

**ARUNDHATI ROY'S VELUTHA AND HARRIET BEECHER
STOWE'S UNCLE TOM: A COMPARISON OF THE
ROMANTICIZED PROTAGONISTS.**

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Abstract

Elite writers, out of their literary charity, deign to represent the underculture by deploying the lowclass beings as heroes their narratives. Observers, as they are, appropriate the voice of sufferers and speak for them. The writing churned out of the observation made from ivory towers turns out to be unrealistic and misleading. They wield their ideological power on the culture under representation. Basic premise of this research paper is to justify that what is Orient to Orientalist is the underprivileged central character to an elite writer. This research paper critiques the portrayal of Dalit (Paravan) protagonist Velutha from The God of Small Things written by a non-dalit writer Arundhati Roy. It also exposes the unrealistic portrayal of Uncle Tom from the novel Uncle Tom's Cabin written by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Arundhati Roy claims to have lived among dalits hence claims to have first-hand experience of being like dalits. There seems to be room to debunk this claim when one closely observes the portrayal of Velutha. Harriet Beecher Stowe penned a story about one fugitive slave's life and called it "Uncle Tom's Cabin." Her novel was based largely on the autobiography "The Life of Josiah Henson Formerly a Slave. This paper will attempt to problematize the portrayal of dalit protagonist from the Arundhati Roy's and portrayal African Americal protagonists from Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin

Key words: class, caste, romanticisation, stereotypes, essentialism, Orientalism, underculture ideology, race, objectification, fatalism, slavery, exoticisation and community.

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When the writers belonging to the privileged social stratum deign to portray underprivileged characters as the protagonists of their literary works, they often resort to the practice of stereotyping. When a writer from majority culture depicts a minority experiences, stereotyping looms large as the most serious issue that impinges on the realm of literary representation. Stereotyping is basically a genetic fallacy which Edward Said, in context of cultural stereotypes, sees as a binary opposition between West and East, us and them, that produces an essentialized and static *other*. To him, colonized people are stereotyped and treated not as communities and individuals but as an indistinguishable mass about whom one can amass knowledge (Said 1978:32). Aforementioned equation is applicable to the elite writers and the characters from under culture they undertake to portray. Basic premise of this research paper is to justify that what is Orient to Orientalist is the underprivileged central character to an elite writer. Owing to absence of firsthand experience of being on the social periphery, the elite writers often rely on observation and imagination to build their impressions about the culture they know via remote sensing. Their 'vicarious experience' of being marginalized, they indulge in literary patronage of underculture. By assuming a morally superior position the elite writers delineate minority characters with the utmost sympathy and pity. This sympathy proves to be anathematic to the full realization of minority portrayals in mainstream fiction. Voice appropriation of this kind cannot be salvaged by invoking the freedom of imagination because it is intrinsically entwined with power. It is a literary exercise of dominant culture on non-dominant culture.

Gayatri Spivak, in her groundbreaking essay '*Can the Subaltern Speak?*' while problematizing the concept of 'strategic essentialism' argues that the subaltern is unable to speak and any claim of any discourse to produce an authentic voice for subaltern should be looked in askance for such claim of speaking for subalterns actually silences them. Spivak arguably seems to say that that the attempt of a dominant culture to lend voice to a minority culture often leads to silencing it further.

This type of voice appropriation is coercive because it is not a dialogue among equals but it is an epistemological imperialism of the elite writers that pushes minority subjects into empirical ghettos so as to suit their literary and ideological ambitions. This kind of forced representation not just pessimistically depicts the minority situation by using very reductive and negative generalizations but also underrates the potential of underculture to represent itself.

Mainstream writers portray marginalized characters as either single-dimensional or unrealistic. Even the protagonists who can be shown to be playing some proactive role are portrayed either as great-souled men or as buffoonish types. The protagonist is sometimes exalted like a Christ figure or sometimes he is reduced to be a sacrificial scapegoat. Sometimes he is romanticized as a Rousseau's Nature's Gentleman-'Noble Savage' or Nietzsche's 'Übermensch'-Overman. There are two possible reasons for this practice being prevalent among such writers. Firstly, they practice this naïve subjectivism so as to suit their own ideological interest of continual subjugation of the minority culture. They, to some extent, even succeed by making negative generalizations about the culture they attempt to represent. The second reason is their limited knowledge of the minority culture. Their knowledge of the culture under representation is mostly sought from observation, and the literature they read about it. The writer who tries to master other cultures cannot avoid trying to master it through the power of expertise. These portrayals based on author's limited knowledge of the culture he represents further escalate the issue of the 'authenticity' of the representation. Typification in literary representation of a minority culture always serves the interest of the representer. This research paper critiques the portrayal of Dalit (*Paravan*) protagonist Velutha from *The God of Small Things* written by a non-dalit writer Arundhati Roy. Roy is Syrian Christian by birth. Syrian Christians are proudly known as 'salt of the earth'.

