



GENDER AND RESISTANCE IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S "THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS"

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Abstract:

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) is a landmark novel in postcolonial Indian English literature, foregrounding issues of gender, caste, and power. This research paper examines how Roy portrays gender oppression within patriarchal and casteist structures while simultaneously highlighting acts of resistance undertaken by women and marginalized characters. Focusing on Ammu, Rahel, Baby Kochamma, and Velutha, the novel presents gender not as an isolated category but as a site deeply intertwined with class, caste, and cultural hegemony. Ammu's transgressive love for Velutha, Rahel's reclamation of memory, and Roy's narrative strategies reveal how small yet significant acts of defiance challenge dominant systems of control. The paper argues that resistance in the novel is fragile, costly, and often silenced, yet it is also essential in sustaining hope and asserting human agency.

Keywords: *Gender, Resistance, Patriarchy, Subaltern, Caste, Arundhati Roy*

Introduction:

Arundhati Roy's Booker Prize-winning novel *The God of Small Things* is set in Ayemenem, Kerala, during the late 20th century. While on the surface it recounts the tragic tale of a fractured family, at a deeper level it interrogates the intersections of caste, class, and gender. Roy's narrative foregrounds how women are denied agency and dignity, their identities shaped by patriarchal codes and religious orthodoxy. The novel's central concern with the "Love Laws"—which dictate "who should be loved, and how, and how much"—epitomizes the systemic policing of women's bodies and choices. Yet within these suffocating structures, Roy carves out spaces of resistance. Characters such as Ammu and Rahel assert their agency, even if briefly, through defiance of oppressive norms. The novel thus oscillates between suppression and resistance, tragedy and hope.



Objectives of the Study:

1. To examine the representation of patriarchal structures and gender oppression in *The God of Small Things*.
2. To analyze the ways in which female characters and marginalized figures resist dominant social, cultural, and caste hierarchies.
3. To explore Roy's narrative techniques as forms of literary resistance against patriarchal and colonial discourses.
4. To situate the novel within the broader discourse of feminist and postcolonial criticism.

Research Methodology:

This study employs a **qualitative, analytical, and interpretative approach**. The methodology consists of:

- **Primary Source:** Close textual analysis of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*.
- **Secondary Sources:** Scholarly works, journal articles, and critical essays on feminist theory, postcolonialism, and subaltern studies.
- **Theoretical Framework:** Feminist criticism, postcolonial feminist theory, and subaltern studies (Spivak, Katrak, Chandra).
- **Approach:** Comparative and interdisciplinary, combining literary analysis with socio-historical insights into caste and gender norms in Kerala.

This framework ensures a systematic and objective interpretation, moving beyond subjective impressions to scholarly critique.

Literature Review:

- **Tickell (2007):** Roy destabilizes the family narrative to highlight marginalized voices.
- **Chandra (2004):** Discusses subaltern resistance through Ammu and Velutha.
- **Devika (2007):** Connects Roy's narrative to Kerala's historical gender norms.
- **Spivak (1988):** Frames Velutha's silencing within the question of whether the subaltern can speak.
- **Katrak (2006):** Explores how female desire is demonized in postcolonial literature, echoed in Ammu's fate.



- **Pandey (2000):** Examines love, law, and transgression in Roy's novel.
- **Ahmad (1997):** Offers a political reading of Roy's debut work.

Together, these works establish that Roy critiques patriarchal oppression while simultaneously offering glimpses of resistance

Analysis and Discussion:

Gendered Oppression:

1. Patriarchy and Female Silencing

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* vividly portrays the entrenched patriarchal structures that deny women agency and autonomy. Ammu, as a divorced woman returning to her natal home, embodies the stigma and social exclusion that accompany female independence in a conservative society. Denied inheritance rights and treated as a burden on her family, Ammu's existence illustrates how women's value is measured only in relation to male authority figures—fathers, husbands, or brothers. Her attempts to assert independence, whether through seeking employment or making personal choices, are continually curtailed by patriarchal expectations.

Similarly, Baby Kochamma reflects another dimension of female silencing. Having once defied her family's wishes by pursuing a forbidden romance, she spends the rest of her life in regret, bitterness, and conformity. Though complicit in perpetuating patriarchal norms—particularly in her betrayal of Ammu and Velutha—Baby Kochamma is also a victim of those very structures. Her repressed desires and thwarted aspirations represent how patriarchy internalizes control over women, not only through external oppression but also through psychological subjugation. Roy thereby illustrates the cyclical nature of female silencing: victims are often forced into complicity, perpetuating the system that oppressed them.

