

The Triple Tragedy of Ammu in The God of Small Things in the Perspective of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory

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Abstract: In the novel *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy's heroine Ammu's short life is surrounded by multiple tragedies. As a divorced woman from a high caste class in India, the significance of Ammu's tragic death is not only the literary aesthetic of the novel that serves to accentuate the conflict of the plot, but it is also a powerful political statement embodying the unlimited downward pressure exerted by the powerful class in Indian society. In this paper, the five-order model of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory is categorised into three levels, namely, basic needs, middle needs and high needs, in accordance with the bottom-up order of the pyramid pattern and is combined with the traditional laws and institutions of Indian society embodied in the text to explore the causes of Ammu's tragedy. Through analysing Ammu's motives and behaviours of human needs, the readers can intuitively understand the opposition between the growing human needs of Indian women and the multiple ruling interests of the powerful class. In the process of pursuing the fulfilment of her human needs, Ammu, unfortunately, touches and even destroys the ruling pattern on which the powerful class relies, which is the main reason for her tragedy.

Keywords: Abraham Maslow, *The God of Small Things*, tragedy

1. Introduction

Indian author Arundhati Roy's debut novel, *The God of Small Things*, has attracted the attention of literary critics worldwide since its release in 1997. The novel uses flashbacks to describe a family tragedy in India over three generations. Divided into 1969 and 1992 storylines, it begins with the reunion of fraternal twin siblings Estha and Rahel after 23 years of forced separation, slowing down the tragedy of the love affair between their mother, Ammu, a divorced, high-caste Syriac Christian believer, and Velutha, an untouchable woodworker. The two generalised patterns vaguely revealed in the title of the novel, "Small Things", and its antagonist, "Big Things", are a true portrayal of the horrors of colonial aggression, class division, caste discrimination, religious oppression and patriarchal oppression that lie beneath the masks of the seemingly simple southern farming town of Ayemenem. In the chronically imbalanced scales of power, the powerful in Indian society maintain the existing order of power through bloody violence and a rule-based discourse that suppresses human needs.

This paper is concerned with the fact that in the power order, the powerful class satisfies its own needs by dominating and oppressing the groups under its power and internalises this need as a private sign that belongs exclusively to the higher class. It is worth noting that the so-called power

hierarchies do not exist independently but have evolved in an interlocking and mutually reinforcing way. The order of power in *The God of Small Things* derives mainly from developing a coalition of colonial, caste, and male power. Moreover, this deep-rooted power order has penetrated into every aspect of social operation through legal forms, educational systems and cultural practices, and it is difficult to achieve the ultimate goal of shaking and subverting the order of power with the power of a small individual. Therefore, this paper will combine Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, focus on the origin of the tragic fate of the book's heroine, Ammu, and analyse how she exceeded and challenged the order of power and touched the bottom line of the ancient taboos in the pursuit and practice of human needs, and finally became a victim and sacrifice for the maintenance of the order of domination under the combined force of multiple powers.

2. Theoretical Foundation

Abraham Maslow was a famous American psychologist who proposed humanistic psychology and the hierarchy of needs theory that marked the birth of the third wave of thought beyond psychoanalysis and behaviourism. According to Maslow, the individual is a complete and organised whole, and the characteristics of iterative needs accompany human beings throughout their lives. Therefore, he proposed the Hierarchy of Needs five-order model based on many experiments and research, which lists all the most basic and innate five needs of human beings in the form of a pyramid. They are Physiological Needs, Safety and Security needs, Belongingness and Love Needs, Esteem Needs and Self-actualisation Needs [1]. These needs are arranged in a hierarchy or level of priority to motivate and guide the behaviour of the individual [2].

This paper argues that these naturally occurring human needs have been exploited by the powerful, who, under force and public pressure, have created a set of operating rules for the oppressed in an attempt to permanently block and confine the way in which the oppressed group's motivated awareness of their needs is created and put into practice. In order to facilitate the summarisation and discussion, this paper will follow the order of these needs in the pyramid from bottom to top, listing physiological needs and safety and security needs as basic needs, The belongingness and love needs, and Esteem needs as intermediate needs, and finally defining the self-actualisation needs, which are at the very top of the pyramid, as the advanced needs (as shown in Fig. 1).

