts of insubordination could lead to an enhanced sentence, which would mean another cycle of rebirth as an Untouchable or as a Shudra. So, it’s best to behave.”⁴²

Occupational Hierarchy: The Lower Castes and the Mudsill

Just like mudsill forms the foundation of a house; “In a caste system, the mudsill is the bottom caste that everything else rests upon.”⁴³ The caste system of India was marked by the division of labor according to the castes. Just as a person’s caste affiliation was inescapable and life-long, so was the occupational affiliation. The lowest section of the society was assigned the most demeaning tasks. “Thus, caste did not mean merely doing a certain kind of labor; it meant performing a dominant or subservient role.”⁴⁴

³⁶ Wilkerson, *Caste*, 102.

³⁷ B.R.Ambedkar. *Castes in India: Their Genesis, Mechanism and Development*, (Jullunder: Patrika Publications, 1916).

³⁸ Wilkerson, *Caste*, 108.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Vyasa, *The Mahabharata*, Ch.1812(131)).

⁴² Roy, *The Doctor and the Saint*, 27.

⁴³ Wilkerson, *Caste*, 123.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 127.

The upper caste made sure that if any Shudra or untouchable dared to cross any boundaries, they were inhumanely punished, or even beaten to death like Velutha. The upper caste's "every act, every gesture, was calculated for the purpose of reminding the subordinate caste, in these otherwise unrelated caste systems, of the dominant caste's total reign over their very being."⁴⁵ Lower castes were not allowed to adopt the professions reserved for the upper castes, and if they dared to do so, they were heavily punished; "a man of low caste who through covetousness lives by the occupations of a higher one, the king shall deprive of his property and banish."⁴⁶

Dehumanization and Belittlement

Dehumanization of the victims is what kept evil practices like the caste system and slavery alive. Dehumanization doesn't happen by a single derogatory act or remark; "it is a process, a programming. It takes energy and reinforcement to deny what is self-evident in another member of one's own species."⁴⁷ One might wonder how evil practices like the caste system continue to exist and flourish. How can the masses ostracize and stand by while human beings, just like them, were being tortured? "...people and groups who seek power and division do not bother with dehumanizing an individual. Better to attach a stigma, a taint of pollution to an entire group. Dehumanize the group, and you have completed the work of dehumanizing any single person within it."⁴⁸ One would think that being the victims of caste-based prejudice; the people from lower castes would empathize with each other. But the shocking fact is that even the lower castes have subcastes, and they ostracize the lowest class amongst themselves. As Wilkerson puts it; "Dehumanization distances not only the out-group from the in-group but those in the in-group from their own humanity."⁴⁹ It is quite hard to believe that the masses stood by and actively participated in atrocities on not only an individual but a whole community, whether it be the untouchables, the Jews, or the blacks. "A caste system relies on dehumanization to lock the marginalized outside the norms of humanity so that any action against them is seen as reasonable."⁵⁰

What was so wrong with Velutha and his family that despite living in the same neighbourhood, they were not allowed to even enter the house of Baby Kochamma and Chacko. During his childhood, when Velutha used to deliver coconuts with his father, he was forbidden to enter the house; "Pappachi would not allow Paravans into the house. Nobody would. They were not allowed to touch anything that Touchables touched."⁵¹ One can only imagine how negatively it affected the innocent psyche of a young boy. For the upper class, the Shudras and Dalits were mere animals who took care of menial and unwanted jobs.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 131.

⁴⁶ Manu, *The Laws of Manu*, v.10.96.

⁴⁷ Wilkerson, *Caste*, 132.

⁴⁸ Wilkerson, *Caste*, 132.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 132-133.

⁵¹ Roy, *The God of Small Things*, 155.

