

CASTE, GENDER, AND SOCIAL RESISTANCE IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*: A CRITICAL STUDY

Dr. Binod Kumar Mandal

Former Research Scholar,

University Department of English, Lalit Narayan Mithila University, Darbhanga

ABSTRACT

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* presents caste and gender not as separate forms of discrimination but as mutually reinforcing structures that regulate property, sexuality, labour, family honour and social belonging. Set primarily in Kerala, the novel traces the destruction of Ammu, a divorced Syrian Christian woman, and Velutha, a skilled Paravan worker, after their relationship violates established social boundaries. This study examines the novel through intersectional, anti-caste, feminist and postcolonial perspectives. It argues that Roy exposes the persistence of caste within religious, familial, political and legal institutions while revealing how patriarchy depends upon the regulation of women's sexuality and inheritance. Ammu and Velutha's relationship constitutes a radical refusal of these structures, although the violence inflicted upon them demonstrates the capacity of dominant institutions to suppress individual resistance. Further, studies Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, Rahel and Estha to show that oppression generates complicated forms of complicity, silence and survival. Roy's nonlinear chronology, child-centred language, repetition and linguistic experimentation function as methods of counter-history by recovering experiences excluded from official narratives. Ultimately, the novel presents resistance as fragile and frequently punished, yet indispensable to the recovery of human dignity.

Keywords: Arundhati Roy, caste, gender, social resistance, intersectionality, patriarchy, Velutha, Ammu, postcolonial fiction

I. INTRODUCTION

Published in 1997, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is simultaneously a family tragedy, a critique of postcolonial society and an inquiry into the relationship between private desire and public power. Its narrative moves between 1969 and 1993, reconstructing the circumstances surrounding Sophie Mol's death, Velutha's custodial killing, Ammu's social expulsion and the traumatic separation of the twins Estha and Rahel. Although these events initially appear to belong to the private history of the Ipe family, Roy gradually demonstrates that they are produced by caste hierarchy, patriarchy, colonial inheritance, economic privilege and institutional violence [1].

The novel is situated within the Syrian Christian community of Ayemenem, Kerala, but its social world cannot be understood through religious identity alone. Caste distinctions persist beneath formal conversion, while colonial values survive within language, education, beauty standards and family prestige. The Ipe family's Anglophilia coexists with its contempt for the Paravan community. Similarly, Chacko's Marxist vocabulary does not prevent him from exercising economic and sexual authority over female workers. Roy thereby exposes the contradictions between progressive self-representation and inherited structures of domination.

Alex Tickell observes that the novel connects intimate relationships with the wider histories of caste, colonialism and political struggle [2]. Julie Mullaney likewise argues that Roy's family narrative opens onto questions of nation, history and social exclusion [3]. The

domestic sphere is therefore not presented as separate from politics; it is one of the principal locations in which political power operates.

This studies three interrelated questions: how caste determines labour, bodily value and social credibility; how patriarchy regulates women's sexuality, property and mobility; and how marginalized characters resist these structures. The central argument is that caste and gender become most violent at their intersection. Ammu is punished not simply because she is a woman, and Velutha is not murdered simply because he is a Paravan. Their relationship threatens caste endogamy, patriarchal control, class privilege and the authority of the respectable family at the same time.

II. CRITICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHOD

The study employs close textual analysis informed by intersectional feminism, anti-caste thought and postcolonial criticism. Intersectionality is particularly relevant because it rejects the treatment of different systems of oppression as isolated or merely additive. Kimberlé Crenshaw explains:

“The intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism” [4, p. 140].

Although Crenshaw developed the concept in relation to Black women's experiences, its methodological insight is valuable for examining the interaction of caste, gender, class, religion and marital status in Roy's novel. Ammu possesses caste and class advantages in relation to Velutha, but she remains economically vulnerable as a divorced woman without an accepted claim to family property. Velutha is male and politically aware, yet caste deprives him of protection, credibility and bodily security. Their vulnerabilities are different, but their relationship activates the punitive force of several hierarchies simultaneously.

Uma Chakravarti's formulation of Brahmanical patriarchy provides a specifically Indian framework for understanding the relationship between caste continuity and the control of sexuality:

“Caste hierarchy and gender hierarchy are the organising principles of the brahmanical social order” [5, p. 579].