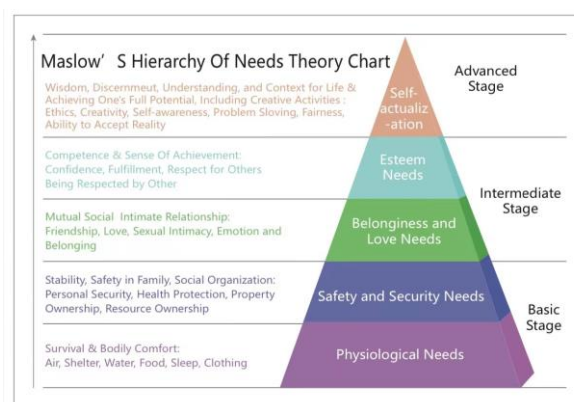


Figure 1: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory Chart.

3. Basic Needs Held Hostage in the Rule of Patriarchal Law

Marx pointed out in *Political Economy* that social existence determines human beings' spiritual life and political sphere [3]. All social relations are ultimately reduced to economic relations, often called "the economic base determines the superstructure". This simple logic of economics and social

relations was once defined by the French philosopher Althusser as a hasty form of economic determinism because Marx viewed all social relations as a simple reflection of the division of labour of capital, to the exclusion of other forms of social oppression. Under the influence of the doctrine of the theory of surplus value, women's domestic labour and reproductive production were excluded from the capitalist mode of production because of the lack of economic income [4]. In conjunction with Marx's view that "the wage is the only sign of value-creating labour" [4], the male class in the traditional patriarchal social system, in full control of the economy, acts as the dominant player in the social system and directly determines the way in which the rules of society are implemented. This is directly reflected in the formulation of legal rules, which not only makes women's right to voice their needs invisible in the construction of all the dimensions of the rules of legal operation but also makes it unavoidable for women's needs to be sacrificed and exploited, so that women's groups are inevitably dependent on men in all kinds of social relations, serving the legal rules constructed by men's needs.

Historically, Indian property law has excluded women from property ownership and authorised their legal and economic dispossession. During the 19th century British colonial period in India, with the collusion of British colonial law with Indian patriarchy, and "with the remodelling of existing property laws according to liberal political theory and the dictates of English case law, women lost customary economic safeguards and became more, not less, dependent on male family members". India's inheritance laws until 2005 prohibited women from inheriting family property in most states, effectively ensuring male financial dominance in the Indian economy [5]. Behind the systematic economic deprivation, the undisguised gender exclusivity of legal rules minimises women's legal subjectivity and mandates that they are forced into a social position of unlimited subjugation and oppression, which means that women in India can only rely on male-provided economic resources to sustain their basic biological needs, and which results in the absolute inferiority of women in marital and labour relations in India. In family relations, they must unconditionally submit to the gender-determined priority of male identity, male consciousness and male needs in social relations and serve the ultimate outcome of the primacy of male needs.

In the novel, after the deaths of Sophie mol and Velutha, Ammu is thrown out of Ayemenem by his own brother Chacko for causing "irreparable damage" and having no "legal status". In a situation of limited security and poverty, Ammu's asthma-induced illness took her life at the age of 31. The "legal status" that Chacko describes as missing from Ammu's life robbed him of the basic guarantees that would have ensured her survival and was directly responsible for the tragedy that strangled Ammu in the first place. The "legal status" that Chacko says Ammu lacks, at its root, robs her of the basic guarantees that would ensure her survival and is directly responsible for the tragedy of strangling her.

Maslow believed that parents and a normal family environment have a central place in the body's need for security. Fighting, physical abuse, divorce, and the death of family members are particularly frightening for children [1]. During her childhood, Ammu and her mother, Mammchi, struggle to survive under her father, Pappachi's moralistic and violent beatings, and the long-lasting violence fuels Ammu's strong desire to escape from her family. Pappachi's miserliness and discrimination against women prevented Ammu from pursuing higher education with her brother Chacko, who did not even provide a decent dowry for Ammu's marriage. It is written in the *mānava-dharma-sāstra* (compilation of relevant religious, moral, philosophical and legal texts of the ancient Indian state) that "If the daughter-in-law brings in sufficient wealth and the woman is honoured, God is pleased [...] All men who desire happiness should continue to provide their daughters with all kinds of adornments, clothes and food at all costs" [6]. The dowry law in India tacitly recognises that a woman's already humble position in the marriage relationship is immediately exacerbated if she fails to provide a dowry that satisfies her husband's family. Growing up in an environment where parental love and security are in short supply, Ammu mistakenly places her hopes in marriage out of a desperate desire

to escape her stifling family of origin. Although the marriage allows Ammu to escape Ayemenem, the short-lived happiness is followed by the beginning of an infinite tragedy.

