

**Gender Politics and Social Stigma in Arundhati Roy's
*The God of Small Things***

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Abstract:

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) offers a powerful exploration of how gender politics and social stigma shape individual lives within postcolonial Indian society. This article examines the ways in which caste, gender, and trauma intersect to regulate desire, suppress dissent, and uphold dominant social norms. Focusing on key characters such as Ammu, Rahel, Estha, Velutha, and Baby Kochamma, the study analyzes how Roy critiques patriarchal structures and the politics of respectability that marginalize transgressive identities. Through the lens of feminist theory, postcolonial discourse and trauma studies, the article highlights Roy's literary strategies in exposing the violence of silence, the erasure of the subaltern, and the deep-rooted hypocrisies embedded in cultural and institutional frameworks.

Keywords: *Gender Politics, Social Stigma, Feminism, Caste, Trauma, Subaltern.*

Introduction

Literature has long served as a powerful medium to reflect, critique, and reimagine the socio-cultural structures that govern human life. Among the most recurring and urgent concerns in literary fiction are gender politics and social stigma, two forces that deeply shape individual identities and collective experiences. Through narrative form, character development, and thematic exploration, fiction enables writers to interrogate the ways in which gender roles are constructed, enforced, and contested, often highlighting the impact of these roles on women, queer individuals, and other marginalized groups. At the same time, literature exposes how social stigma, rooted in norms around caste, class, sexuality, or mental health, functions as a mechanism of exclusion and silencing.

Several works of English fiction have powerfully addressed themes of gender politics and social stigma, offering insight into how societal norms regulate bodies, identities, and desires. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* critiques Victorian ideals of femininity and class, portraying a woman who asserts moral and emotional independence in a repressive social

order. Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* explores the psychological consequences of gendered roles and societal expectations, particularly for women and queer men, through the lens of post-war trauma. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* delves into racialized beauty standards, internalized stigma, and the abuse of Black female bodies in a white-dominated society. More recently, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* confronts issues of sexual violence, patriarchal domination, and the resilience of Black women in the American South. In these narratives, gender and social stigma are not just themes but structural forces that shape the lives of characters revealing the deep, often painful intersections of personal desire and public condemnation.

Among the rests, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* stands as a seminal work that deftly weaves gender politics and social stigma into its fabric. Set in Kerala in the 1960s and framed by the tragic destinies of its central characters, the novel unpacks deeply embedded cultural systems that regulate behaviour and desire, especially those of women and marginalized castes. Roy explores how societal expectations around womanhood, purity, and family honour constrict the lives of female characters, particularly Ammu and Rahel. Simultaneously, the novel interrogates how stigma attached to caste, sexual transgression, and illegitimacy is used to maintain hierarchical control and suppress dissent. Roy's portrayal of forbidden love, maternal alienation, and the trauma of social shame draws attention to the Intersectional nature of oppression in postcolonial India. Through a richly symbolic and emotionally charged narrative, *The God of Small Things* illustrates how fiction can lay bare the hidden cruelties of societal structures, offering both critique and resistance through storytelling.

Objectives and Methodology

The primary objective of this article is to critically examine how *The God of Small Things* represents gender politics and the pervasive role of social stigma in shaping identity, desire, and belonging. By focusing on key characters such as Ammu, Rahel, Velutha and Estha it explores how the intersections of caste, gender and trauma contribute to marginalization, silencing, and erasure. The study further investigates how Roy's narrative challenges patriarchal and caste-based power structures through its form and content.

The methodology is qualitative and interpretative, centering on close textual analysis of the novel. It draws on feminist literary criticism, intersectionality theory, and trauma studies to unpack the social and psychological dimensions of stigma and resistance. The research also situates the novel within its socio-historical context, engaging with critical scholarship and postcolonial discourse to provide a nuanced and multidisciplinary perspective.

Analysis and Discussion

Gendered Expectations and Disciplining of Female Desire

In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy presents a powerful critique of the gender roles imposed on women in traditional Indian society. The character of Ammu, mother of the twin protagonists, becomes a symbol of resistance against these expectations. As a divorced woman and single mother, she is already seen as a social outsider. Her relationship with Velutha, a Dalit man, represents a bold act of defiance, not just of caste boundaries but also of the rigid control over female sexuality. Roy writes, "*Ammu had lived in a world where the truth was that she had no rights at all*" (Roy, 1997, p. 42). This stark line sums up Ammu's

position in a society that denies women agency. Her love for Velutha is not just personal—it is political. It threatens the norms that dictate who can be loved, and under what conditions. As Roy puts it:

“They all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tampered with the laws that lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much” (33).

Ammu’s rebellion begins even before this relationship, when she refuses Mr. Hollick’s indecent proposal to sleep with him so that her husband can keep his job. Her refusal and subsequent divorce are acts of courage, but they also come at a cost. Her own father, Pappachi, refuses to support her, saying, *“He didn’t believe that an Englishman, any Englishman, would covet another man’s wife”* (42). This reflects how patriarchal authority and colonial loyalty often work together to silence and discredit women.

