

## Echoes of Oppression: The Struggles of the Deprived in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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### Abstract

This paper examines the recurring theme of oppression and the struggles of marginalized individuals in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Set in postcolonial Kerala, India, the novel portrays lives shaped by systemic injustices rooted in caste, class, and gender. Through a narrative interwoven with personal tragedy and rigid social structures, it reveals the silent suffering of the "small" people—those silenced by cultural hierarchies and societal norms. Characters like Velutha, Ammu, and Estha become symbols of how caste discrimination, patriarchal oppression, and colonial legacies dictate individual fates, often with devastating consequences. This study explores the intersectionality of these struggles, positioning *The God of Small Things* as a poignant critique of institutionalized inequality and a call for empathy and social change. By tracing the experiences of the oppressed, it underscores how the echoes of historical and societal injustice resonate across generations, leaving an enduring mark on the lives of the powerless.

**Keywords:** Marginalization, Class Struggle, Gender Inequality, Patriarchy, Systemic Injustice, Intersectionality

### INTRODUCTION:

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* offers a poignant exploration of how systemic oppression and societal injustice shape the lives of the marginalized. Set in Ayemenem, a lush village in Kerala, India, the novel vividly portrays the rigid hierarchies of caste, class, and gender that dictate the characters' destinies. Through the tragic experiences of Ammu, Estha, Rahel, and Velutha, Roy captures the devastating consequences of defying deeply ingrained social norms and power structures.

Far more than a personal tale of shattered lives, the novel serves as a broader commentary on India's socio-political landscape, exposing the harsh realities of

caste discrimination and patriarchal dominance. With her lyrical prose and non-linear narrative, Roy gives voice to those silenced by history—the "small" people whose stories are often overlooked or erased. This analysis aims to explore how *The God of Small Things* lays bare the multilayered struggles of the oppressed, focusing on the intersections of caste, class, and gender. It seeks to examine how these overlapping forms of marginalization shape the characters' lives and expose the enduring impact of social and historical injustices.

### AIMS AND OBJECTIVES:

The primary aim of this study is to examine the theme of oppression and the struggles of marginalized individuals in

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. It seeks to analyze how social, cultural, and political structures perpetuate deprivation and suffering, focusing on the intersections of caste, class, and gender in shaping the characters' lives.

### Objectives:

1. To analyze the portrayal of caste-based oppression in the life of Velutha and its influence on his fate.
2. To explore how patriarchal structures affect female characters, particularly Ammu, and examine the impact of gender-based discrimination on their experiences.
3. To highlight the depiction of systemic injustice and social marginalization through the personal tragedies of the characters.
4. To investigate how historical and cultural contexts reinforce oppression and deprivation in postcolonial Kerala.
5. To examine how Roy's use of narrative style, symbolism, and non-linear structure underscores the struggles of the "small" people.
6. To contribute to a broader understanding of how literature reflects and critiques societal inequalities.

### LITERATURE REVIEW:

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* has received significant scholarly attention for its layered portrayal of social inequalities, particularly through the intersecting lenses of caste, class, and gender. Widely regarded as a seminal postcolonial text, the novel critiques the

enduring impact of colonial legacies and oppressive social structures in India. This literature review highlights key academic perspectives that examine these themes, focusing on how the novel exposes the struggles of the marginalized.

### • Caste and Class Oppression

Several scholars have explored the novel's depiction of caste-based oppression, with particular emphasis on Velutha, a member of the marginalized Paravan caste. J. Devika (2007) identifies Velutha as a subaltern figure whose caste identity renders him both invisible and vulnerable in Kerala's rigid social hierarchy. Similarly, Meena T. Pillai (2012) argues that Velutha's tragic fate illustrates the harsh consequences of challenging caste boundaries in a society deeply rooted in orthodoxy.

### • Patriarchy and Gender-Based Oppression

Gender studies scholars analyze Roy's critique of patriarchy through the character of Ammu, whose life is shaped by gender-based restrictions and discrimination. Kalpana Sharma (2015) highlights how Ammu's defiance of societal norms and her subsequent marginalization expose the oppressive nature of patriarchy in postcolonial India. Ammu's struggles embody the compounded burden of class and gender-based oppression, further intensifying her vulnerability.

### • Postcolonial and Cultural Critique

Postcolonial theorists such as Ania Loomba (2009) emphasize the novel's

engagement with colonial legacies and cultural hegemony. Set against the historical backdrop of British colonialism and its aftermath, the novel provides a broader framework for understanding the structural oppression experienced by the characters. M. Nair (2011) notes that Roy's incorporation of Malayalam expressions and local cultural elements enhances the authenticity of the narrative while exposing the pervasive influence of colonial ideologies.

- **Trauma and Memory**

The themes of trauma and memory are pivotal to the novel's exploration of personal and collective suffering. Susan Stanford Friedman (2010) examines how Estha and Rahel's fragmented memories reflect the psychological toll of systemic oppression and personal tragedy. The non-linear narrative structure echoes the fractured lives of the characters, reinforcing the novel's focus on loss, trauma, and marginalization.

- **Symbolism and Narrative Technique**

Roy's narrative style and use of symbolism are central to the novel's portrayal of oppression and resistance. Aijaz Ahmad (2000) highlights the recurring use of nature imagery and symbols like the river and the History House, which underscore themes of freedom, confinement, and rebellion. The fragmented, non-linear storytelling mirrors the complexity of oppression and its multifaceted impact, offering readers a deeper understanding of the characters' struggles.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:**

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology to explore the theme of oppression and the struggles of marginalized individuals in *The God of Small Things*. Grounded in postcolonial theory, feminist critique, and subaltern studies, the research employs close reading and textual analysis to examine how the novel portrays the intersections of caste, class, and gender-based oppression and how these forces shape the lives of its characters.