When Ammu rejoins Ayemenem with her twins, her status as a divorced woman forces her to rejoin her own parents. Moreover, of course, she inevitably ends up as the laughingstock of the family. In India, where a divorced woman is a great shame to her family and is not entitled to any economic status, Baby Kochamma transfers her youthful hatred of Father Mulligan's unrequited love to Ammu, who can choose her own husband. So, when Baby Kochamma saw Ammu divorced from a marriage of her choice, she expressed her hatred for Ammu and threatened that "a married daughter had no position in her parents' home" [7]. However, this is not Baby Kochamma's opinion alone but a widely shared norm in Indian society. So even though Ammu has an equally considerable stake in the fruit and vegetable pickling factory that her mother, Mammchi, started, Chacko swallows up the whole thing after turning Mammchi's identity into that of an anonymous shareholder, and tells her own sister, Ammu, "my Factory, my pineapples, my pickles. [...] What's yours is mine, and what's mine is also mine" [7]. The Hindu Marriage and Divorce Act, passed by the Indian authorities in 1955, provides women with the right to divorce, but there are few provisions to protect women's financial and livelihood resources after divorce. As a result, Ammu is forced to return to her "status-less" family and rely on her brother Chacko's charity, as she is responsible for the basic needs of her children after the divorce.

After Baby Kochamma describes Ammu as the real culprit in Sophie Mol's death in front of Chacko, Chacko roars and kicks Ammu out of the house unceremoniously, Ammu's legally suppressed and neglected, isolated economic base and social status as a woman without a husband allows Chacko to kick Ammu out with impunity and take all of her parents' property for herself. Predictably, the absence of economic resources means the absence of social activities, and the absence of social activities makes it overwhelmingly difficult to survive in a social environment. The tragedy of Ammu's death begins with her inability to escape the unmet basic needs she faces. Suffering from a serious illness, she struggles to find work in the unwelcoming Indian labour market to earn money to bring her twins back to India, but in the end, Ammu's exhaustion and worries about her twins cause her to fall seriously ill and die. The significance of Ammu's tragic death in the dilapidated hotel transcends the aesthetic dimension of literature and becomes a silent indictment and a tragic political statement by Roy of the legal strangulation of women's basic needs in India.

4. Intermediate Needs in the Caste Taboo Blockage of Marriage

"When she looked at herself in her wedding photographs, Ammu felt the woman that looked back at her was someone else ...not of the wedding itself so much as the fact that she had permitted herself to be so painstakingly decorated before being led to the gallows. It seemed so absurd. So futile" [7].

After her divorce, Ammu often sits alone in front of her wedding photographs, reflecting on the absurdity and ridiculousness of the gallows marriage. Having successfully escaped Ayemenem, she did not find the belonging and loving fulfilment she had long lacked in her marriage of choice. Her husband, an irresponsible alcoholic, agrees to his white boss's outrageous request to "take care" of Ammu when he is in danger of being fired for his drinking. This causes a great deal of damage to Ammu's personal dignity in the relationship. So when she and the twins are faced with domestic violence once again, Ammu resolutely divorces and takes the children away. Back in Ayemenem, the physically and mentally repressed Ammu gets all her middle-class needs met in an affair with Velutha, her family's long-time untouchable labourer. However, their love affair runs afoul of India's ancient and deep-rooted caste taboos and ultimately turns into a second executioner who strangles Ammu.

The class struggle between the aristocracy, represented by Baby Kochamma, and the plebeians, represented by Velutha, is particularly profound in the novel, but such encounters often end only in the defeat of the plebeians. As Luce said, "Caste has been removed from its historical and economic

roots and exists as a political identity” [8]. Moreover, the caste taboos in India’s traditional marriage laws clearly state that “the law of caste endogamy must be followed, which is the most paramount restriction on intermarriage” [9]. Ammu’s family, the Ipe family of Kerala, is descended from the earliest Syriac Orthodox Christians and belongs to India’s noblest class of Brahmins. As a woman from a high-caste family, Ammu is acutely aware that there is no future between herself and Velutha, a member of the untouchable class. Their unspeakable love seems to have begun by chance, driven by carnal desire. However, what really attracts them is their simultaneous defiance of the injustice of fate and the love that touches their souls.