While the Ipes are Syrian Christians, their social practices reveal the migration of caste ideology across religious boundaries. The regulation of Ammu's sexuality protects not only patriarchal honour but also caste exclusivity. Ajay Sekher's study of Christianity and caste in the novel demonstrates that conversion does not automatically eliminate caste consciousness or untouchability.

B. R. Ambedkar's analysis of endogamy further clarifies why Ammu and Velutha's relationship appears so dangerous:

“The real remedy for breaking Caste is inter-marriage. Nothing else will serve as the solvent of Caste” [6, sec. 20].

Their relationship crosses the boundary that caste must guard in order to reproduce itself. At the same time, Gopal Guru's insistence that Dalit experience cannot be adequately represented through a generalized account of gender warns against treating Ammu's and Velutha's oppression as identical [7]. The analysis must acknowledge their solidarity without erasing the unequal social risks attached to their bodies.

III. CASTE AND THE ORGANIZATION OF SOCIAL POWER

Velutha occupies a contradictory position within the Ayemenem community. He is an accomplished carpenter, mechanic and factory worker whose technical abilities exceed those of many socially privileged characters. Nevertheless, his competence does not produce equality. The Ipe family values his labour while refusing him social intimacy. His skill makes him economically useful, but caste determines the limits of his recognition.

This contradiction reveals caste as more than occupational classification. It is a system governing touch, proximity, mobility and credibility. Velutha may repair machinery and manufacture objects for the family, but he cannot enter its social world as an equal. Even his name—meaning “white” in Malayalam—ironically challenges the association between fair skin, caste status and purity. His body is admired for its strength and beauty, yet the same body becomes available for unrestricted police violence once he is accused.

Sekher argues that the novel exposes the survival of caste discrimination within the Syrian Christian community, undermining claims that Christianity exists outside India’s caste history [8]. Mammachi’s treatment of Velutha makes this continuity evident. Her acceptance of his labour does not weaken her belief in caste distance. When his relationship with Ammu is disclosed, economic paternalism immediately turns into disgust and punitive rage.

Vellya Paapen, Velutha’s father, illustrates the psychological internalization of caste. Instead of defending his son, he reports the relationship to Mammachi and offers to kill him. His response shows how hierarchical power can compel the oppressed to participate in preserving the system that degrades them. Fear, dependence and inherited notions of pollution become instruments of social discipline.

Caste power also operates through political betrayal. Velutha participates in Communist activity, yet Comrade Pillai refuses to protect him. The party recognizes workers as a class but fails to confront caste prejudice within its own practice. Needham reads the novel as an attempt to recover the “small voice” of those excluded from dominant historical narratives [9]. Velutha’s abandonment demonstrates the inadequacy of political movements that speak in universal terms while leaving caste hierarchy intact.

The police complete the alliance among family authority, caste prejudice and state power. Baby Kochamma converts a consensual inter-caste relationship into an allegation of abduction and sexual assault. The police accept the accusation because the upper-caste family’s narrative possesses institutional credibility, whereas Velutha’s caste identity marks him as presumptively criminal. His killing is therefore not an accidental excess. It is the violent restoration of a boundary he has crossed.

IV. GENDER, FAMILY AND FEMALE DISPOSSESSION

Patriarchy in *The God of Small Things* is reproduced through both male authority and female complicity. Mammachi experiences prolonged domestic violence from Pappachi, yet she later protects Chacko’s privileges and condemns Ammu’s sexuality. Her suffering does not automatically create solidarity with other women. Instead, she acquires limited authority by accepting the gendered structure of the family and transferring its violence downward.

The contrast between Chacko and Ammu exposes the family’s sexual double standard. Chacko’s relationships with female factory workers are tolerated and euphemistically described as his “needs,” while Ammu’s consensual relationship becomes an unforgivable violation. Chacko is divorced, but divorce does not diminish his status as son, property holder and factory owner. Ammu’s divorce, by contrast, makes her socially suspect and

economically dependent. She is treated as a temporary resident in her parental home rather than as a legitimate heir.

