
Feminine Marginalization and the Perpetuation of Caste-Based Inequities in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract:

This research paper looks at how patriarchal oppression and discrimination based on caste show up in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. The novel makes it very clear how women and people from lower castes suffer because of strict social rules and customs. Ammu is a character who shows how hard it is for women to live in a world dominated by men, where they don't have freedom. Similarly, Velutha's character shows how hard it is to be discriminated against because of race and left out of social groups. The paper examines how these two types of oppression are linked and how they impact people's lives. It also talks about how people's lives are still controlled by social norms and power systems. This research paper also tries to show how important fairness and equality are in society by using easy analysis to look into the unfair things that still happen.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Caste System, Social Inequality, Gender Discrimination, Marginalization

Introduction:

Indian women writers have consistently highlighted the lived experiences of women and the structural inequalities that shape their lives. Their works often explore issues such as gender discrimination, social exclusion, domestic oppression, and the struggle for identity within patriarchal societies. Arundhati Roy stands firmly within this tradition, yet her literary contribution extends beyond mere representation of women's suffering. Her writings offer a profound and uncompromising critique of the social, political, and cultural systems that perpetuate inequality and injustice. Through her fiction, Roy exposes the hidden mechanisms of power that govern individual lives and regulate social relationships. As a novelist, political commentator, and social activist, Roy addresses a wide range of contentious issues, including domestic violence, alcoholism, untouchability, women's rights, the authority of religious

institutions, changing family structures, the consequences of Gulf migration, and the politics of sexuality. Her narratives reveal how these issues intersect with caste, class, gender, and religion, creating complex forms of marginalization. Rather than presenting oppression as an individual problem, Roy situates it within larger historical and institutional frameworks. She critically examines how social norms and cultural traditions often function as tools of control, particularly over women and other marginalized groups. Her works challenge readers to question accepted hierarchies and expose the contradictions embedded within democratic and modern societies. By giving voice to those who are silenced or excluded, Roy transforms literature into a powerful medium of social critique and resistance. Through her bold and politically conscious writing, she not only documents injustice but also encourages critical engagement with the structures that sustain it.

Roy's novel, *The God of Small Things*, looks at not only discrimination based on race and gender, but also the mental and emotional effects of these strict systems. "The novel deals with a hackneyed subject matter—a high caste woman falls in love with a low caste man. The result is obvious—class discord, secret rendezvous, arrest and annihilation. The novel begins with death, is interwoven with memories mostly tragic and ends in a feelings of loneliness" (Dodiya, 143).

In the small Keralan town of Ayemenem, where the story takes place, the Ayemenem House becomes a sign of strict social norms and cultural clashes. The family is mostly part of a Syrian Christian community, but patriarchal values and caste awareness still have a big impact on their lives. Ammu becomes a tragic character whose life shows how hard it is for women who don't follow the rules. As a child, she runs away from an abusive home and marries an assistant manager at a tea farm. But her marriage soon ends because her husband is an alcoholic and has lost all morals. When he tries to force her into a physical relationship with his English boss, Ammu says no, standing up for her honor in a colonial and male-dominated setting. Going back to live with her parents with her children, Estha and Rahel, doesn't give her safety; instead, it makes her feel even worse because she is seen as a burden and isn't accepted emotionally. Even though he went to the University of Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar, her brother Chacko is a perfect example of male power and hypocrisy. His failed marriage to Margaret Kochamma shows that he can't keep emotional connections going, but he still tries to be in charge of the family. In a strange twist, Chacko is forgiven and made to feel better, but Ammu is pushed to the side and blamed. This shows that there are different rules for men and women, even in families that are thought to be modern and educated.