Ammu has a rather unfortunate childhood, and even though she comes from an aristocratic family, she is not immune to the violence that all Indian women cannot resist. Pappachi’s mask of a wagging tail and a gentleman, when confronted by a white visitor, is gone when he beats his wife and daughter, and after beating Ammu with a horsewhip, he even cuts up her favourite rubber boots right in front of her and stares at her with a “cold, flat eyes” [7]. This cruelty leaves Ammu deeply traumatised. However, Ammu’s husband also did not give her the conjugal love she had longed for. Her husband’s wild behaviour at their wedding was not motivated by his obsession with Ammu or the excitement of the physical pleasure he was about to enjoy but simply the satisfaction of an alcoholic who had been drinking. Even on the war-torn night when Ammu gave birth to the twins, her husband also “stretched out on a hard bench in the hospital corridor, was drunk” [7].

Maslow considered the need for love to encompass both the dimensions of giving and receiving love [1]. The need for self-esteem, on the other hand, stems from both the individual’s affirmation of self-worth and the recognition and respect of others. What is evident is that from the parental and marital relationship, only the twins and Ammu have a two-way, running, interconnected love for each other. The presence of Velutha satisfies Ammu’s long-suppressed carnal desires after her divorce with sexual intimacy, revitalising her as she releases her nature. As Maslow argues, love is not the same as sex [1], and Velutha’s deep attraction to Ammu goes far beyond the pleasures of physical union.

Velutha’s Paravan status puts him at the bottom of the Indian caste hierarchy as an untouchable, born unworthy of the need for love and self-respect. They are forbidden to walk on public roads, wear half-length clothes and carry umbrellas, and are not allowed to intermarry with high-caste women. Despite his mastery of carpentry and machine manipulation, Velutha remains treated as a kind of creature instead of a man who can be abused at will, and even the wages he is entitled to become a handout and a favour for the aristocracy. After the divorce, Ammu has become a woman of “no status”. The previous period of her life seemed to her to be a miserable one, and she was in a situation where “her life had already been lived”: the marriage she had chosen had broken up, and her endeavours in the fruit and vegetable pickling factory had been buried. Meanwhile, she and the twins are being hated by Baby Kochamma and seen as Chacko’s “millstones around his neck” who could be bored and abandoned at any time. So Ammu is desperate to be recognised, to still have value in the world, and to have the strength and ability to occupy an essential place [1]. Of the few personal belongings she possesses, her two children are the most valuable treasures and artefacts she has created. Moreover, Velutha is at this point selflessly loving her artefacts with the strength of an adult: letting the twins paint his nails, playing house with them, building novelty gadgets and repairing damaged boats, and hugging them deeply and lifting the children above his head [7]. These vast difference in treatment not only satisfies the twins’ lack of fatherly love but also Ammu’s long-lost need for self-esteem, which is deeply satisfied when he sees Velutha’s heartfelt love for the twins. So even though Ammu and Velutha are worlds apart in terms of caste, their two hearts, oppressed by the same hierarchical order and “political identity”, are gradually coming closer together.

The good-natured Velutha has his own political ambitions. After joining the Communist Party, he actively responds to the party’s marches to fight against the rigid caste hierarchy, which makes