The term *servant* can't be applied here because even servants are treated in a better way than the untouchables. For the upper class; the untouchables did not have an identity of their own. They were mostly referred to by their surnames, and that's the reason why they couldn't escape caste even if they left their homeland and migrated abroad. "The Untouchables of India were assigned surnames that identified them by the lowly work they performed, forcing them to announce their degradation every time they introduced themselves, while the Brahmins; many quite literally, carried the names of the gods."⁵² Velutha and his father Vellya are identified as Paravnas, i.e., the untouchables. No one bothers to learn their names; they are just specks of dirt, living in disgrace because of their past sinful acts. "Individuals were no longer individuals. Individuality, after all, is a luxury afforded the dominant caste."⁵³

Despite performing manual labor in an unhygienic environment all day, the Dalits struggled to get two square meals and were severely penalized if they attempted to sustain their family by stealing food. They were treated as criminals and were severely punished for the slightest crime. If it were an upper caste individual instead of Velutha, the police wouldn't have touched him without incriminating evidence. And if the victim of the crime was untouchable, the upper caste criminal would have walked free without any criminal investigation. Hard to believe as it is, this was quite common in Indian society, especially in the rural areas. Dalit women were raped, even murdered; still, it was considered a trivial matter. But as Velutha was untouchable, he was beaten to death without any hard evidence of crime.

Terror and Torture as a Means of Control and Establishing Dominance one might wonder why didn't the Dalits ever revolt against a system as unjust as casteism. What forced them to be mute victims for centuries? It was fear. As Wilkerson puts it; "the only way to keep an entire group of sentient beings in an artificially fixed place, beneath all others and beneath their own talents, is with violence and terror, psychological and physical, to preempt resistance before it can be imagined."⁵⁴ As mentioned before, the Dalits were severely punished for the slightest disobedience or derivation from the law. The Brahmins were exempt from capital punishment, but capital punishment was common for shudras and untouchables. The Untouchables are also threatened by rebirth in even more miserable forms. "(A Sudra who is) pure, the servant of his betters, gentle in his speech, and free from pride, and always seeks a refuge with Brahmanas, attains (in his next life) a higher caste."⁵⁵ The Dalits were starved, beaten, their women were raped, their children demeaned, and if they tried to resist, they were severely punished. "They were punished for the very responses a human being would be expected to have in the circumstances forced upon them."⁵⁶

⁵² Wilkerson, *Caste*, 134.

⁵³ Ibid. 133.

⁵⁴ Wilkerson, *Caste*, 141.

⁵⁵ Manu, *The Laws of Manu*, v.9.335.

⁵⁶ Wilkerson, *Caste*, 135.

“As with African-Americans during the time of enslavement, it was a crime for Dalits to learn to read and write.”⁵⁷ The Dalits guilty of learning to read or write were severely punished, often by chopping off their tongue, amputating them, or damaging their ears with molten lead. What is even worse, the scriptures forbade the untouchables to read or hear the recitation of the religious texts; “For he who explains the sacred law (to a Sudra) or dictates to him a penance, will sink together with that (man) into the hell (called) Asamvrita.”⁵⁸

Internalization of Inferiority and the Megalomania of the Upper Castes

“Beneath each pillar of caste was the presumption and continual reminder of the inborn superiority of the dominant caste and the inherent inferiority of the subordinate.”⁵⁹ One can only imagine how far-reaching the impact of casteism will be on a young, innocent child. Ever since Velutha was born, he was made to feel inferior, unworthy of any goodness. As an innocent child, he devoted considerable time and effort creating intricate toys, but when he; “would bring them for Ammu, holding them out on his palm (as he had been taught) so that she did not have to touch him to take them.”⁶⁰

With the passage of time and the continuous acts of barbarism committed upon the Shudras, they were forced to believe and accept the allegation that they were inferior—and this formed the base of their servile status. People like Vellya “had seen the Crawling Backwards Days and (hence) his gratitude to Mammachi and her family for all that they had done for him was as wide and deep as a river in spate.”⁶¹ Vellya internalized this constant reminder of inferiority to the extent that he was prepared to murder his own son, just for having romantic relationships with an upper-caste woman, for violating the social code. “...the caste system drilled into the people under its spell the deference due those born to the upper caste and the degradation befitting the subordinate caste. This required signs and symbols and customs to elevate the upper caste and to demean those assigned to the bottom, in small and large ways and in everyday encounters.”⁶² These everyday encounters included unimaginable and inhumane acts—including ostracizing not only the shudras, but also their children who, despite the never-ending hardships, dared to go to school. “Such precepts are absorbed and internalized by Dalits from childhood on. Reinforced through constant practice, this ‘education’ profoundly shapes Dalit consciousness and identity.”⁶³

Every possible measure was taken to single out the untouchables, from appearance, clothing, to the way untouchables were tortured. “Dalits were not to wear the clothing or jewelry of upper-caste people but rather tattered, rougher clothing as the “marks of their inferiority”.⁶⁴ The touchable coworkers of Velutha were enraged at his recruitment and possibly jealous of his

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Manu, *The Laws of Manu*, v.4.81.