Throughout the novel, Ammu is punished for her independence. When she tries to defend Velutha at the police station, the officer insults her by calling her a *“veshya”* (prostitute). She is expelled from her family home, dies alone in a lodge, and is denied a proper funeral. These consequences show how deeply female desire—especially outside of marriage and across caste lines—is stigmatized and erased.

Critics such as Gayatri Spivak have noted how women like Ammu, particularly in colonial and postcolonial societies, are denied voice and power. In her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, Spivak argues that subaltern women are often silenced in both political and cultural narratives (Spivak, 1988). Ammu’s story is a clear example of this voicelessness. Her love is criminalized, her motherhood is used against her, and her death is treated as a final act of social rejection.

Roy uses Ammu’s life and fate to expose how society disciplines women who challenge its rules. Her character stands as both a victim of stigma and a quiet symbol of resistance, showing that female desire—especially when freely chosen—remains one of the most policed and feared aspects of patriarchal control.

The Intersections of Caste and Gender: Velutha and Ammu

The relationship between Velutha and Ammu in *The God of Small Things* brings to the front the intersectionality of caste and gender, highlighting how caste and gender come together to create deep and complex forms of oppression. As a Dalit man, Velutha is doubly stigmatized; he faces discrimination not just because of his caste but also because of his romantic involvement with Ammu, a Syrian Christian woman. This intersectional analysis, as proposed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, helps understand how overlapping systems of oppression impact individuals differently. Velutha becomes a doubly marginalized figure, targeted for who he is and who he dares to love.

Even though Velutha is skilled, intelligent, and politically aware, society refuses to see beyond his Dalit identity. His relationship with Ammu is not seen as love but as a violation of social and caste boundaries. When their affair is exposed, Velutha is violently beaten by the police and falsely accused of rape. His relationship with Ammu is perceived not as a human connection but as an act of pollution. He dies unnamed, erased by a system that refuses to acknowledge his humanity. Roy writes with brutal clarity:

“It is after all so easy to shatter a story. To break a chain of thought. To ruin a fragment of a dream being carried around carefully like a piece of porcelain. To let it be, to travel with it, as Velutha did, is much the harder thing to do.” (190)

Velutha’s dream of love and of belonging is shattered not just by police brutality but by the societal refusal to see him as fully human.

Ammu, too, faces harsh consequences. As a woman, her desire and choices are judged more harshly. Her relationship with a lower-caste man leads to social rejection, and her identity is reduced to that of a fallen woman. Her emotions and suffering are ignored. This reflects what postcolonial feminist thinkers call “double colonization”- the idea that women are oppressed both by patriarchy and by systems like caste or class.

Together, Velutha and Ammu imagine a love that crosses forbidden lines; one that challenges the rules of caste, gender, and family honour. But their love is crushed by a society that uses violence, shame, and silence to punish those who break these boundaries. Their story is not just about forbidden love; it is a powerful example of how social structures control who we can love and how we are allowed to live.

Silence and Trauma: Estha and Rahel

The psychological trauma experienced by Estha and Rahel is a direct consequence of the gendered and caste-based stigma faced by their mother. Estha and Rahel, the twin siblings in *The God of Small Things*, carry the deep emotional scars left by their mother’s forbidden relationship and the rigid social system around them. Their lives are shaped by silence, pain, and the lasting effects of trauma.

Estha’s trauma begins when he is sexually abused by the Orangedrink Lemondrink man. After this, he is forced into silence, not just about the abuse but also about the events that follow. As he grows older, he chooses not to speak at all. This muteness is more than just a lack of speech; it symbolizes how trauma can silence people, especially boys, who are often taught not to show pain or vulnerability. As Judith Herman notes in *Trauma and Recovery*, trauma survivors often experience a collapse of speech and narrative coherence (Herman, 1992). The novel puts it as “*The quietness arrived at Estha like a bus. It didn’t stop anywhere. It just arrived. And made itself at home.*” (13) Estha becomes the embodiment of trauma- silent and broken.

Rahel experiences a different but equally painful form of trauma. She grows up emotionally distant, struggling in school and later becoming isolated in her adult life. Her failed marriage and emotional emptiness reflect how deeply stigma and loss have shaped her. When she returns to Ayemenem and reunites with Estha, the two of them share a moment of physical closeness that is often misunderstood and controversial. However, Roy clarifies that it is not about breaking a taboo; it is about love, grief, and trying to reconnect with a shared past: “*It was about love. And brokenness. About what they had lost. About who they had lost*” (328). Feminist psychoanalysis particularly Julia Kristeva’s concept of the abject is useful here- Rahel becomes the carrier of what society wants to repress: incest, memory and female grief (Kristeva, 1982).

