

A Tapestry of Struggles: Exploring Layers of Oppression in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

Dibpriya Bodo

Assistant Professor
Department of English
Hills Degree College
Haflong, Assam

Abstract

The God of Small Things is a richly layered novel written by Arundhati Roy that addresses a wide range of social, political and personal themes, underscoring its significance in contemporary Indian literature. The present paper undermines the concept of Indianness in the novel. It concentrates on the cultural values related to caste and gender discrimination depicted in the story. Arundhati Roy vividly illustrates the patriarchal structure of Indian society, highlighting the difficulties women encounter within traditional frameworks. It explores personal struggles, modern social issues, and various human behaviours. Through a non-linear narrative that alternates between past and present, Roy reveals the inner lives of her characters, demonstrating how their experiences are shaped by larger societal forces. It reflects on the erosion of ideals since India's independence, current social challenges, and the complexities of human behaviour. By questioning existing power dynamics and patriarchal norms, Roy aims to inspire significant change.

Keywords: Caste system, Culture, Gender, Society, Women.

Introduction

Arundhati Roy stands out as one of the few authors who actively engages with socio-political issues in her work. Her novels have received global acclaim and she is recognized as the second Indian author to win the esteemed Booker Prize. In her acclaimed novel, *The God of Small Things*, released in 1997, she delves into various social values present in Indian society. This ground-breaking work is celebrated for its captivating narrative and profound exploration of intricate social and political themes. Roy was awarded the Booker Prize for this novel and in November 2001 she received the French Prize from the Universal Academy of Cultures in recognition of her impactful activism against intolerance, racism, and sexism. The story centres on a fractured family, focusing on the experiences of fraternal twins Rahel and Estha. Set in the small town of Ayemenem, near Kottayam in Kerala, the novel also vividly captures Indian culture, particularly highlighting caste discrimination through the forbidden romance between Ammu and the untouchable Velutha. It reflects cultural values tied to caste and gender inequality. Using a non-linear narrative that shifts between past and present, Roy unveils the characters' inner lives showing how their personal experiences are shaped by broader societal influences. The novel tackles various themes, illustrating how Roy's intricate storytelling addresses issues such as caste, colonialism, gender, memory, and the fragile nature of human relationships. It reflects on the decline of ideals since India's independence, ongoing internal conflicts, contemporary social issues, and the complexity of human behaviour. Furthermore, the narrative

explores themes of women's alienation and self-discovery. By critiquing existing power dynamics and patriarchal norms, Roy seeks to inspire meaningful change.

Representation of Indian Society through each character's struggle

The novel serves as a powerful representation of Indian identity, illustrating a society where women often face disrespect and blame. In this context, women are categorized into groups—such as married versus unmarried, those with children versus those without, and married versus divorced—further complicating their status in society. Gender and patriarchy are key themes along with a few more in *The God of Small Things*. The novel portrays the systemic oppression of women in a patriarchal society, where strict gender roles prevail and those who challenge them face punishment. It is not the woman who is to blame, but rather society, with its entrenched traditions and patriarchal norms. While traditional and conservative women may accept their roles without question, those who are more aware and open-minded recognize the importance of individuality and freedom, leading them to challenge these societal norms. The novel explores Roy's insights on personal sensitivity, critical awareness and the emotional connections that transcend caste and patriarchal boundaries, suggesting that these elements can drive significant change in a traditional, male-dominated society. The story centres on four generations of a family living in Ayemenem, near a river in Kerala, South India. The oldest generation includes Rev. E. John Ipe and his wife, but the narrative mainly focuses on the last three generations of the Kochamma family. Following Ammu's divorce, her children, Estha and Rahel, reside with the Kochamma family. The arrival of their uncle Chacko's ex-wife, Margaret, and their daughter Sophie Mol marks a pivotal moment in Estha and Rahel's lives. Chacko shows no remorse for his actions, while Ammu's life is shattered at just 24 years old. The book also highlights the struggles of Indian women, examining their hardships from social, religious, cultural, and economic perspectives. A central character is Velutha, an untouchable whose sensitivity and talent for crafting small wooden toys bring joy to his friends. Velutha embodies the God of Small Things, representing the small yet significant aspects of life, such as feelings, emotions, memories, personal desires, and love. The novel also shows how women can perpetuate patriarchal values, as seen in characters like Baby Kochamma and Mammachi, who enforce societal norms and punish those who resist. This theme highlights the complex dynamics of power and oppression within families and society at large.