The novel is sometimes described as an autobiographical novel. Even if we consider Ammu as the protagonist of the novel, the title of the novel seems to be attributed to Velutha who is only 'bodily' present in the novel. The novelist claims to have lived among dalits hence claims to have first-hand experience of being like dalits. There seems to be room to debunk this claim when one closely observes the portrayal of Velutha. Her obsession with the style and technique compared to the content of the novel too is worth-studying. Besides her inappropriate portrayal of a dalit character, her views on the dalit literature too seem to be a little biased. She finds fault with the dalits insistence that their literary representation should be done by dalits only. She agrees that people's own history should be written "but policing the territory of representation into formal policy can be counterproductive" (Rege

2006:9). In one of her interviews she expresses little displeasure about the way dalit writers write:

“In fact I am little skeptical about some dalit writing which goes great lengths to describe victimhood, with gratuitous description of smell and stink and humiliation. I feel that this is a sort of inverted plea for compassion and I think it can be counterproductive. I don’t believe in the politics of compassion and good intentions. I believe in finding beauty in saddest places, and honing it in to a weapon of war” (Blog- Outcaste: 2008)

This paper will attempt to problematize the portrayal of dalit protagonist from the Arundhati Roy’s and portrayal African Americal protagonists from Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

Velutha, the name itself seems ironic when Roy herself tells the readers that Velutha means “White in Malayalam because he was so black” (Roy1997:73). The name could be equated with the name of a Hindu God-Panduranga (worshipped in Maharashtra and Karnataka) which, in Marathi, means ‘White in colour’ but the God is actually known more for his black colour. The deifying tags such as – ‘God of Small Things’, ‘the God of Loss’, ‘The God of Goosebumps’, ‘the God of Sudden Smiles, Of Sourmetal Smells’ are all attributed to Velutha. These tags too are no less ironic. Though Velutha is the protagonist of the narrative, he is shown to be wanting in the kind of heroism and diligence found in the central character of a novel. He is not only romanticized and eroticized but he is exoticized too. He is culled from his entire community .Except his old father, paralyzed brother and the passing mention of his dead mother, we hardly get any idea about the condition of the rest of his community.

He, at times, seems to be un-*paravan*-like if he is compared with his brother and father. His father Vellya Paapen, subalternity personified, leads a life of slavery and subhuman fidelity. He lives through it as a penance and finally as a true vassal informs his feudal lord about his son’s violation of old rules and waits before his hut to kill his own young son. Vellya Paapen is a typical example of a loyal slave, informer and torturer of his own subject. Kuttapan too, unlike his able and literate brother Velutha is a “good and safe paravan. He could neither read nor write” (Roy1997:207). Anuradha Nidham in her essay “*The Small Voice of History*” in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* states that Velutha’s chimerical appearance and disappearance and his quiet suggestions could be interpreted as an evasive protest at the touchable logic. She argues: “what makes Velutha *dangerous* (italics original) so far as touchables and untouchables are concerned is his refusal to be interpellated [or addressed] as a paravan” (In Tickel2007:84).

Velutha is shown to be an exceptionally skilled technocrat. Like a “*Little magician*” as Roy calls him, he makes intricate toys, tiny windmills, rattles, minute jewel boxes, out of dried palm reeds. He can carve a perfect boat out of tapioca stems and figurines on cashew nuts (Roy 1997:74). He goes on to be educated in an Untouchable’s school. At the age of fourteen he attends a workshop for local carpenters conducted by Johann Klein, a carpenter from a carpenters’ guild in Bavaria. He not only completes his high school education at the Untouchables’ school founded by Mammachi’s father-in-law, Punnyan Kunju but becomes a successful carpenter. He has his own set of carpentry tools and a distinctly German design sensibility. Besides his carpentry skills he has complete mastery over machines. He mends water pumps, radios, clocks, electrical gadgets. He knows plumbing, assembling and maintaining machines. Mammachi makes Velutha a factory carpenter and puts him in charge of the factory’s general maintenance. She says that “it was a big step for a Paravan” (Ibid: 77). She often says that “if only he had not been a Paravan he might have become an engineer” (Ibid: 77). Chacho believes that Velutha “was a Parvan with future” (Ibid: 119).