2. Sexual Double Standards

Roy also critiques the stark sexual double standards embedded within patriarchal culture. Chacko, Ammu's brother, openly engages in casual relationships with working-class women, describing them as fulfilling a man's "needs." His behavior is tolerated, even normalized, because male sexuality is socially sanctioned and shielded from moral scrutiny. In contrast, Ammu's consensual relationship with Velutha is vilified as scandalous and immoral, not because of the act itself but because it violates the rigid codes that regulate women's bodies and choices.



This double standard exposes how patriarchal societies police female sexuality far more severely than male desire. Ammu's transgression is framed not as an act of personal autonomy but as a dishonor to her family and community. Her punishment—social ostracism, humiliation, and eventual exile from her own home—highlights the systemic hypocrisy in which men's desires are excused while women's are condemned. Through this disparity, Roy critiques the deeply gendered morality that sustains patriarchy.

3. Caste and Gender Intersection

Perhaps the most radical aspect of Ammu's defiance is that her love for Velutha crosses not only gender boundaries but also caste divisions. Velutha, as a Paravan (an Untouchable), occupies the lowest rung of Kerala's caste hierarchy. Ammu's relationship with him is doubly transgressive: it asserts her female sexual agency while simultaneously defying the rigid social order of caste.

This intersection of caste and gender oppression intensifies the consequences of her actions. Velutha's murder at the hands of the police is not simply the result of breaking social norms; it represents the violent defense of caste privilege. Ammu, too, is punished with social ostracism, denied dignity, and driven into early death. Through this tragic narrative, Roy demonstrates how gender oppression cannot be understood in isolation—it is deeply enmeshed with caste, class, and community. The novel thus illustrates the interlocking nature of power structures, echoing intersectional feminist critiques that oppression is never singular but compounded across identities.

Acts of Resistance:

1. Ammu's Defiance

Ammu's relationship with Velutha, though brief and doomed, represents one of the most profound acts of resistance in the novel. By daring to love outside patriarchal and casteist boundaries, Ammu asserts her right to self-determination. This act challenges the "Love Laws," which dictate "who should be loved, and how, and how much." Though her defiance ultimately results in her tragic downfall, it is also a radical claim to female desire and autonomy in a society that suppresses both. Ammu embodies a feminist refusal to submit to societal constraints, even when the consequences are devastating.

2. Velutha's Subaltern Resistance

Velutha's resistance lies not only in his relationship with Ammu but also in his very existence as a skilled, confident, and dignified member of the Paravan caste. By excelling



in his craft, participating in political movements, and loving across caste boundaries, Velutha undermines the assumptions of inferiority imposed upon him by dominant society. His love for Ammu destabilizes the foundations of caste hierarchy, which explains the disproportionate violence unleashed upon him. Velutha's fate echoes Gayatri Spivak's question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" His voice is silenced by systemic brutality, yet his rebellion lingers symbolically as a challenge to the social order.

3. Rahel and the Politics of Memory

Rahel, Ammu's daughter, resists not through overt action but through the act of remembering. As an adult, she revisits the past and reconstructs the silenced histories of Ammu and Velutha. In refusing to allow their love and suffering to be erased, Rahel engages in an act of political resistance. Memory here functions as reclamation—an effort to preserve dignity and resist erasure by dominant narratives. Through Rahel, Roy suggests that remembering is itself a subversive act, one that challenges cultural amnesia and affirms the humanity of those silenced by history.

4. Narrative Subversion

Finally, Roy's narrative technique itself constitutes resistance. The novel's fragmented, nonlinear structure, its use of childlike diction, and its privileging of marginalized voices all work against the conventions of patriarchal and colonial storytelling. By destabilizing linear narrative and centering silenced perspectives, Roy resists dominant modes of representation. This stylistic experimentation challenges readers to confront uncomfortable truths about caste, gender, and power without the comfort of traditional narrative closure. In this way, Roy transforms narrative form into a vehicle of resistance, aligning style with political content.

Findings:

- Gender oppression in the novel is inseparable from caste and class hierarchies.
- Acts of resistance—whether Ammu's love, Velutha's defiance, or Rahel's memory—are fragile but carry symbolic power.
- Roy emphasizes the importance of "small" acts of defiance in sustaining dignity and hope amidst systemic oppression.
- The narrative form itself operates as resistance by giving voice to the silenced and destabilizing patriarchal conventions.



Conclusion:

The God of Small Things reveals how gender, caste, and class intersect to enforce systemic oppression. Yet, Roy foregrounds fragile acts of defiance—Ammu’s transgressive love, Velutha’s quiet rebellion, and Rahel’s reclaiming of memory—that resist erasure. The novel demonstrates that resistance, though costly, is essential for human dignity and survival. Roy affirms that “small things” such as memory, desire, and storytelling destabilize the “big things” of power and domination, making resistance both necessary and inevitable.

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