⁵⁹ Wilkerson, *Caste*, 148.

⁶⁰ Roy, *God of Small Things*, 80-81.

⁶¹ Ibid. 82.

⁶² Wilkerson, *Caste*, 149.

⁶³ Shah et. al. *Untouchability in Rural India*. 13.

⁶⁴ Wilkerson, *Caste*, 149-150.

skillset; “because, according to them, Paravans were not meant to be carpenters. And certainly, prodigal Paravans were not meant to be rehired.”⁶⁵

Baby Kochamma is one of the best examples of upper castes living in the delusion of their own superiority and megalomania, when she sees Mammachi interacting with Vellya, she is baffled and asks her; “How could she (Mammachi) stand the smell? Haven’t you noticed, they have a particular smell, these Paravans?”⁶⁶

The superiority complex of the upper caste is clearly visible in Indian society. Even well-educated “modern” Brahmins avoid socializing with anyone from the Shudra community and advise their kids to do so too. Visit any Indian neighborhood, and you’ll clearly notice and feel the demarcation between the upper caste and lower caste, an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ mentality. The few upper caste people, who socialize with the lower caste, broadcast it as an example of their ‘open-mindedness’, as if they are doing a huge favor to the lower castes. “A certain kind of violence was part of an unspoken curriculum for generations of children in the dominant caste.”⁶⁷ The constant atrocities committed by the upper class desensitized the future generation towards the violence perpetuated on the lower castes and resulted in the continuance of casteism, a seemingly never-ending cycle of injustice. “The laws and protocols kept them both apart and low. The greater the chasm, the easier to distance and degrade, the easier to justify any injustice or depravity.”⁶⁸

Caste: The Face of Evil and Hate

What gave upper castes like Pappachi, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, and Chacko the right to physically and mentally torment and ostracize a whole community of Paravans, including Velutha and Vellya? How dare Baby Kochamma incriminate an innocent man like Velutha, just because he was in love with an upper-caste woman, Ammu, and by doing so he broke the ‘love laws’ and ‘social codes’? Such “caste behavior is essentially a response to one’s assigned place in the hierarchy...”⁶⁹ Whenever the upper castes like Baby Kochamma feel like their social standing is threatened due to a shudra or an untouchable, they go to extremes to preserve their social status. “The caste system primes the dominant caste to experience discomfort, unfairness at the sight of a lower-caste person in a position above their perceived station and more particularly above them, and may feel the need to restore equilibrium by putting the lower-caste person in their place.”⁷⁰

The atrocities committed on the Jews of Europe, the African-Americans, the Native Americans, the Dalits and women bear witness to a horrifying truth “that evil is not one person but can be easily activated in more people than we would like to believe when the right conditions

⁶⁵ Roy, *God of Small Things*, 83.

⁶⁶ Ibid. 84.

⁶⁷ Wilkerson, *Caste*, 145.

⁶⁸ Ibid. 152.

⁶⁹ Wilkerson, *Caste*, 246.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

congeal.”⁷¹ All of the unspeakable acts of physical and psychological violence were possible “because a big enough majority had been persuaded and had been open to being persuaded, centuries ago or in the recent past, that these groups were ordained by God as beneath them, subhuman, deserving of their fate.”⁷² And this truth is even harder to accept as it means that “the enemy, the threat, is not one man, it is us, all of us, lurking in humanity itself.”⁷³

