

PORTRAYAL OF UNDERPRIVILEGED IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS AND ARVINDADIGA'S THE WHITE TIGER

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ABSTRACT

*This paper explores the portrayal of the underprivileged in contemporary Indian English novels, focusing specifically on Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger*. Both novels reveal the complex socio-political realities of India's marginalized communities, highlighting issues of caste, class, and systemic oppression. By analyzing the narrative techniques and characterizations employed by Roy and Adiga, the study elucidates how literature serves as a powerful medium for social critique and awareness. The paper situates these works within the broader tradition of Indian writing in English that addresses deprivation, suppression, and the quest for identity among the oppressed classes.*

KEYWORDS: Indian writing in English, Deprived, Underprivileged, Oppressed, *The God of Small Things*, *The White Tiger*, Indian Society, Suppression, Untouchable etc

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‘The most paying and interesting subject of study in this world is what happens to human beings’ (Mukherjee, Introduction xi)

INTRODUCTION

The genre novel depicts varied themes and subject matter which comprises of human emotions, feelings, psycho societal traits such as human agonies, protests, relations, fighting, greed, exploitation, victories, sentiments, spiritual quests, quest for identity and so many other aspect of human nature. Indian writing in English especially Indian Novel writing, from its beginning has represented contemporary and historical themes and issues that comprises of nationalism, patriotism, partition, struggle for independence, Hindu traditions and rituals, social practices, superstitions, marginalization of lower and working class, issues of feminism in Indian context, poverty, Casteism and many other relevant issues. Among them, the theme of ‘underprivileged’ is also one of the major themes. Venkat Reddy rightly observes;

The Indian novel, we may say, has emerged not simply as a pure literary exercise, but as an artistic response to the socio-political situation existing in the county. For, the factors that shaped and moulded the growth of the Indian novel, since the mid-nineteenth century, arose as such from the political and social problems of a colonized country as from indigenous narrative tradition of ancient culture. (Reddy, Introduction 1)

HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXT OF UNDERPRIVILEGED REPRESENTATION IN INDIAN ENGLISH NOVELS

The first novel that portrays the under privileged in an Indian context is Sharat Chandra Chatterjee's *Shesprasha*, *Charitraheen* and *Pather Panchali* by Bibhuti Bhusan Bandopadhyay explore the issues of downtrodden, deprived and helpless etc. 'Sharat Chandra identified himself with the down and outs, and boldly portrayed the tears and sweat of the lower middle and have-nots classes' (Iyengar 318). The prominent writers like Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Bhabani Bhattacharya and Kamala Markandaya have brought the issues of untouchables, poverty, and the unprivileged and middle class families in Indian writing in English. *Untouchable* by Mulk Raj Anand is probably the first Indian novel in English that narrates the realism of underprivileged through dalit protagonist. The fate and condition of the deprived and exploited class is also portrayed in his other novels like *Coolie*, *The Road* and *Two Leaves and a Bud*. R.K. Narayan portrayed the lives of middle class and picture of Indian society minutely through his novels like *Bachelor of Arts*, *The Dark Room*, *The English Teacher*, *The Guide*, *Mr. Sampath*, *The Financial Expert*, *Waiting for Mahatma*, and so on.

Bhabani Bhattacharya took up the issue of the underprivileged and down-trodden in his novels *So Many Hungers* and *He Who Rides a Tiger*. The social realism and the exploration of the lower class in Indian society in the post colonial world is accurately portrayed by Kamala Markandaya in her works *A Handful of Rice* and *Nectar in a Sieve* etc. the issues of women and women empowerment, various traits of feminism were questioned, and discussed in several female novelists in 1960s and 70s; among them, the prominent writers are Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sehgal, Shashi Deshpande, Namita Gokhale, Jai Nimbar, Shoba De, Rama Mehta, Meena Alexander, Kamala Das and many other women writers. *A Fine Balance* (1996) by Rohinton Mistry portrays the torment and exploitation in the hands of rich and politically powerful. The lives of the helpless, the forgotten, the unprivileged became more miserable as they got trapped in the vicious circle. Anita Desai's *The Village by the Sea: An Indian Family Story* (1982), represents the poor and their real condition. The social life of peasants is described in Vasudeva Reddy in *Vultures* (1984). The hopeless condition of the underprivileged and their rustic life is accurately depicted in *Cyclones* (1987) by Manoj Das. *The God of Small Things* (1997) by Arundhati Roy which was awarded by Booker Prize narrates the conditions of an underprivileged Velutha and how brutally he was treated. The character Ammu in the novel is also alienated in the name of pseudo culture. The novel represents dalit protagonist who is helpless, suffering, discriminated and finally murdered.

THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS: CASTE, CLASS, AND TRAGEDY

A Booker Prize winner novel, published in 1997, *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, dealt with the theme of untouchability and class distinction in the society. The untouchability, the social evil that prevailed prolonged over the ages is discussed in the detail and its aftermaths are accurately portrayed in the narrative. According to the myth of Purusha who is divine ancestor can give an explanation for the emergence of *Varnas* that is caste system. The Brahman's originated from Purusha's mouth, his arms are represented by Kshatriyas, his thighs by the Vaishyas, and the Shudra's are building his feet. The untouchables belong to the Shudras, and even below it. As Mammachi is referring to the past, there is a part in which is said that the untouchables were not allowed to walk on public roads. Moreover, they had to cover their mouths while they were speaking. They actually were not given permission to exist. The non existence of the untouchables is several times referred in the novel, for example, when Velutha does not leave footprints or ripples in the water. From this, it is almost clear that either he is inhuman or supernatural.

