

SOCIAL INEQUALITY, FORBIDDEN LOVE, AND CHILDHOOD TRAUMA IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*

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Abstract

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, published in 1997, explores the devastating consequences of caste discrimination, patriarchal authority, social inequality, and family oppression in postcolonial Kerala. Through the tragic experiences of Ammu, Velutha, Rahel, and Estha, Roy examines how social conventions regulate personal relationships and determine the lives of individuals who challenge established hierarchies. The forbidden relationship between Ammu, a Syrian Christian woman, and Velutha, a Paravan man, exposes the brutality of caste prejudice and the unequal distribution of power within society. The novel also portrays the emotional suffering of children whose innocence is destroyed by adult conflicts, institutional violence, and family secrets. Roy's representation of women further reveals how gender expectations restrict individual freedom and reinforce patriarchal control. Through fragmented chronology, shifting perspectives, symbolic imagery, and innovative language, the novelist connects personal tragedy with broader historical and political realities. This study examines the interconnected themes of caste, gender, childhood trauma, forbidden love, and social injustice, with particular attention to the relationship between individual experiences and oppressive social structures. It also analyses how Roy's narrative techniques challenge conventional storytelling and give significance to neglected experiences. The study argues that the tragedy of the central characters arises not merely from individual mistakes but from a society that protects established hierarchies at the expense of human dignity. *The God of Small Things* remains a powerful literary examination of how prejudice, silence, and unequal power destroy relationships and shape individual lives.

Keywords: Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, Caste Discrimination, Childhood Trauma, Social Inequality, Narrative Technique, Social Injustice.

INTRODUCTION

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is a significant work of contemporary Indian English fiction that examines the relationship between individual suffering and the social structures that govern human life. Published in 1997, the novel is set primarily in Ayemenem, Kerala, and follows the experiences of a Syrian Christian family whose internal conflicts reflect the wider inequalities of Indian society. Through the lives of Ammu, her twins Rahel and Estha, and Velutha, a skilled Paravan carpenter, Roy explores the destructive consequences of caste prejudice, patriarchal authority, and rigid social conventions. The novel's central tragedy develops from relationships that challenge established boundaries of caste, gender, and family respectability. Rather than treating these events as isolated personal misfortunes, Roy reveals how social institutions reinforce discrimination and punish individuals who resist accepted norms. The novel's political significance emerges from its close attention to private suffering, demonstrating that personal relationships are deeply influenced by historical and social inequalities.

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Caste discrimination forms one of the most important themes in the novel. Velutha is talented, intelligent, and capable, yet his social position as a member of the Paravan community restricts the recognition and freedom available to him. His technical skills and friendly relationship with the children do not protect him from the prejudice directed towards his caste. The contrast between his abilities and the treatment he receives exposes the irrationality of a social system that values inherited status above individual merit. Although Velutha

contributes to the life of the family through his work, he is denied the freedom to form relationships outside the boundaries imposed by society. His treatment reveals that caste discrimination operates not merely through personal attitudes but through institutions, customs, and assumptions that determine who is entitled to dignity and belonging.

The relationship between Ammu and Velutha becomes the most direct challenge to this social hierarchy. Ammu is a divorced Syrian Christian woman whose position within her family is already insecure. Her relationship with Velutha crosses boundaries that the community regards as unacceptable, threatening the social authority maintained by the family and its wider environment. Their intimacy becomes a challenge to the rules governing caste and gender, exposing the unequal standards by which society judges individuals. Ammu is condemned for exercising her personal freedom, while Velutha is subjected to far more violent consequences because of his caste position. Their relationship reveals that the freedom to love is not distributed equally. Social expectations determine which relationships receive recognition and which are treated as threats to established order.