Social Exclusion

Man is a social animal; hence isolation and exclusion are some of the worst forms of psychological torment. One can only imagine what an untouchable, unable to choose their desired profession, working menial jobs all day felt like when they were humiliated by the same people they served day and night. Furthermore, the Hindu scriptures encouraged social exclusion; “food served by a shudra must never be eaten... food cooked by a shudra is condemned.”⁷⁴ The Shudras are considered so loathsome that the Brahmans rather chew raw grains than dine with a lower caste person. “A Brahmana who knows (the law) must not eat cooked food (given) by a Sudra who performs no Sraddhas; but, on the failure of (other) means of subsistence, he may accept raw (grain), sufficient for one night (and day).”⁷⁵

Mammachi recalls the days “when Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan footprint.”⁷⁶ They were considered so polluted that they “were not allowed to walk on public roads, not allowed to cover their upper bodies, not allowed to carry an umbrella. They had to put their hands on their mouths when they spoke, to divert their polluted breath away from those who they addressed.”⁷⁷ It was blasphemous for the Brahmans to socially interact with Shudras and resulted in the loss of the upper caste status; “A Brahmana who unintentionally approaches a woman of the Candala or of (any other) very low caste, who eats (the food of such persons) and accepts (presents from them) becomes an outcast; but (if he does it) intentionally, he becomes their equal.”⁷⁸ Caste also dictated the Gods to be worshiped as the; “lower castes were not permitted to worship the high Hindu Gods (Shiva, Vishnu, and Krishna) but were relegated to demon worship. Temple entry for low-castes was denied.”⁷⁹

⁷¹ Ibid. 242.

⁷² Ibid. 241.

⁷³ Ibid. 242.

⁷⁴ *The Mahabharata*, Ch.1812(131)).

⁷⁵ Manu, *The Laws of Manu*, v.4.223.

⁷⁶ Roy, *God of Small Things*, 80.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 80.

⁷⁸ Manu, *The Laws of Manu*, v.11.176.

⁷⁹ S. Thomas., “From Chattas to Churindas: Syrian Christian Religious Minorities in a Secular Indian State”. PhD dissertation, (Rutgers University, New Jersey, 2011). 36.

The Plight of the Victims of the Caste System

By working hard and consistently, Velutha learned carpentry from a foreigner, Johann Klein. If he (Klein) were a high caste teacher like Dronacharya, he probably would have refused to even be near, let alone train an untouchable. Jadhav compares Velutha to Ekalavya, an untouchable archer who learned archery on his own by consistently practicing in front of the statue of an upper-class teacher, Dronacharya, who refused to train him on the grounds of his untouchability and later on asks for Ekalavya's thumb as a fee (Guru Dakshina). Jadhav aptly points out; "...power will remain the guarded possession of the highborn, striving to ensure that an outcaste remains a lowly outcaste... Ekalavya was cornered into sacrificing his strength, and... his silent consent (was) transformed into a myth that promotes submission among the disempowered."⁸⁰

The scriptures ordered the Shudras to shave their heads and even their ration was lesser than an Aryan's despite the fact that the former did more manual labor than the latter. "Sudras who live according to the law, shall each month shave (their heads); their mode of purification (shall be) the same as that of Vaisyas, and their food the fragments of an Aryan's meal."⁸¹ Maybe there was the same logic behind it acting, upon which the Jews and Black servants were starved to death so that they could barely function, let alone revolt or rebel against their oppressors. Ambedkar discusses the extent of untouchability:

The untouchable was required to have a black thread either on his wrist or around his neck, as a sign or a mark to prevent the Hindus from getting themselves polluted by his touch by mistake (and) ... was required to carry an earthen pot hung around his neck wherever he went – for holding his spit, lest his spit falling on the earth should pollute a Hindu who might unknowingly happen to tread on it. (Ambedkar, 2014, 390).

The victims of the caste system were humiliated in every way, even after all these years, if a person from the Dalit community, got an education, despite all odds, and got a job, they were discriminated against at work, despite the fact that their coworkers are highly educated. Their coworkers hesitate to socialize with them; they don't share food or beverages with them. When beverages are served, the members of lower castes are served separately, and they are often forced to wash their own dishes. Untouchability follows its victims like an incurable disease. Even when the Shudras and Dalits attempt to escape the curse of caste discrimination by embracing Christianity, they are haunted by the caste discrimination they had been trying to escape. Untouchables like Velutha's grandfather, Kelan made the same mistake in a futile attempt to escape the caste-based humiliation and; "It didn't take them long to realize that they had jumped from the frying pan into the fire. They were made to have separate churches, with separate

⁸⁰ Jadhav, *Untouchable*, 3.