Ammu, who is also under multiple oppressions, feel the resonance of their hearts and souls. In the final chapter of the novel, Roy's beautifully crafted writing depicts their mutual admiration conveyed through their joined bodies, showing the process of physical and spiritual fusion between Ammu and Velutha. However, as Maslow explains in his elaboration of the difference between love and sex, the expression of love and emotion in a sexual relationship is not only fraught with contradictions but also limited by many constraints and taboos [1]. As the title of the last chapter, "*The Cost of Living*", implies, when Velutha enters Ammu's body, the price of survival has "climbed to unaffordable heights" [7]. Resistance and attempts to cross the border drove them to their mutual love and, in the same way, became the most immediate weapon to kill them. As the Communist Party of India becomes more and more politically active in Ayemenem, it could at any time overthrow Baby Kochamma's proud caste dominance and the aristocratic interests on which it depends. After his father, Velly Pappu, in a show of loyalty, denounces his son's forbidden love for Ammu in front of Mammachi. Velutha, with his dual "political identity" as an untouchable and a communist, is chosen by Baby Kochamma to be the scapegoat for Sophie Mol's death and suffers an agonising death under the inhuman violence of the non-Dalit police. Velutha died not only in defence of the faltering dominance and reputation of the powerful but also in his father's perceived unquestioning and foolish loyalty to the caste, and Velutha's tragic death was followed by the death of the family's banished exile, Ammu, who died of guilt and nostalgia for him. They share the same tragedy; both sacrificed to the abandonment and back-stabbing of their relatives, forced to sacrifice their young blood to India's ancient and corrupt racial laws.

5. Advanced Needs Erased in the Systems of Society

"Everybody says that children need a Babà. And I say no. Not my children." [7].

This is a lesson in love that Ammu often does to the twins. Ammu often tells the twins that she loves them with double the love of a normal parent. Throughout her life, Ammu has challenged and attempted to transgress the deep-rooted taboos of Indian law and patriarchy. She is educated enough to know what a "male chauvinist society" is, and she tries her best to plan and practice it in an attempt to resist. She has a combination of masculine and feminine qualities. In the midst of her marital misfortunes, she bravely withstood the pressures, did not give up her strict upbringing of the twins, and used her love to resist and defend herself and the twins against all the violence and injustice they faced. She goes further and further in her pursuit of self-actualisation, but it is precisely this process of achieving "transcendence" that unfortunately touches and destroys the order of power and the interests of domination on which the powerful class relies, which leads to Ammu's irreparable tragedy, and her loved ones pay a terrible price for it.

Maslow defined self-actualisation as the desire of man to fulfil his ambitions, a tendency to realise all his potential. It is not only an end state but a process of realising one's potential at any time and to any extent [1]. It may represent an iteration of a state or a degree to which the latter can outperform or surpass the former. In *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, Maslow demonstrates his multiple interpretations of the word "transcendence", and it is in the course of these "transcendences" that Ammu's tragedies progress until they slowly touch and destroy the smooth functioning of the order of power and the core interests of the powerful class.

Firstly, there is the transcendence of the past and the opinions of others [10], which is Ammu's trial and intervention in the order of power in the early period. The Hindi poet Dulcidas' *Rama Kundalini* has described women's identity in India in this way: a woman without a husband is equivalent to a lifeless shell and a waterless lake [6]. Despite the relative peace of her marriage, when her children are subjected to violent conflict and the childhood abuse by Papachi is about to be repeated with her own children, Ammu chooses to leave the past behind and return to the home from which she wants to run away from every moment of her life. She must provide her children with the

basics they need to survive, but she must also endure the cost of ridicule and judgement from her family.

Secondly, there is the transcendence of culture, Ammu's revolt against the powerful class and his intervention and resistance to the order of power. According to Maslow, in a very specific sense, the transcendent self-realised person will look at the culture in which he or she is rooted in a transcendent and objective way [10]. Ammu is one such self-actualiser. When faced with a backward marriage culture that prevents her from marrying because she has no dowry, she does not sit back and wait but actively plans for her escape from her family. When Chacko tells her twins that Ammu has no "legal status," Ammu immediately and forcefully retorts, "Thanks to our wonderful male chauvinist society" [7]. Although Ammu understands the inferior status of women after divorce, she remains adamant in her denial of the proposition that fatherhood must be present in the upbringing of the children. By strictly regulating the behaviour and conduct of the twins and by constantly working to earn a living in the hope of creating a home for them, Ammu hopes to demonstrate her value as a woman and her denial of the infinitely divinised masculine overtones of Indian culture through the double, if not infinite, love she has for her children.