Velutha in the novel speaks on very few occasions and his voice ill-suits the character of a *Paravan*. It is on page number 177 of the novel that he first opens his mouth and has a hearty talk with his kid friends Rahel and Estha. With a nice sense of humour he tries to tell the kids that it was not he whom they saw in the Communist march. His gentlemanly way of talking scarcely suits the undereducated *Paravan*. Dalit heroes in dalit biographies talk to each other in a distinct dialect which is different from the main-stream language. Their local slang, swear words and abuses give readers a flavour of the local colour. Stowe, being a non-negro novelist uses a different spelling and grammar structure to capture the essence of the Black subculture in her novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) albeit succeeds to a limited extent. Kancha Ilaiah in his book “*Why I am not Hindu*” (2005) vindicates the deviation of caste language from the standard language. He says that “caste language is structured by its own grammar. It is a flexible and alert grammar, designed for production-based communication” (5). Velutha’s brother Kuttappen who is uneducated speaks a common mainstream language. “We’ll see about that” (Roy 1997:213&284) says Velutha in two separate contexts: first when Rahel requests him to repair the boat that leaked and next when he replies to the threat of Mammachi that she will have him castrated and killed. Velutha’s reply in both the situations seems un-Paravan-like. Aijaz Ahmad, in his article “*Reading Arundhati Roy Politically*” comments on Velutha and Ammu’s mute love-making:

“All of that falls off as an inexorable sexual attraction overcomes them almost literally as a mystery; without a word spoken or any other indication passing

between them, both arrive, in the thickness of the night, at the same spot where they are to meet as if by predestination" (In Tickell 2007:116).

Velutha appears in the novel as a archetypal scapegoat figure. His elimination is almost a foregone conclusion when he treads on the corns of the laws of the Syrian Christian community. Velutha's elimination in the novel vindicates the "Love Laws laid down who should be loved. And how. And how much" (177). Velutha's butchering is passed off as a man's natural feeling "to destroy what he could neither subdue nor deify". The community's style of having Velutha killed is described as a preventive measure that will not allow the recurrence of such an incident: "they were not battling an epidemic. They were merely inoculating a community against its outbreak" (Roy, 1997:309). Velutha is a sacrificial scapegoat and his death is recommended to placate the community or purge it of its violation. He is seen as a threat by the community, hence his death is preordained. His destruction is brought about because the society was not ready for the change that his sexual affair with Ammu advocated. Before his annihilation he is blamed for the kid's abduction and Ammu's rape, typical of scapegoats' blameworthiness. The scapegoat's death makes him more powerful than his life. Velutha's inhuman torture by the police is ennobling and his subsequent death elevates him to a Christ-like height. The sacrifice of the scapegoat is believed to be caused either by bad luck or poor judgment. It is the fake F.I.R lodged by Baby Kochamma alone which leads to Velutha's extinction. Inspector Mathew repents later for his poor judgment and scolds Baby Kochamma for her fake complaint.

The love-relationship between Ammu and Velutha has not only been dissected and discouraged but treated as a forbidden relationship because it is inter-caste. However the author appears to be soft and evasive about more serious and complicated relationships in the novel. These relationships have just been glossed over may be because they concern high class people. One such relationship is the incestuous relationship between Rahel and Estha. Their relationship is not described in the manner that Ammu's and Velutha's is elaborated. There are mere hints about the incest and that too in an indirect and symbolic manner. The upper class children seem to be given a concession owing to their being 'Dizygotic'. Broken hearted Kari Saipu who commits suicide because of the failure in his same-sex love for a boy is painlessly portrayed just in a few lines. We get a limited view of Rahel's relationship with Larry McCaslin. So is the case with Baby Kochamma's relationship with Father Mulligan. The description of Mammachi's fierce one-sided oedipal attachment with her son Chacko does not go beyond a few hints. Gratification of Libertine Chacko's 'feudal libido' and the provision made of his objects of 'need' by his own mother is tersely described. These things seem to be scantily dealt with because that is in the best interest of the community and class.

Harriet Beecher Stowe who hailed from a deeply religious family wrote a noted political novel Uncle Tom's Cabin. She was daughter of Lyman Beecher who was a Presbyterian minister, American Temperance Society co-founder. Harriet Beecher Stowe, a small-town Connecticut woman whose family was known as the "Beecher preachers" for their long lineage of ministers, was so appalled by slavery, she penned a story about one fugitive slave's life and called it "Uncle Tom's Cabin." Her novel was based largely on the autobiography "The Life of Josiah Henson Formerly a Slave." Josiah Henson, the model for Uncle Tom, was a minister in the African Methodist Episcopal church who, with his wife and four children, escaped from slavery in 1830, and spent six weeks on a journey to freedom in Canada. Henson created the Dawn Settlement, a northern refuge for free slaves. When Henson was a small child, he saw his family separated and always remembered the tears his mother shed when his brothers and sisters were literally torn from her arms. He would also recount how his mother would pray in church. Henson was considered by many to be the most important fugitive slave of his time, and his life story, as retold in "Uncle Tom's Cabin," sensitized world to the tragedy of slavery.