Roy's treatment of forbidden love is closely connected with the idea of the "Love Laws," the social conventions that determine whom individuals may love, how they may love, and how much freedom they may exercise in their relationships. These laws represent the invisible boundaries through which families and communities regulate personal behaviour. They transform private affection into a matter of public judgement and make conformity more important than individual happiness. Ammu and Velutha's relationship challenges the assumption that caste boundaries and social reputation should determine emotional attachment. Their tragedy demonstrates how society can turn love into a source of punishment when it threatens established hierarchies. The novel does not present their relationship as separate from its social context; instead, it reveals the consequences of a system that refuses to recognise the equality of human desire and dignity.

Gender inequality further complicates the novel's representation of social power. Ammu's experiences reveal the restrictions imposed on women within a patriarchal family structure. Her marriage does not provide the security or independence expected from conventional domestic life, and her return to her parental home does not restore her dignity. Instead, she remains vulnerable to the authority of male relatives and the judgement of the community. Her brother Chacko, by contrast, enjoys privileges that Ammu is denied. This contrast exposes the unequal standards through which men and women are judged within the same household. Chacko's behaviour receives a degree of tolerance, while Ammu's decisions become grounds for condemnation. Through this imbalance, Roy questions a social order that grants men greater freedom while requiring women to preserve family honour through obedience and self-denial.

The treatment of Ammu also reveals how economic dependence and family reputation reinforce patriarchal authority. Her position as a divorced woman limits her influence within the household and makes her dependent on relatives who regard her as a source of embarrassment. The family's concern with social standing becomes more important than its responsibility to protect her emotional well-being. Ammu's desire for love and personal independence is therefore interpreted as a threat rather than as a legitimate expression of human need. Her experience demonstrates that women may face punishment not only for challenging male authority but also for refusing to accept the identities assigned to them by family and society. Through Ammu, Roy exposes the cruelty of conventions that demand female sacrifice while offering little protection or recognition in return.

Childhood trauma is another central concern of the novel. Rahel and Estha experience events whose emotional consequences continue long after the immediate circumstances have passed. Their childhood is shaped by family conflict, social prejudice, fear, and the punishment of those they love. Although children may not fully understand the social structures responsible for these events, they experience their consequences directly. Estha's traumatic encounter with a stranger and the later events surrounding Velutha contribute to his withdrawal and silence. Rahel's memories similarly reveal how childhood experiences continue to influence adult identity. Roy does not present childhood as an uncomplicated period of innocence. Instead, she demonstrates how adult decisions and institutional violence can destroy a child's sense of safety and belonging.

The twins' relationship provides an important emotional centre for the narrative. Rahel and Estha share experiences that connect them even when physical distance and emotional withdrawal separate them. Their memories reveal the lasting effects of trauma and the difficulty of recovering a sense of wholeness after profound suffering. Roy represents their childhood experiences through fragmented recollections rather than a simple chronological account. This narrative method reflects the way painful memories return unevenly and disrupt an individual's understanding of the past. The twins' experiences also challenge the assumption that children remain unaffected by the conflicts of adults. Their suffering demonstrates that family secrets, social prejudice, and violence can shape psychological development in ways that continue into adulthood.

Family relationships in the novel are marked by affection, resentment, authority, and unequal expectations. The Ipe household is not simply a private domestic space; it reflects the wider social hierarchy of its community. Mammachi's experiences reveal the persistence of patriarchal control, while Baby Kochamma's resentment and desire to preserve family respectability contribute to the tragedy surrounding Ammu and Velutha. Chacko's position demonstrates how male privilege can operate even within a family that experiences

other forms of social pressure. These characters do not function merely as individuals with personal weaknesses. Their behaviour also reflects the values and prejudices they have absorbed from their environment. Roy therefore presents the family as an institution through which social inequalities are reproduced, defended, and passed from one generation to the next.

The novel also examines the relationship between caste prejudice and institutional power through the role of the police. Velutha's treatment demonstrates how official authority can reinforce existing social discrimination rather than protect those who are vulnerable to it. Once the relationship between Ammu and Velutha becomes known, the response is shaped by assumptions about caste, respectability, and social order. Velutha is not judged solely on the basis of his individual actions; his caste identity determines how his circumstances are interpreted. The violence inflicted upon him reveals the devastating consequences of institutional prejudice. Roy's representation of the police challenges the assumption that legal authority always operates independently of social bias. The novel shows how institutions can become instruments of oppression when they reflect the prejudices of the communities they serve.