⁸¹ Manu, *The Laws of Manu*, v.5.140.

services and separate priests.”⁸² What is even worse is that “after Independence, they found they were not entitled to any government benefits like job reservations or bank loans at low-interest rates, because officially, . . . they were Christian and therefore casteless.”⁸³ In her book, Gidla discusses this issue in an interesting manner. She points out that the Christians who were formerly Brahmins shunned fellow Christians like her. She ponders; “Wasn’t I a Christian like them? But they shunned me just as any Hindu would. I was deeply hurt, more deeply than when it happened with the Hindus”.⁸⁴

“To compound the problem, caste, unlike say apartheid, is not color-coded, and therefore not easy to see. Also, unlike apartheid, the caste system has buoyant admirers in high places. They argue, quite openly, that caste is the social glue that binds as well as separates people and communities in interesting and, on the whole, positive ways.”⁸⁵ M.K. Gandhi, the leader of the Indian freedom movement, championed the cause of untouchables and named them ‘harijans’ (Children of God). Although he believed in the equality of all castes, he was not in the favor of the complete elimination of the caste system.

Desire for Upward Mobility and Escape from Caste-based Discrimination

In their quest for upward social mobility, Dalits are willing to do almost anything; from changing their family names, religion, migration, or modify their appearances. “They have continually struggled to shed the stigma that shadows their lives. The younger generation, in particular, resents traditional caste labels and the derogatory tone and style in which they are usually addressed.”⁸⁶ In the recent past, the Dalits were not allowed to dress however they wanted. They usually wore coarse cloths, walked on foot, often carrying heavy loads (piles of feces in case of latrine cleaners.) “... many Dalits make it a point to dress as well as they can. For Dalits, owning and driving vehicles such as bicycles, scooters and motorcycles is not merely a convenience but a mark of social status that is all the more significant because such forms of property have traditionally been the monopoly of upper-caste Hindus.”⁸⁷

To deal with the identity crisis and alienation from society, Dalits strived to create a new system of belief. “This quest for an identity that allows Dalit’s self-respect and dignity has resulted in the invention of new idioms, symbols, vocabulary and rituals. Instead of using derogatory caste names, Dalits prefer to call themselves Satnami, Adi-Dravidian, Parayar, Buddhist, Ambedkarite and, of course, Dalit.”⁸⁸ Numerous Dalits; “greet each other with the

⁸² Roy, *God of Small Things*, 80.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ S. Gidla. *Ants Among Elephants*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017).13.

⁸⁵ Roy, *The Doctor and the Saint*, 22.

⁸⁶ Shah et. al. *Untouchability in Rural India*. 144.

⁸⁷ Shah et. al. *Untouchability in Rural India*. 145.

⁸⁸ Ibid.146.

phrase *fai Bhim* (literally, 'Victory to Dr. Ambedkar'), an expression that evokes solidarity and a sense of community".⁸⁹

The far-reaching impact of caste on a person's life is evident from the confession of Sujatha Gidla, an untouchable; "... your life is your caste, your caste is your life."⁹⁰ Velutha's life would have been incredibly different and convenient if he was just born in an upper-caste family.

Considering his interest in construction and creation, he probably would have received a quality education and become an engineer. Even if he had sexual or romantic relationships with a divorcee like Ammu, Baby Kochamma would let this issue go, keeping in mind the 'needs' of upper-classmen, just like Mammachi did with Chacko. Most importantly he would have the blind respect of almost everyone he interacted with, unlike in the reality where, despite working harder than everyone else and being more skilled, he was discriminated against at work because of his affiliation to a low caste. Regardless of all the progress made in various aspects, the upper castes practice caste-based prejudices and thus motivate their children to do so in the future too. "India lives in several centuries at the same time. Somehow, we manage to progress and regress simultaneously."⁹¹