In Indian culture, divorce is often viewed as a man's privilege rather than a woman's. This male-centric society restricts women's lives through various customs and traditions. The character of Baby Kochamma in the novel exemplifies this aspect of Indian society, she shows no compassion for her relatives or for other women in distress. The influence of patriarchy is so strong that Ammu's own mother lacks empathy for her unhappy daughter. In this family dynamic, women are often seen as the ones responsible for domestic violence. Divorced women often face blame for their circumstances, while men are rarely questioned about their divorces. However, the perspectives of some women and segments of society are evolving. Although conservative and traditional views still criticize and shame women for their divorces and personal struggles, there is a contrasting viewpoint among rational, unconventional, and progressive individuals who hold a different stance on divorce. The Kochamma family's close ties with their British relatives reflect a sense of progress and a feeling of superiority. In contrast, she experiences deep despair in her life, feeling lonely, isolated, and bored. Ammu realizes that

even though she lives with her mother and brother in her parents' house she lacks a true sense of belonging. At twenty-four she becomes aware of life's frustrations and pains. She faces the consequences of her choice in a husband, enduring punishment for her decision. In her parents' home, within her family, and in a patriarchal society, she is treated like an outcast simply because she is divorced.

Ammu's experiences reveal the struggles women face in a male-dominated world. As a single mother, she suffers social isolation and financial hardship. Her pursuit of love and independence is met with harsh criticism ultimately leading to her tragic end. Her struggle reflects the broader challenges women encounter in a society that restricts their freedoms and choices. However, Ammu represents another facet of Indian identity as a symbol of rebellion and defiance. She boldly challenges societal norms and refuses to conform to English customs. Her secret love affair with Velutha, who is considered untouchable, highlights her resistance. Ammu's character is pivotal in the story as she confronts entrenched traditions and breaks through social barriers, including caste distinctions. Her defiance against caste discrimination is evident in her relationship with Velutha, an untouchable. Roy suggests that true change in patriarchal attitudes relies not on political parties but on individual awareness and freedom. Velutha, who is skilled and educated, deserves respect, love, and job opportunities, regardless of his caste. However, it disrupts delicate and sensitive aspects of traditional Indian society. Ammu is portrayed as intelligent, brave, and defiant. She refuses to accept the violence associated with marriage and, despite being a mother of two, chooses to pursue a divorce. The conflict between Velutha and Ammu arises from their personal desires and love, which are at odds with the rigid caste system. In society's eyes, personal feelings hold little significance. In India, there are strict social norms that cannot be easily challenged. Individuality is often rejected by entrenched traditions and customs, and those who defy societal rules face consequences. The novel reaches a tragic climax with the deaths of Ammu and Velutha, which deeply impacts Estha and Rahel. The story concludes without a hopeful or empowering resolution. Ammu dies in isolation, in a tragic state, separated from her children, while Velutha is killed by the police. The novel also highlights a prevalent belief in Indian society that investing in a daughter's education is futile, as she will eventually marry into another family, benefiting her husband instead. Some families worry that a well-educated girl may struggle to fit into her in-laws' household. This mind-set leads the high-caste Kochamma family to halt Ammu's education while supporting Chacko's studies in Oxford.

The way Sophie Mol is treated is completely different from how Estha and Rahel are treated. In Indian society, there is a significant disparity in how the children of sons and daughters are treated. Sophie receives favourable treatment because she is the daughter of a son, while Estha and Rahel face mistreatment as they are the children of a divorced daughter. For the family, Sophie represents the future head of the household due to the lack of brothers. In contrast, Estha and Rahel are seen as a source of trouble and embarrassment. This negative perception stems from the fact that they do not live in their father's home. In the context of Indian patriarchal society, a father's home is considered the proper place for children. However, Ammu challenges this norm by getting a divorce and seeking support from her parents. This unpleasant behaviour is reflected in the way the servant, Kochu Maria treats Estha and Rahel.