Rose Casey argues that the novel's feminist critique is closely connected with women's historical exclusion from property and juridical authority [10]. Ammu's vulnerability is consequently material as well as emotional. Without secure property, employment or an independent residence, she remains subject to the decisions of Chacko and Mammachi. Chacko's assertion of ownership over the house and factory converts patriarchal custom into domestic law.

Susan Stanford Friedman's analysis shows how the novel connects gendered violence inside the family with violence performed by the state [11]. Ammu's body is controlled by relatives, humiliated by the police and excluded from socially respectable space. When she attempts to challenge the fabricated case against Velutha, the police inspector responds with sexualized contempt. The encounter demonstrates that patriarchal authority is not confined to the household; it extends into legal and administrative institutions.

Baby Kochamma occupies an especially complex position. Her frustrated desire, religious discipline and dependence upon the Ipe household reflect the restrictions imposed upon unmarried women. Nevertheless, she converts her own deprivation into surveillance and punishment. She manipulates the children, falsifies Velutha's actions and protects the family's reputation at the cost of innocent lives. Her character prevents the novel from reducing gender politics to a simple conflict between virtuous women and oppressive men.

John Lutz relates the emotional deprivation of Roy's characters to structures of patriarchal and economic domination [12]. Mammachi, Baby Kochamma and Ammu respond differently to restricted lives: Mammachi accommodates power, Baby Kochamma imitates it, and Ammu openly defies it. Only the last response directly challenges the social order, which explains why Ammu becomes the object of its harshest punishment.

V. THE "LOVE LAWS": INTERSECTION OF CASTE AND GENDER

The relationship between Ammu and Velutha forms the moral and political centre of the novel. Roy describes the rules regulating intimacy as the "Love Laws":

"The laws that lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much" [1, p. 33].

These laws condense caste endogamy, patriarchal control and class privilege into a single principle. The question is not merely whether Ammu may experience sexual desire. It is whether an upper-caste woman may choose a Dalit man and thereby refuse the authority of family and community over her body. Similarly, Velutha's offence is not merely that he enters a prohibited relationship; it is that he behaves as if caste does not determine the boundaries of his humanity.

Brinda Bose interprets the erotic dimension of the novel as a form of politics because Ammu and Velutha use desire to cross boundaries enforced by caste and patriarchy [13]. Their meetings create a temporary space in which socially imposed identities lose some of their authority. Ammu is no longer merely a disgraced divorcee, and Velutha is no longer merely an Untouchable employee. They encounter one another as desiring subjects.

This resistance, however, does not erase differences in their social position. Ammu possesses caste privilege even while suffering gendered oppression. Velutha faces the full violence of untouchability. Consequently, their punishments are both connected and unequal. Ammu is locked up, separated from her children, expelled from her home and condemned to an

isolated death. Velutha is beaten to death by the police. The difference shows that caste marks his body as disposable in a way Ammu's body is not, even though patriarchy gradually destroys her social existence.

Leila Neti's legal reading of the "Love Laws" demonstrates how apparently private sexual norms overlap with formal and informal systems of law [14]. Baby Kochamma's fabricated accusation succeeds because sexual respectability, caste prejudice and police authority support one another. The consensual nature of Ammu and Velutha's relationship is erased, and the upper-caste family assumes the authority to define both the woman's honour and the Dalit man's criminality.

Their love should not be romanticized as a complete social revolution. It does not dismantle caste, redistribute property or transform political institutions. Yet it reveals that hierarchical systems are neither natural nor emotionally absolute. The violence required to suppress their relationship exposes the instability of the order they challenge. If the relationship were socially insignificant, the family and police would not need to respond with such brutality.

VI. SOCIAL RESISTANCE AND ITS LIMITATIONS

Resistance in the novel appears through desire, labour, speech, memory and linguistic play rather than through a single organized movement. Ammu resists by leaving an abusive marriage, refusing passive obedience and choosing Velutha. Velutha's craftsmanship, political participation and relationship with the twins challenge the assumption that caste can define intelligence or human worth. Rahel and Estha resist adult authority through private language, reversed words, imagination and their attachment to socially forbidden persons.