The novel features Uncle Tom, an African-American slave whose long-suffering narrative and unshakable allegiance to his master imparts a regressive message. Tom is depicted as a self-sacrificial, deeply pious, endearing, fatalist, indefatigable and a man of impeccable character. Tom's character is highly unlike other slaves in terms of their nature, attitude and conduct. He is romanticized, exoticised and depicted as a Christ Figure. The novel popularized the phrase "Uncle Tom" which mean slavish and excessively subservient man to perceived authority figures, particularly a black person who behaves in a subservient manner to white people. The phrase also means a black man who will do anything to stay in good standing with "the white man" including betray his own people. Just like his counterpart from Roy's novel Tom is rarely found with his community men. He is voiceless and inactive. He never does anything to improve his lot and completely resigns himself to fate. He is depicted as an extra-religious man who is pitched against a dark-hearted villain Mr. Haley. Stowe declares him a hero of the narrative and intrudes in it in behalf of Tom. His love for child Eva is identical to Velutha's affection for Estha and Rahel in *The God of Small Things*. Mammachi praises Velutha by stating that he would have become an engineer if he was not a paravaan(untouchable). Chacko is Mammachi's son and owner of Paradise pickle factory where Velutha works as an in charge of maintenance. Chacko reacts in Velutha's behalf on receiving a suggestion from K.M.N. Pillai, the local politician, to sack Velutha. Chacko admits that Velutha practically runs the factory and he is indispensable. Tom is praised even by Mr. Haley who is a cruel auctioneer of the slaves. Mr. Haley says:

I've marked that ar. Now, a nigger of that ar heft and build is worth considerable, just, as you may say, for his body, supposin' he's stupid; but come to put in his calculatin' faculties, and them which I can show he has oncommon, why, of course, it makes him come higher. Why, that ar fellow managed his master's whole farm. He has a strornary talent for business." (Stowe,2005:127)

Uncle Tom's Cabin is too Jesus-centred novel. Tom is quarantined from his community members who are rather shabby, untidy and uncouth. He is a man of gentle, sophisticated manners. Augustine St. Clare is a typical hypocrite character in the novel that reminds us K.M.N.Pillai from *The God of Small Things*. Marie, St. Clare's wife is a self-centered woman and a trickster who resembles Baby Kochamma from Roy's *Novel*. Tom was deeply religious. Stowe vouches for his credentials in following lines:

Uncle Tom was a sort of patriarch in religious matters, in the neighborhood. Having, naturally, an organization in which the morale was strongly predominant, together with a greater breadth and cultivation of mind than obtained among his companions, he was looked up to with great respect, as a sort of minister among them; and the simple, hearty, sincere style of his exhortations might have edified even better educated persons. (Stowe,2005:27)

Tom is portrayed as a fatalist character who remains content with his present circumstances. Unlike people from social periphery who unite and straggle to get recognized and to try to obtain the right to dignified life, Tom does not do anything to attain the right to respectful living. Other African Americans, Gay Lesbian, Dalits, Tribals are often shown to be struggling to make their presence felt. Stowe herself puts this in the novel that "The slave is always a tyrant, if he can get a chance to be one" (Stowe, 293). The writers, who have experienced the pains of being on margins, unfailingly capture the faithful picture of their literary counterparts in their creative works. Stowe has foisted her Christian values, obedience, and piety onto the character of Tom. He tries to comfort his wife-aunt Chloe

"I'm in the Lord's hands," said Tom; "nothin' can go no funder than he lets it;—and thar's one thing I can thank him for. It's me that's sold and going down, and not you nur the chil'en. Here you're safe;—what comes will come only on me; and the Lord, he'll help me,—I know he will." (Stowe, 2005:80)

Both novels have several common things besides elite writers depicting the low class characters as heroes. Sophie Mall's death in the former and Eva's death in the latter novel are sentimentalized. There are stereotypes, generalizations, experiments with grammar, plot structure and narration in both of the novels. These things appear to be unnecessary if we focus on the unrealistic and improper portrayal of the protagonists. Both writers chose to assign protagonists from underculture only to rob them of their rightful energy and zeal to reform their brethren. The portrayals of the protagonists are made so as to suit the writers ideological interests.

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