Social class and political ideology also contribute to the novel's criticism of inequality. The setting of Kerala, with its history of political movements and social reform, provides a background against which competing claims about equality can be examined. The presence of communist politics suggests the possibility of challenging class divisions, yet political affiliation does not automatically eliminate caste prejudice or patriarchal attitudes. Comrade Pillai's political activities reveal the limitations of movements that speak in the language of collective equality while remaining influenced by personal ambition and established social divisions. Roy's treatment of political life is therefore complex. She recognises the significance of political struggle but questions whether public declarations of equality necessarily transform private behaviour. The novel demonstrates that caste and gender inequalities can persist even where political movements claim to represent the interests of ordinary people.

Roy's narrative technique strengthens the novel's thematic concerns. The story moves between different periods of time, gradually revealing the events that lead to the central tragedy. This fragmented chronology requires readers to reconstruct the relationship between past and present, memory and experience. The structure reflects the continuing influence of traumatic events on the characters' lives. Instead of presenting the story as a straightforward sequence of incidents, Roy allows details to acquire meaning as earlier experiences are reconsidered. This method also challenges conventional narratives in which social problems are explained through simple causes and consequences. The reader must examine how family history, political circumstances, personal decisions, and institutional power interact to produce the tragedy.

Language and symbolism contribute further to the novel's distinctiveness. Roy frequently uses repetition, playful expressions, unusual capitalisation, and childlike verbal patterns to represent the twins' understanding of the world. These techniques create a contrast between the imaginative possibilities of childhood and the harshness of adult society. The children's language becomes a means of expressing experiences that cannot easily be explained through conventional forms of narration. The title itself draws attention to the importance of small experiences, private affections, ordinary objects, and overlooked individuals. By focusing on apparently minor details, Roy demonstrates how intimate moments can reveal the larger structures of power governing social life. The small things of the novel acquire significance because they expose the emotional realities that public institutions and respectable families attempt to suppress.

The significance of the novel extends beyond its particular setting. Caste discrimination, gender inequality, institutional violence, and childhood trauma remain important subjects in discussions of justice and human rights. Roy's narrative encourages readers to question the assumption that established traditions deserve unquestioned respect. It also reveals the danger of treating social conformity as a measure of moral worth. The experiences of Ammu and Velutha demonstrate the consequences of a society that protects inherited privilege at the expense of individual freedom, while the suffering of Rahel and Estha shows how injustice can affect future generations. The novel's continuing relevance lies in its ability to connect structural inequality with the emotional lives of individuals, making visible the suffering that dominant social narratives often ignore.

CONCLUSION

The God of Small Things presents a powerful critique of the social structures that regulate love, identity, and individual freedom. Through the tragic experiences of Ammu, Velutha, Rahel, and Estha, Roy exposes the destructive relationship between caste hierarchy, patriarchy, family authority, and institutional power. Her fragmented narrative, innovative language, and attention to childhood memory deepen the novel's exploration of suffering and resistance. The tragedy of the characters arises not simply from personal decisions but from a social order that refuses to recognise their equal humanity. By giving literary significance to marginalised experiences and suppressed emotions, Roy challenges readers to reconsider the relationship between tradition and justice. The novel ultimately suggests that human dignity cannot flourish where love is controlled by social hierarchy and where institutions preserve prejudice rather than protect the vulnerable.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Author Contributions

Conceptualisation: Dr. S. Sujitha and Mrs. V. Sudha; Methodology: Dr. S. Sujitha and Mrs. V. Sudha; Formal analysis: Dr. S. Sujitha; Investigation: Dr. S. Sujitha and Mrs. V. Sudha; Writing – original draft: Dr. S. Sujitha; Writing – review and editing: Dr. S. Sujitha and Mrs. V. Sudha. Both authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

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