Oppressive nature caused due to Social Hierarchy and Caste System

One of the prominent themes in *The God of Small Things* is the oppressive nature of the caste system which profoundly influences the lives of the characters. The novel offers a critical examination of the rigid social hierarchy that exists within Indian society where individuals are frequently evaluated and restricted based on their caste affiliations. The relationship between Ammu, a Syrian Christian, and Velutha, a Dalit, often referred to as “Untouchable”, serves as a poignant illustration of this theme. Their love perceived as a breach of societal norms results in devastating repercussions, underscoring the stringent enforcement of caste boundaries. The tragic fate of Velutha highlights the brutality of a system that denies individuals their fundamental dignity and rights solely due to their lineage.

Arundhati Roy does not simply present the caste system as an abstract idea, she vividly portrays its detrimental impact on both individuals and families. The novel critiques the persistent practice of caste discrimination, which is sustained not only by societal structures but also by individuals who have internalized these prejudices. This is particularly evident in characters such as Baby Kochamma and Mammachi, who actively support and perpetuate these oppressive customs. A crucial element of the narrative centres on caste, as the protagonist endures oppression stemming from his low caste status, being labelled as untouchable. This group is viewed as polluted and is often avoided. Velutha emerges as a significant figure representing the untouchables in the story. His name, which means “whiteness” in Malayalam, contrasts with his dark complexion. Many untouchables possess remarkable talents and skills capable of performing tasks just as well as those from higher castes. However, their identity as “untouchables” hinders their personal growth and potential. Velutha is depicted as a kind of magician, able to create beautiful items like tiny windmills and delicate jewellery boxes from dried palm reeds. His father, Vellaya Paapan, works as a toddy tapper and belongs to the Paravan caste. Velutha often accompanies his father to Ayemenem House for work.

Mammachi is the first to recognize Velutha’s exceptional talent as a carpenter. Despite his status as an untouchable and his humble origins, Velutha proves to be invaluable to Ammu’s family. He excels as the best machine operator in their factory and possesses impressive carpentry skills. Mammachi often points out that if Velutha were not a Paravan, he could have pursued a career as an engineer. Unlike Chacko, who is educated at Oxford, it is Velutha who takes care of the new canning machine and the automatic pineapple slicer. He also maintains the water pump and the small diesel generator. This clearly shows that Mammachi’s family increasingly relies on Velutha. However, his identity as an untouchable prevents them from fully appreciating his contributions. Vellaya Paapan has his own concerns as Velutha matures into a young man. One day, Velutha vanishes, and for four years, no one knows his whereabouts. He eventually returns to Ayemenem but never discloses where he has been. Upon his return, Mammachi assigns him the responsibility of general maintenance for the factory, which leads to some resentment among the other workers. Vellaya Paapan is aware of his son’s rebellious nature and worries for him even more. His fears intensify when he realizes the extent of what his untouchable son has engaged in. The only action he can take is to rush to Ayemenem House and inform Mammachi about the situation.

The caste system has rendered the love between Ammu and Velutha unacceptable. Ammu’s love for Velutha is considered forbidden due to the cultural norms of the time. People from higher castes are not permitted to have relationships with those deemed untouchable. Consequently,

Ammu's affection for Velutha is unacceptable to both her family members, like Mammachi and Baby Kochamma, and to Velutha's father, who exposes their secret relationship to Ammu's family. Despite their feelings for each other, Ammu, being from a higher caste, is forbidden from having any special relationship with Velutha, who is considered untouchable. Baby Kochamma hurries to the police station to explain the events that leads to Velutha's abrupt arrest. The death of Sophie Mol is the final blow for Velutha, as he is wrongfully accused, even though everyone knows it is an accident. The police treats Velutha brutally, which ultimately results in his death. His body is discarded in the Pauper's pit, a place where the police routinely disposes of the deceased. This marks the tragic end of Velutha's life as an untouchable, a trade unionist, a rebel, a carpenter, and a lover. His wish to experience life as a touchable sparks this tragedy. The river, which flows in front of Velutha's house, represents the divide between him as an untouchable and Ammu's family as touchables. The novel illustrates how he faces discrimination from the upper caste in all aspects of life.