Velutha, an “Untouchable” belonging to the Paravan community, is portrayed as a highly skilled carpenter and mechanic employed in the family’s pickle factory. His intelligence, creativity, and technical expertise distinguish him from many others in the novel, yet these qualities are overshadowed by the stigma attached to his caste identity. His relationship with Ammu evolves into a profound act of resistance against the rigid social and caste hierarchies that govern their society. By crossing the boundaries imposed by the “Love Laws,” which dictate “who should be loved, and how, and how much,” Ammu and Velutha challenge the deeply entrenched structures of caste and social privilege.

The novel repeatedly emphasizes the tragic irony that Velutha’s remarkable abilities are acknowledged even by those who discriminate against him. Mammachi’s observation, “If only he hadn’t been a Paravan, he might have become an engineer,” exposes the cruel contradictions of a society that recognizes talent but refuses to reward it when it appears in members of marginalized communities. This statement reveals how caste functions as a mechanism of exclusion, limiting opportunities regardless of merit or achievement. Roy critically demonstrates that caste is not merely a social classification but an institutionalized system of power that suppresses human potential and reinforces inequality. Through Velutha’s character, she exposes the dehumanizing effects of caste prejudice and the violence used to preserve social boundaries. His tragic fate illustrates how individuals who challenge oppressive structures are often punished by the very society that benefits from their labor and talents. In this way, Roy presents caste discrimination as both a moral failure and a systemic injustice that continues to deny dignity, freedom, and recognition to the marginalized.

Ammu’s wrongdoing is not just personal; it’s also societal. Both patriarchy and caste hierarchy are challenged by her failure to fit in. But Roy also says that this kind of resistance is harshly punished in a conservative society. This shows how little an individual can do to fight back against oppressive social systems. Murali Prasad (2006) says that “her rebellion against maternal and marital conventionality, and finally, her liaison with dark-skinned and untouchable Velutha (ironically meaning white) constitutes a violation against a determinate social order, sponsoring the immutable love laws” (39).

Ammu’s connection with Velutha changes her life, making her stop suffering in silence and start fighting back. A big act of rebellion for her is going to the police station to argue that Velutha is being held illegally. She doesn’t stay a passive victim; instead, she speaks out against wrongdoing, taking on both social bias and state power. But her protest is

ignored, which shows how the opinions of the oppressed, especially women's, are routinely shut down. Through Ammu, Arundhati Roy shows the subaltern woman who fights against unfair social and political structures. However, she also shows how tragically limited this kind of defiance is in a society with a lot of hierarchy. Amitabh Roy (2005) mentions: "Ammu, on the other hand, is the rebel who represents the defiance of the present (neo-colonial) state of society from educated [though marginalized and proletarianized], passionate and thinking women. She stands for those women who are aspiring for freedom and equality. This section of women is challenging traditional (pre-colonial) ideas and conventions. The hopes for the (post-colonial) future lie with this section only" (77-78). Mary Jean Green (2009) argues that *The God of Small Things* exposes the deeply rooted patriarchal structures that regulate women's bodies and sexuality while granting greater freedom to men. According to Green, Ammu's relationship with Velutha challenges both caste boundaries and patriarchal norms, making her a threat to the social order. As a result, she faces severe punishment and social exclusion. In contrast, Chacko enjoys social and sexual privileges that are accepted and even justified by his family and community. Green suggests that Roy uses this contrast to reveal the double standards that govern male and female behavior in Indian society. The novel demonstrates how patriarchal power protects men while restricting women's freedom and autonomy.

In *The God of Small Things*, Ammu's relationship with Velutha is met with severe condemnation because Velutha belongs to a lower caste. Their love challenges not only caste boundaries but also the social norms that regulate women's sexuality and personal freedom. Roy exposes how society imposes rigid moral standards on women while simultaneously allowing men far greater freedom in matters of desire and relationships. Ammu's transgression is viewed as a threat to the social order because it disrupts both patriarchal authority and caste hierarchy.