The mythological framework of Purusha's body, which legitimizes the caste system, is invoked in the novel to contextualize social stratification. According to this myth, Brahmins originated from Purusha's mouth, Kshatriyas from his arms, Vaishyas from his thighs, and Shudras from his feet. Untouchables, positioned even below the Shudras, are subjected to extreme marginalization. The writer's narrative references this myth to underline the historical and cultural roots of caste oppression.

Velutha's character is subjected to dehumanizing treatment, such as being forbidden from walking on public roads and having to cover his mouth while speaking. Roy's narrative metaphorically renders Velutha as almost supernatural, emphasizing his invisibility and non-existence in the eyes of the dominant caste—he leaves no footprints or ripples in water, symbolizing societal erasure. The use of symbolism conveyed the message of systematic denial of identity and authority to marginal that is to Dalits.

At the same time, the novel portrays Ammu—a woman marginalized by patriarchal and cultural norms—highlighting intersections of caste, gender, and class oppression. Her illicit love affair with Velutha transgresses social boundaries, resulting in tragic consequences. The fatal fate of Velutha and Ammu underscores the consequences of defying rigid social hierarchies. The fragmented chronology, poetic prose, and dense symbolism of Roy's text make all their social oppressions far more deeply felt than in the novels and films of the 19th century. The novel's attention to "small things" — ostensibly insignificant moments and gestures — exposes how everyday small acts have the weight of social conventions and prejudices. In this sense, Roy not only denounces caste, but also the broader mechanisms of oppression—whether patriarchal or colonial.

THE WHITE TIGER: CLASS MOBILITY AND MORAL AMBIGUITY

It's a stark presentation of India's current socio-economic imbalances through BalramHalwai's gaze, one who aspires to rise and become a successful entrepreneur by subverting the system. What emerges from the novel is an exposure of this corruption, exploitation, and moral decay that lies at the heart of India's caste and class systems. Unlike Roy's tragic depiction, Adiga's employs a darker, more satirical, and morbid tone to portray Balram's rise as both a critique of and a response to systemic oppression. The novel is the result of a text consisting mostly of letters from Balram to the Chinese Premier, and presents the first-person confessional that offers frank commentary that is also sharp satirical. The violent and morally ambiguous trajectory of Balram from servant to powerful embodies the need for the despair and guile it would take to escape poverty and social subservience. The violent murder of his master, Ashok, represents a cruel break with the feudal and corrupt social order exploiting people of the less fortunate.

The White Tiger interrogates the myth of economic progress for India by exposing the survival of feudalistic structures of social relations and exploitation of the underprivileged by affluent classes. Balram's narrative subverts common standards of morality and justice, in that the poor are not made passive victims, but are active participants, working within a corrupt system.

His self-described identity as the "white tiger," a creature both rare and cunning, highlights his exceptionalism and his refusal to be victimized. Adiga's novel draws attention to all levels of corruption throughout society, e.g., the nepotism and social stratification that block meaningful social mobility. The metaphor of the "Rooster Coop", symbolising the social trap that keeps the poor subjugated, is of great assistance in seeing how systemic obstacles are imposed upon the underprivileged. Balram's final escape from his "coop" becomes a triumph both personal and reflective of a gruelling reality in India with regards to class struggle.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF BOTH THE TEXT

Both *The God of Small Things* and *The White Tiger* foreground the underprivileged but through different lenses and narratives strategies. Arundhati's work is rooted in the historical and cultural specificity of caste oppression, employing poetic prose to evoke empathy and tragedy. Adiga's narrative, on the other hand, uses a fast-paced, epistolary form to critique contemporary capitalism and social mobility.

While Velutha represents the invisibility and victimization of the Dalits, Balram embodies the potential for agency and rebellion, albeit through morally complex means. Velutha's tragic fate highlights the rigid and violent enforcement of caste boundaries, where resistance is crushed. Rebellion and morality are the two weapons by which one can transcend the social constraints; and it is suggested through Balram's story. Gender also plays a critical role in these portrayals.

Ammu's marginalization in *The God of Small Things* illustrates how caste and patriarchy intersect to oppress women, while Balram's narrative foregrounds masculine agency and individualism as tools for survival and success. The novels together illustrate the multifaceted nature of underprivileged experiences in India, shaped by caste, class and gender dynamics. They expose systemic inequalities that persist despite India's economic growth and democratic ideals, emphasizing the enduring legacy of historical oppression and the democratic ideals, emphasizing the enduring legacy of historical oppression and the complexities of contemporary social realities.

CONCLUSION

The portrayal of the underprivileged in *The God of Small Things* and *The White Tiger* reflects the evolving concerns of Indian English literature with social justice and realism. Roy's poetic tragedy and Adiga's satirical critique complement each other in exposing the systemic inequalities that continue to marginalize vast sections of Indian society. These narratives not only document oppression but also provoke critical reflection on the possibilities and limitations of resistance and transformation within entrenched social hierarchies.

Indian writing in English, through such works, continues to serve as a vital platform for voicing the struggles of the deprived and underprivileged, fostering awareness and empathy among readers globally. The nuanced portrayals in these novels encourage readers to question established social norms and consider the human cost of economic and social policies. The continued relevance of these themes underscores the importance of literature as a tool for social critique and change. Both Roy and Adiga remind us that the stories of the underprivileged are integral to understanding the full spectrum of Indian society and that their voices must be heard to achieve genuine social progress.

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