Through Estha and Rahel, Arundhati Roy shows how trauma passes from one generation to the next, how silence can both protect and isolate, and how children often suffer the consequences of adult decisions and social cruelty. Their story is a moving portrayal of how people cope with pain and how they search for healing in the face of silence and loss.

Internalized Patriarchy and the Machinery of Stigma

Baby Kochamma, a key character in *The God of Small Things*, illustrates how even women can help uphold oppressive systems and become enforcers of patriarchal norms. Baby Kochamma, the failed romantic and emotionally bitter woman redirects her frustrations by aligning with systems of control. Instead of challenging the injustice around her, she becomes an enforcer of it. She clings to the rules of society and uses them to punish Ammu and Velutha for breaking social norms.

Baby Kochamma lies to the police, manipulates the twins, and plays a direct role in Velutha's tragic fate, not because she believes in justice, but to protect her own reputation and the family's honour. Feminist theorist Sandra Bartky explains this kind of behaviour as the 'internalization of patriarchal values', when women adopt the very ideas that once oppressed them, and then apply them to others. Her actions show that gender oppression doesn't always come from men. It can also be maintained by women who have been taught to believe in and enforce society's rules.

Similarly, characters like Pappachi and the Orangedrink Lemondrink man represent predatory masculinity, where power is exercised through suppression, abuse, and erasure. Pappachi's violence and the Orangedrink man's sexual abuse show how patriarchy operates through both emotional and physical harm.

Together, these characters show how systems of power, like patriarchy and caste, survive through silence, shame, and the complicity of those within them. Roy's novel urges readers to look beyond simple categories of victim and oppressor and to recognize how deeply social conditioning shapes people's actions.

Social Stigma and the Politics of Respectability

In *The God of Small Things*, the concept of "respectability" is deeply tied to rigid expectations surrounding caste hierarchy, religious conformity, and traditional gender roles. Ammu breaks all of these rules; she is a divorced woman, falls in love with a Dalit man, and does not fit the traditional image of a good, obedient mother. Because of this, society sees her as a shameful figure, and her rejection by family and community becomes unavoidable.

Arundhati Roy shows how society uses public shaming to punish those who don't conform. Ammu is not only excluded in life but also in death. She is denied a proper funeral, and her family refuses to remember her with dignity. This is a powerful example of how stigma works not just to punish but to erase people from social memory altogether.

Velutha's fate is equally tragic. Although he is brutally beaten and killed by the police, his death is reported as an accident rather than the result of caste violence. This silence helps preserve the illusion of order and respectability, while hiding the truth.

Roy's novel reveals how social hierarchies are kept in place through acts of silence, denial, and the careful control of whose stories are told, and whose are erased. Through the experiences of Ammu and Velutha, the novel shows how the politics of respectability can become a tool of cruelty and exclusion.

Resistance through Narrative Structure and Aesthetic Choices

Arundhati Roy's narrative form itself becomes a form of resistance. She uses the structure and style of her novel as a form of resistance against traditional storytelling and

rigid social norms. The story is not told in a straight line; it moves back and forth in time, uses unusual words, italics, and a childlike way of seeing the world. These creative choices reflect the emotional and psychological confusion of the characters, especially the twins, and challenge the usual authoritative way stories that are told in patriarchal societies.

Instead of providing clear answers or neat endings, Roy leaves many things unresolved. This reflects how trauma doesn't always follow a clear path or get 'fixed.' One of the most controversial parts of the novel- the tender moment between Estha and Rahel- is not written as a shocking scandal. Instead, it is shown as a quiet moment of connection between two broken people. Roy refuses to judge them through the lens of social morality and instead focuses on their shared pain and love.

Through this unique way of storytelling, Roy resists the pressure to follow traditional rules, both in literature and in society. Her narrative style becomes a powerful tool to express themes of trauma, stigma, and emotional truth in a deeply human and unconventional way.

Conclusion

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is a deeply political novel that lays bare the intersecting forces of gender, caste, and societal expectations that govern individual lives. Through the experiences of Ammu, Velutha, Estha, and Rahel, Roy presents a powerful critique of how love, desire, and identity are policed by rigid norms rooted in patriarchy and caste hierarchies. Transgressing these norms does not merely invite disapproval; it results in social exclusion, emotional devastation, and in Velutha's case, death.

Yet, the novel does more than expose oppression; it also reveals the subtle and often painful forms of resistance. Ammu's defiant love, Velutha's quiet dignity, Estha's silence, and Rahel's emotional endurance all speak to the ways in which individuals attempt to reclaim agency in the face of erasure. Even the novel's unconventional narrative structure- fragmented, poetic and nonlinear- becomes a form of resistance against dominant, patriarchal modes of storytelling that seek order, closure and control.

Roy does not offer easy resolutions or redemptive endings. Instead, she insists on the importance of memory and witness. She gives voice to the silenced, attention to the broken, and dignity to those who have been cast out. In doing so, *The God of Small Things* becomes not just a story of personal loss and trauma but a larger political statement on the enduring impact of social stigma and the gendered distribution of power.

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