Chacko's sexual relationships with lower-caste women, both in the village and in the pickle factory, are casually justified as "man's needs" (168). This double standard reveals the deeply entrenched patriarchal values that normalize male privilege while policing female behavior. Whereas Ammu is publicly humiliated, ostracized, and ultimately destroyed for exercising her personal choice, Chacko faces no comparable social condemnation. Roy thereby illustrates how gender inequality operates alongside caste discrimination to produce unequal standards of morality and justice. The novel suggests that social norms are not neutral ethical principles but instruments through which dominant groups maintain power and control. The same pattern of inequality is evident in the economic sphere. Although

Mammachi establishes and successfully manages the pickle factory, ownership and authority are ultimately transferred to Chacko. Ammu, despite being equally connected to the family enterprise, is denied both recognition and economic power. Chacko's assertion, "What's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine" (57), encapsulates the patriarchal logic of entitlement that excludes women from property, decision-making, and financial independence. Roy uses this imbalance to demonstrate how patriarchal structures are reinforced not only through cultural attitudes but also through economic arrangements that systematically privilege men.

Through Ammu's tragic life, Roy offers a powerful critique of the social norms that sustain inequality. Her isolation, humiliation, and premature death reveal the devastating consequences faced by those who challenge established hierarchies. The novel exposes the hypocrisy of a society that claims to value morality while selectively applying its rules according to caste, class, and gender. Roy argues that true social progress cannot be achieved merely through legal reforms or modern institutions when discriminatory attitudes continue to shape everyday life. By portraying the interconnected nature of caste oppression, gender discrimination, and economic exclusion, she demonstrates how inequality is reproduced across generations and embedded within the very fabric of society.

Brinda Bose (2003) contends that Roy's novel highlights the intersection of caste oppression and gender discrimination. Bose argues that Ammu's tragedy is not simply the result of her personal choices but of a social system that denies women agency and punishes them for crossing prescribed boundaries. She notes that while Chacko inherits authority, property, and social privilege despite his flaws, Ammu is denied economic independence and social recognition. The ownership of the pickle factory by Chacko, despite Mammachi's labor and management, illustrates how patriarchal entitlement operates within family and economic structures. According to Bose, Roy critiques a society that appears modern on the surface but continues to reproduce traditional inequalities based on caste and gender. Through Ammu's suffering, the novel exposes the enduring power of these oppressive systems and their devastating consequences for women.

Mammachi, another important character in *The God of Small Things*, shows how complicated and often contradictory patriarchal control can be. Mammachi is the mother of Ammu and Chacko. She is shown to be a good musician and businesswoman, but in her personal life she is quiet and suffers. Living under her husband Pappachi's harsh control, she has to deal with years of physical and mental abuse. Her silence isn't just passive acceptance;

it shows how she has internalized patriarchal ideals that teach women to put up with abuse. Mammachi seems to be a victim of gender, class, and caste all at the same time, but her character also shows how victims can become part of the same repressive system. After Pappachi's death, she doesn't fight sexism in a general way. Instead, she gives her support to her son, which makes him even more powerful in the family. This makes her job harder because she has to deal with patriarchal beliefs while also upholding them.

Arundhati Roy's Mammachi is a complex critique of how deeply ingrained social systems keep going, not only through direct violence but also through the help and conditioning of the people who have to live with them. Roy Binayak in his article "The Title of *The God of Small Things*: A Subversive Salvo" comments on her thus: "Mammachi is another Big Woman who deifies her son Chacko and despises her daughter Ammu. When Chacko stops Pappachi's beating of Mammachi, his action has unexpected consequences: "From then onwards he became the repository of all (Mammachi's) womanly feelings. Her Man. Her only Love" (168). That is why Mammachi likes him and gives more preference. In spite of suffering a lot from her husband's brutal activities on her body, she does not exhibit any disgust towards her husband and adapts herself "properly into the conventional scheme of things" (122). She cries at her husband's funeral because she was "used to him" (50). She always thinks about her social status. When Ammu goes back to live with her mother, Mammachi doesn't feel sorry for her. Instead, she doesn't like it. She doesn't like that Ammu won't give in to her husband, and she thinks her daughter's return is rude, even though she herself was abused by Pappachi. This response shows how deeply women absorb patriarchal values, which makes them judge and punish other women instead of standing by them.