Women characters' alienation and self-discovery

Another significant cultural issue is gender bias. The roles of men and women in society are heavily influenced by cultural norms. In Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, we see three generations of women, each raised in different circumstances. The oldest generation includes Mammachi, followed by Ammu's generation, and the youngest is Rahel. Mammachi, Ammu's mother, lives under the dominance of men. She is married at a young age to a seventeen-year-old man who nearly controlled her every move. In the early years of their marriage, Mammachi, who has shown promise as a violinist, abandons her career at Pappachi's request. During their brief time in Vienna, she begins her first violin lessons, but they are cut short when her teacher, Launsky-Tieffenthal, mistakenly tells Pappachi that Mammachi has exceptional talent and can potentially perform at a concert level. This incident highlights the male dominance in their relationship. Additionally, Mammachi faces domestic violence, Pappachi often physically abuses her with a brass flower vase and insults her, not allowing her to sit in his Plymouth until after his death.

Another figure who exerts control over Mammachi is her son Chacko, who is privileged and educated at Oxford. After his divorce from Margaret, he returns home and takes over Mammachi's pickle factory, referring to it as "my factory" and "my pickles" (Roy 57) without acknowledging that Mammachi has founded and nurtured the business before his return. In light of these circumstances, Mammachi accepts her situation passively, believing it is her duty as a woman, as dictated by the cultural norms of her society.

Ammu, the second-generation woman in the novel, faces significant restrictions due to her circumstances. She is harshly oppressed as she attempts to assert her individuality. Her parents favours her brother simply for being male, leaving her with no option but to remain in her parents' home and await a marriage proposal. During this time, she often dreams of escaping Ayemenem and freeing herself from her harsh father and her long-suffering mother. She travels to Calcutta to spend the summer with a distant aunt, where she meets her future husband, who works as an assistant manager at a tea estate in Assam. However, she soon learns that he is an alcoholic and dishonest. When he attempts to sell her to his employer, she divorces him and returns to Ayemenem. Society expects a good woman to live with her husband and accept his

actions without question. Feeling neglected in Ayemenem, Ammu becomes fiercely protective of her vulnerable twins, Rahel and Estha. Velutha, a close friend of the twins, is always willing to entertain them. Ammu's character teaches us about a woman who seeks to challenge the cultural values and patriarchal system in Indian society. Unlike her mother, she refuses to tolerate her husband's negative behaviour and chooses divorce over staying in an unhappy marriage. Ammu exemplifies someone who defies the societal norms of India.

Her daughter, Rahel, finds herself without a place in both her family and society. Living in her grandparents' home, she cannot experience a typical childhood and instead witnesses the injustices faced by her mother. As Rahel grows up, she is not acknowledged by those around her, preventing her from fully engaging with cultural traditions. This lack of recognition allows her to become a free woman, unbound by the mental constraints of cultural expectations, unlike her mother. When she returns to Ayemenem and is asked about her marital status, she confidently replies that she is divorced showing no concern for the old man's judgment.

Conclusion

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* presents a deep and complex narrative that examines a wide array of themes, such as caste, social stratification and gender dynamics. Through her intricate storytelling and well-developed characters, Roy delivers a compelling critique of the societal conventions and structures that perpetuate inequality and oppression. The novel illuminates the persistent struggle of women against unyielding exploitation, suffering, and the myriad challenges they face within a patriarchal framework. Roy adeptly explores the intricate layers of Indian society, revealing its multifaceted nature. The narrative is rich with examples that underscore various cultural dimensions, including the oppression of women, their battles for property rights and educational opportunities, their roles within familial structures, and the challenges they encounter in expressing their views, all of which are overshadowed by entrenched male dominance. Despite these adversities, the novel underscores the importance of human emotions and sentiments. It posits that traditions and customs should serve to enrich human existence, asserting that no practice or societal norm should possess the power to diminish it.

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