Nevertheless, Roy does not present resistance as automatically successful. Institutional power defeats Ammu and Velutha, while the twins survive only in a state of psychological fragmentation. This pessimism has produced an important critical debate. Aijaz Ahmad argues that the novel risks transferring political transformation from collective struggle to private erotic transgression and offers a contentious representation of Kerala's Communist movement [15]. His criticism draws attention to the danger of treating personal rebellion as an adequate substitute for organized politics.

Bose's interpretation provides a necessary counterpoint. The personal is already political when caste survival depends upon the regulation of marriage and sexuality [13]. Ammu's desire cannot be dismissed as apolitical because her choice directly violates the reproductive logic of caste. Yet Ahmad's objection remains valuable: symbolic boundary-crossing alone cannot protect marginalized people from family authority, economic dependency or state violence.

The novel's social resistance is therefore best understood as revelatory rather than immediately transformative. It reveals the hypocrisy of Chacko's Marxism, the caste prejudice concealed within Christian respectability, the coercion behind family honour and the violence supporting legal authority. Resistance exposes power before it can overthrow it.

Susan Comfort argues that the novel's layered structure connects caste, gender, class and environmental exploitation to wider processes of commodification [16]. The deteriorating river, the transformed History House and the commercialization of culture indicate that social domination is accompanied by ecological and economic dispossession. Roy's "small things" are thus not trivial matters. They are bodies, memories, natural spaces and forms of affection sacrificed to supposedly larger narratives of family, development, political ideology and national progress.

VII. NARRATIVE FORM AS COUNTER-HISTORY

Roy's narrative method is inseparable from the novel's politics. The story does not proceed chronologically from cause to consequence. Instead, it circles repeatedly around traumatic events, revealing their meaning through fragments. The reader learns early that Sophie Mol has died and that Velutha has been destroyed; suspense arises from discovering how social institutions made these deaths possible.

Roy writes:

"Things can change in a day" [1, p. 32].

The statement does not reduce tragedy to chance. The decisive day carries the accumulated pressure of histories extending across generations. A few hours become catastrophic because caste prejudice, patriarchal inheritance, colonial values and political betrayal are already in place.

Elizabeth Outka describes the novel's nonlinear temporality as a representation of trauma in which the past remains active within the present [17]. Estha's silence and Rahel's emotional detachment show that trauma has not become a completed memory. Repetition reproduces the involuntary return of experiences that cannot be assimilated into an orderly life story. At the same time, the reconstruction of the past enables the narrative to restore relationships erased by the official account.

Roy's manipulation of English also constitutes resistance. Capitalization, phonetic spelling, reversed words, Malayalam expressions and child-centred rhythms weaken the authority of standardized English. Michael Lawrence Ross argues that Roy's interplay between English and vernacular language supports her broader political challenge to rigid identities and inherited conventions [18]. The children disassemble adult language just as the novel disassembles official history.

The narrative gives detailed attention to gestures, insects, smells, colours, toys and fragments of speech. Such details challenge historical accounts centred exclusively on political leaders and public events. Velutha's skill, Ammu's desire and the twins' memories become forms of evidence. The novel thereby constructs a counter-history in which the experiences of socially "small" people reveal the violence concealed within respectable institutions.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The God of Small Things demonstrates that caste and gender are interconnected systems governing intimacy, labour, property, mobility and credibility. Velutha's death exposes the alliance among caste prejudice, family authority, political abandonment and police violence. Ammu's destruction reveals how patriarchal society disciplines a woman who claims sexual and emotional autonomy. Mammachi and Baby Kochamma show that those injured by power may also reproduce it when limited privilege depends upon obedience to hierarchy.

Ammu and Velutha's relationship is politically significant because it violates both caste endogamy and patriarchal control. Its tragic conclusion does not make the resistance meaningless; rather, it reveals the extent of violence required to preserve social inequality. At the same time, the novel cautions against mistaking private transgression for complete political emancipation.

Roy's most enduring resistance occurs through narrative itself. By disrupting chronology, privileging children's perceptions, hybridizing English and recovering suppressed memories, she refuses the orderly history produced by dominant institutions. The novel does not offer easy liberation. It preserves the testimony of those whom family, party and state attempt to

silence. In doing so, it affirms that attention to “small things”—individual dignity, bodily autonomy, memory and forbidden affection—is essential to any meaningful struggle against caste and patriarchal power.

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