Baby Kochamma is Rahel and Estha's grandmother in *The God of Small Things*. She is a complicated character who shows the worries and conflicts of a conservative postwar society. She is in charge of the family because she is the daughter of Reverend John Ipe and Mammachi's sister-in-law, but her life is full of mental pain and unfulfilled wants. She doesn't show her feelings for Father Mulligan, the Irish Catholic priest she met when she was young because she doesn't have the guts to go against the strict rules about love, religion, and marriage.

This failure at the personal level turns into anger and hatred. Baby Kochamma grows up with a strong dislike for other groups, especially Hindus, and a narrow, exclusive way of thinking. Her connections with other people are often selfish and manipulative, which shows

that she can't really connect with others emotionally. She does not understand the problems women face; instead, she supports patriarchal and social rules, taking part in the system that limits her freedom. Her dislike of Rahel and Estha, whom she sees as outsiders because they have mixed-race parents, shows how strictly she follows social rules. Arundhati Roy criticizes in *Baby Kochamma* how fear and control can turn people into people who cause conflict, keeping prejudice and unfairness alive in the family and in society as a whole. "Half-Hindu Hybrids whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian would ever marry" (45) and on the side of the coin, she likes Chacko who got married to an English woman and having "beach-coloured" little angel" (179). Mammachi and Baby Kochamma are Syrian Christians. The people from this religion believe themselves to be "descendants of the one hundred Brahmins whom St. Thomas the Apostle converted to Christianity when he travelled east after the Resurrection" (64).

Both Mammachi and Baby Kochamma appear to submit unquestioningly to patriarchal social norms, internalizing and reproducing the very structures that limit their agency. As Antonio Navarro-Tejero (2006) observes in "Power Relationships in *The God of Small Things*," the first generation of women in the novel accords unquestioned authority to patriarchal codes and ultimately yields to them. However, this submission is not merely passive; it is also complicit, as these women actively enforce the same norms upon others, particularly Ammu. As opposed to these strict rules, Ammu is a force that stirs things up and questions the so-called "Love Laws" that say "who should be loved, how, and how much." Mammachi and Baby Kochamma follow these rules to keep things in order, but Ammu's refusal to follow them shows how unfair and cruel they really are.

The three women, Ammu, Mammachi, and Baby Kochamma, represent distinct responses to the oppressive structures of patriarchy, caste, and social hierarchy. Their lives reveal different modes of negotiating power: resistance, accommodation, and complicity. Through these contrasting female characters, Arundhati Roy offers a nuanced critique of the interconnected systems of gender and caste oppression in post-independence India. The novel demonstrates that women's subjugation and caste-based discrimination are not isolated forms of injustice; rather, they are deeply intertwined and sustained through social customs, family traditions, and ideological conditioning. Although each woman is shaped by these oppressive structures, their responses differ significantly. Ammu emerges as the most defiant figure, refusing to submit to her husband's demand that she sexually exploit herself for his professional gain. Her rejection of this humiliating proposal becomes a powerful assertion of personal dignity and moral autonomy. In challenging patriarchal authority, Ammu not

only resists gender oppression but also exposes the broader mechanisms through which women's bodies are controlled and commodified. Her relationship with Velutha further challenges the rigid boundaries of caste and social respectability, making her an emblem of resistance against institutionalized inequality. Mammachi and Baby Kochamma illustrate how marginalized individuals may become agents of oppression, while Ammu represents a more conscious challenge to dominant structures. Through these characters, Roy highlights the complexities of female agency and demonstrates that resistance to oppression is neither uniform nor guaranteed. The novel ultimately suggests that subalternity is not a fixed identity but a dynamic condition shaped by individual choices, social constraints, and historical circumstances.

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