Towards a Casteless Society: Reformation of the Caste System

The sad truth is that the majority of the religious and political leaders remained indifferent to an issue as serious as casteism. This is what makes horrifying and abominable practices like racism, anti-Semitism, and casteism seem like a normal part of society. For instance, in the novel, K.N.M. Pillai never protests against the atrocities and discrimination of Velutha on the basis of caste. He only cares about his own political career. Refusing to take any responsibility for Velutha's merciless murder; "he dismissed the whole business as the Inevitable Consequence of Necessary Politics".⁹² Talking about Kerala in her interview with Barsamian, Roy aptly states "If you look at the Communist parties, most of their leaders are upper-caste. When they fight elections, candidates are carefully chosen to represent the dominant caste of their respective 'vote bank'..."⁹³ The religious leaders also overlooked social evils like casteism, presumably to avoid violating religious principles. As Ambedkar puts it, even the saints did "not preach that all men were equal. They preached that all men were equal in the eyes of God – a very different and a very innocuous proposition, which nobody can find difficult to preach or dangerous to believe in."⁹⁴

The burning question is – how can we eliminate caste? After all, it is not so easy to eradicate a social evil as heinous and wide-spread as casteism; social evil that has been practiced for centuries, and has been mentioned in the scriptures and religious texts.

⁸⁹ Ibid.146-149.

⁹⁰ Gidla, *Ants Among Elephant*, 9.

⁹¹ Arundhati. Roy. *The End of Imagination*. (Chicago, Haymarket Books, 2016), 179.

⁹² Roy, *God of Small Things*, 23.

⁹³ Barsamian, *The Checkbook and the Cruise Missile*, 2.

⁹⁴ Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, 87-88.

Talking about social reform and annihilation of caste, Ambedkar acknowledges the fact that it is unusually difficult if not impossible task; “The wall built around Caste is impregnable, and the material of which it is built contains none of the combustible stuff of reason and morality. Add to this the fact that inside this wall stands the army of Brahmins, who form the intellectual ... At any rate, it would take ages before a breach is made.”⁹⁵ The upper castes can cite such religious texts as the basis of their cruel and inhumane acts towards the Dalits. Consequently, Ambedkar made the controversial yet revolutionary claim that to eliminate the caste system from the society, we need to break away from the Hindu sacred texts; “if you wish to bring about a breach in the system, then you have got to apply the dynamite to the Vedas and the Shastras, which deny any part to reason; to the Vedas and Shastras, which deny any part to morality...”⁹⁶

Increased interaction may end the hostility of the upper caste towards their lower caste counterparts. It is much harder to wrong an acquaintance than an unknown face. The superiority complex of the oppressors prevented them from socializing with the oppressed, for the oppressors—all the lower castes deserved to suffer because they had sinned in the past, the blacks were supposed to be slaves because of their skin color, the Jews were all wrong and deserved to be tortured because just because of their religion. If Baby Kochamma had taken the time to know Velutha, as an employee and as a potential suitor for Ammu, she might not have made such grave allegations against him. And who knows, maybe she would have agreed to an intercaste marriage between Ammu and Velutha, considering what a suitable match he was for Ammu and how generous and patient he was with Rahel and Estha.

As Ambedkar said; “Fusion of blood can alone create the feeling of being kith and kin, and unless this feeling of kinship, of being kindred, becomes paramount, the separatist feeling – the feeling of being aliens – created by Caste will not vanish... where society is cut asunder, marriage as a binding force becomes a matter of urgent necessity.”⁹⁷ These interactions don’t necessarily have to be through marital relationships or exogamy. Ambedkar suggests inter-caste dining as a starting point.⁹⁸ No matter what the interaction between people from different castes consists of, it should arouse empathy and friendliness between the upper and lower castes.

The only way to end casteism is to acknowledge the fact that beneath the flashy masks and the show we put on, we all are just the same human beings; with strengths and insecurities. We have to be careful not to submit to our primal need to dominate. If possible, we should always raise our voice against all forms of injustices as; “evil asks little of the dominant ... other than to sit back and do nothing.”⁹⁹

⁹⁵ B.R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste, Writings and Speeches* (New Delhi: Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment Govt. of India, 2014), 74.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, 67.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Wilkerson, *Caste*, 141.

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