Finally, there is the transcendence of an extreme dichotomy. This is Ammu's most serious transgression of the order of power, and her move deeply disrupts the smooth functioning of the order of power. In the novel, the transcendence of this dichotomy is mainly manifested in the extreme identification with caste differences. When Velutha's foolish father denounces Velutha's affair with Ammu in front of Mammachi, Baby Kochamma shudders and says, "How could she stand the smell? Haven't you noticed? They have a particular smell, these Paravans" [7]. It shows that the prejudice and enmity of the higher caste classes downward in the Indian social system are not confined to the superficial forms of names and designations but have risen to an inner distinction and attack at the physical and spiritual levels. However, Ammu, a high-caste woman, rejects India's deep-rooted caste prejudices and takes it upon herself to transcend the age-old physical and spiritual dichotomy by joining Velutha in ultimate union and ecstasy by the river. Their tiny relationship is a small respite from the eerie gaps in the domination of the powerful, and their physical intermingling presents a beautiful and fleeting dissolution of a long-standing racial divide.

Ammu's transcendental behaviour starts from the first tentative and interfering and progresses step by step to the higher level of needs with the gradual satisfaction of the needs until it finally shakes and even breaks the smooth-running order of the powerful and directly violates the ruling interests of the powerful class. Maslow has addressed several destructive topics. He argues that the occurrence of destructive behaviour can be seen as one of the concomitant reactions to a basic threat. Any perception of damage and degradation of the organism is likely to trigger threat-like emotions in the mind of the insecure person, which is a form of non-retaliatory defensive behaviour [1]. Ammu's behaviour fits Maslow's thesis. Her so-called seriously disruptive behaviour in the eyes of the powerful is her anxious and hostile reaction to a threat to her basic needs and general way of life. All her human needs are sacrificed to the disregard and suppression of the Indian social system, which makes her restless and unmanageable, so she "temporarily set aside the morality of motherhood and divorcée-hood" [7]. Unfortunately, this transcendental act of defence attacks the powerful class with greater power. However, unbeknownst to the perilous Ammu, while she still tries to bring the twins to clear the dead Velutha's name, her transcendent love of caste and class has completely damaged the high caste family's hypocritical reputation and will inevitably lead lesser people to follow suit. Therefore, Ammu must be banished as the least costly way of preserving the family's honour and aristocratic interests.

The never-ending downward pressure from the powerful has led to a system of social convention that has increased the degradation and exploitation of women, and the right to wear long hair has become the criterion for determining whether an Indian woman conforms to the rules of society.

When Ammu leaves her reviled hometown with regrets for Velutha, on the night of her death, she dreams of herself being branded by the police with scissors cutting off her hair - she is being treated as a prostitute and will spend the rest of her life completely stripped of her dignity, dying a disturbing and humiliating death in a society that tacitly accepts the system's abuses and discrimination. Frightened by the dream, Ammu aggravates her condition and passes away with regret and nostalgia on the path of unfinished self-actualisation. Ammu's tragedy clearly demonstrates the contradiction between the growing human needs of women in Indian society and the current backward and feudal social system, but her weak personal power could not subvert the existence of this order of power fundamentally, so her silent resistance ultimately led to a terrible price: the loss of young lives, and two children's permanently unhealed trauma tragedy.

6. Conclusion

The paper argues that Roy uses the tiny gender relationship between Ammu and Velutha to map the deep-rooted oppression of power in Indian society, profoundly reflecting the blow to and exploitation of the human needs of "Small Things" by "Big Things" and presenting the tragic price paid by the little people in their upward revolt. The ancient legal and social issues involved in the caste system, superimposed on the lingering shadow of the colonial issue not discussed in this paper, represent the powerful class's aim to maintain the crumbling existing order of domination by brutally devouring and stifling the small needs and tiny hopes of the small people in order to slow down the progress and development of society and civilisation. Ammu's short and tragic life was spent pursuing her own needs and trying to break taboos. She was a maverick in this downstream flood of history, fighting her way through the maelstrom of power that is the imbalance of Indian society until she is completely engulfed. While this transgression and breakthrough is an unprecedented challenge for a populous country that is at the back of the global gender index and, at the same time, has a long history, her tragic end also represents the helplessness and sadness of countless failed self-actualises of the oppressed classes in India.

This paper analyses Ammu's life and his tragic end through Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory in the hope that more Indian writers will speak out in writing, prompting future rebels and revolutionaries to examine and reflect on India's deep-rooted social realities and to realise as early as possible the equality of the existence of high-level human needs and the revolutionary realisation of such needs. In the course of continuous practice and change, they will break the deep-rooted corrupt laws to challenge and subvert the existing ruling pattern of the powerful class to promote the continuous development and progress of Indian civilisation and make sure that tragedies like Ammu's will not be repeated in reality.

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