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The Social Intricacies of Pagford and Ayemenem: A Comparison between *The Casual Vacancy* by J.K Rowling and *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy

Introduction

British and Anglo-Indian literature has come a long way. Anglo-Indian literature even owes its origin to British literature as it was the British conquerors who bestowed upon the conquered Indians the medium through which they could propagate their agenda-English.

British Literature has had a turbulent past. From being disregarded as a language of those of lower classes to being hailed as the universal language of knowledge, English has had its many ups and downs. Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton and many more elevated the standards of English by contributing their work. The Renaissance was a period of re-birth that changed the way people thought. It was a period where people were slowly becoming more open-minded and that indirectly helped the evolution of literature as well. Literature was used to question religious teachings and in-turn helped overthrow the Catholic regime.

Indo-Anglian literature started as a revolt against the British colonizers. They turned the tables on the British by using the language they taught to write about what Indians experienced under their regime and the oppression faced by them. Those authors that come under this category like Shashi Deshpande, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K Narayan, and more used English to portray the plight of Indians and put their own spin on English. They used the process of chutnification to give English an Indian feel. There were various words in the

vernacular languages of India that did not have an English counter-part and authors took it upon themselves to provide the appropriate English word, thus making the language their own.

The purpose of this project is to compare the works of J.K Rowling, *The Casual Vacancy*, and Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*. Not just the works but their personal experiences as well.

Arundhati Roy and her work *The God of Small Things*

Arundhati Roy did not belong to a conventional family. Her mother was shunned for getting married to a Bengali man and being outspoken. Roy was not brought up under restrictions as other children. Her mother did not impose any rules on her and she has been grateful for that:

... Given the way things have turned out, it's easy for me to say that I thank God that I had none of the conditioning that a normal, middle class Indian girl would have. I had no father, no presence of this man telling us that he would look after us and beat us occasionally in exchange. I didn't have a caste, and I didn't have a class, and I had no religion, no traditional blinkers, no traditional lenses on my spectacles, which are very hard to shrug off. I sometimes think I was perhaps the only girl in India whose mother said, "Whatever you do, don't get married." (Roy)

She grew up in Ayemenem, the same place where *The God of Small Things* is set. It is a story about Estha and Rahel, twins who were forced to live apart, their mother, Ammu, and many other individuals in their lives. It is a satire on Indian society and the importance it gives to the caste system over the lives of fellow humans. It sheds light on the patriarchal society as well. Ammu is faced with criticism because she got married to a man from Calcutta and later divorced him. Rahel is criticized for not behaving like a conventional girl. The novel also talks about the various masks a man wears. Papachi showed himself to be a

civilized man who dressed and spoke like the British and yet he would mercilessly abuse Mammachi and Ammu.

In the end, we learn that Ammu dies of cancer, Velutha, Ammu's lower caste lover, is killed because of his affair with Ammu, and Rahel and Estha resort to a physical display of love as the only means to find the connection between them.

J.K. Rowling and her novel *The Casual Vacancy*

J.K. Rowling underwent a lot of complications as well. She lost her mother to multiple sclerosis and the harrowing experience of losing her mother propelled her to write *Harry Potter* and use the novels as an outlet for her emotions. Her *Harry Potter* series has sold a million copies worldwide and has made her the richest author in the world. She contributes most of this for various charities and has even started her own charity called Lumos.

Much like Roy, Rowling is an outspoken person. She uses Twitter as the main battleground to make her thoughts known on various issues. Her wit has enabled her to give quick comebacks to those who challenge her. She has been penalized by the Catholic church as well. Her books were suspected to propagate witchcraft and magic, thereby corrupting young impressionable minds. However, she says that that's not her agenda. Aside from the negatives, her books have encouraged children to read more. It activates their imagination which would otherwise be suppressed by spending too much time on television and computers.

It has become a pop culture statement. Not limiting itself to just entertainment, it has permeated through various aspects of literature with studies on different characters in the books and their real-life comparison.

Rowling did not expect the number of fans she would get, "It's incredible, it's humbling, and it's uplifting to see people going out there and doing that in the name of your character"(Rowling).

The Casual Vacancy is about a small idealistic town with a lot of secrets. It begins with death and ends with death. The novel starts off with the death of Barry Fairbrother. As he was a member of the parish council, his death opened up a vacancy and each individual tried their hand at it. As the story progresses, we find out various details of the characters and their horrible lives. The ending is tragic, as Krystal kills herself because of her brother's death.

The Themes Seen in Both the Novels

Literary devices like satire and black comedy are used in both novels. We see that death is a major theme in the novels starting with Sophie Mol, Velutha and Ammu in *The God of Small Things*. Barry Fairbrother, Krystal Weedon, and Robbie Weedon are the deaths seen in *The Casual Vacancy*.

Women are shown to be exploited. Ammu does not get a say on the matter of her father's land, despite the work she puts into the company, because she is a woman. Moreover, she is chastised for being a divorcee and is also seen as a sexual object. Women are also expected to live up to certain beauty standards and we see this with Samantha Mollison who contemplates how it will be to alter her face surgically.

Sexual Abuse is another prominent theme. No one is safe from sexual predators. Not even a little boy. Estha was forced to do the unthinkable and that affects him. Krystal was raped in her own house, meaning that you are not safe even in your home.

Racism and casteism are also part of the novels. People of the Paravan caste were considered to be so low that they had to tie brooms to their back so as to not leave their footsteps and risk those of a higher caste to be contaminated by them.

In Rowling's book, The Fields are considered to be inferior to Pagford and the council is getting ready to remove them from their parish.

Hints of Syrian Christian influences and Sikh history are seen in Roy's and Rowling's works respectively. Politics is also another theme seen in both these novels.

Love and sex are two very different things and characters within the novels mistake one for the other. Velutha and Ammu, Estha and Rahel, Barry and Mary Fairbrother and many more such examples are given related to this.

Humans are materialistic by nature and symbols of it are seen in the novels. "Paradise Pickles & Preserves" in *The God of Small Things* and Howard Mollison's delicatessen are these symbols.

Most of the characters have not had healthy family lives. Ammu was constantly beaten by her father. Simon Price, *The Casual Vacancy*, is abused by his father and Krystal Weedon does not have any parental figures to rely on.

Mental health problems are another aspect that is dealt with by the authors. Madness, that runs in the family, in the case of Ammu, and OCD in the case of Colin Wall.

Krystal Weedon can be compared to Rahel. Both are wild spirits that would do anything to maintain their freedom. However, they encounter suppression in many ways. The way they deal with these problems is what makes them a true epitome of being a woman.

Thus we come to the end of this project. Lack of time and resources were some of the reasons that this project couldn't be fleshed out more. Both authors are incredibly talented and should be given a lot more credit and recognition than they are given. Growing up with *Harry Potter*, this was a great opportunity to learn more about its author. Arundhati Roy is an amazing writer as well. Her novel does not mince words and tells it as it is.

On the whole, it was a great opportunity and a wonderful experience.

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