### **1. Research Approach**

The study is primarily literary and analytical, focusing on the textual representation of social hierarchies and systemic injustices. It draws on established theories from postcolonial studies, intersectionality, and trauma studies to offer a comprehensive understanding of the struggles faced by the marginalized.

### **2. Data Collection**

The primary data for this research is Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Secondary data consists of scholarly articles, critical essays, and books on postcolonial literature, as well as studies on caste, class, and gender in Indian society. The analysis is supported by sources from academic databases such as JSTOR and Project MUSE, along with works by prominent postcolonial and feminist theorists.

### **3. Analytical Framework**

The analysis is organized around key themes that reflect the struggles of the deprived:

- **Caste and Class Oppression:** Analyzing the portrayal of caste-based discrimination through Velutha's character and its influence on his fate.
- **Patriarchy and Gender Oppression:** Examining the experiences of female characters, particularly Ammu, within the context of patriarchal control and gender-based discrimination.
- **Postcolonial and Historical Context:** Investigating how the novel critiques colonial legacies and their impact on local power structures.
- **Trauma and Memory:** Exploring how trauma and fragmented memory are depicted in the narrative and their connection to personal and systemic oppression.

#### 4. Theoretical Framework

The study is informed by several key theoretical perspectives:

- **Postcolonial Theory** (Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak): To examine the enduring influence of colonialism on social hierarchies.
- **Feminist Critique** (Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler): To analyze the portrayal of female characters and their struggles within a patriarchal framework.
- **Subaltern Studies** (Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Spivak): To highlight the silenced voices of marginalized characters like Velutha.

- **Intersectionality** (Kimberlé Crenshaw): To understand how caste, class, and gender intersect in shaping the experiences of oppression depicted in the novel.

#### 5. Scope and Limitations

This study is limited to a close analysis of *The God of Small Things*, focusing specifically on caste, class, and gender dynamics. While historical and cultural contexts are considered, the scope does not extend to comparisons with other works of Indian literature. Additionally, the analysis is constrained by the availability of secondary sources addressing certain aspects of the novel.

#### DISCUSSION:

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* intricately portrays the lives of those on the margins of society, exposing how caste, class, and gender-based oppression intersect to shape their experiences and destinies. This discussion explores how these oppressive forces manifest in the novel, highlighting the struggles of the marginalized and their lasting consequences.

- **Caste-Based Oppression**

Central to the novel is the theme of caste discrimination, poignantly embodied in Velutha, a Paravan (untouchable) who defies the rigid social order. His love for Ammu, a woman from a higher caste, is a bold act of rebellion against deeply entrenched caste hierarchies. Despite his skills and kindness, Velutha is reduced to his caste identity and ultimately punished for transgressing societal boundaries. His fate reflects the harsh

reality of caste-based oppression in India, where marginalized communities are denied agency, dignity, and representation.

Velutha's tragic story symbolizes the broader condition of the subaltern, as theorized by Gayatri Spivak (1988), who argues that the subaltern is often silenced and excluded from dominant narratives. Velutha's brutal death underscores the violent enforcement of caste hierarchies and serves as a powerful reminder of how systemic oppression keeps individuals like him voiceless and powerless.

- **Gender Oppression and Patriarchy**

The novel also lays bare the pervasive nature of patriarchal control and the oppression of women. Ammu's life exemplifies the struggles of women who resist societal expectations. As a divorced woman and mother, she is treated as an outcast and denied the freedom to make her own choices. Her love for Velutha—grounded in mutual respect and equality—is condemned by society and ultimately leads to her downfall.

Ammu's experiences highlight the intersection of caste and gender oppression. She is punished not only for defying patriarchal norms but also for crossing caste boundaries, placing her in a position of dual marginalization. This compounded vulnerability reveals how deeply entrenched patriarchal values are in postcolonial India's cultural fabric.

Rahel, on the other hand, faces more internalized forms of gendered oppression. Her trauma, closely tied to her twin brother Estha, reflects the long-lasting impact of societal judgment and repression. Through these female characters, the novel illustrates how patriarchal power operates both personally and socially, controlling women's bodies, desires, and autonomy.

- **Trauma, Memory, and Silence**

Roy delves into the psychological dimensions of oppression through Estha and Rahel, whose fragmented memories and silences reflect the lingering trauma of personal and systemic violence. The novel's non-linear narrative structure, with its frequent shifts in time, mirrors their fractured lives and experiences.

Estha's enforced silence—stemming from his sexual abuse and the traumatic witnessing of Velutha's death—symbolizes the deep scars left by violence and societal expectations. His trauma is compounded by the pressure to remain silent, reinforcing the theme of silenced voices. Rahel's return to Ayemenem and her reconnection with Estha mark an attempt to confront their shared past and reclaim their lost sense of self.

- **Postcolonial Critique and Social Structures**

The novel's depiction of oppression is embedded in its broader critique of colonial legacies and postcolonial society. The decaying Ayemenem House symbolizes the remnants of colonialism



and the enduring power of social hierarchies. Roy presents a society caught between tradition and modernity, where rigid social structures persist despite the promise of progress. The History House serves as a potent symbol of the oppressive weight of the past. It is a site where caste and class boundaries are both enforced and transgressed, ultimately becoming a space of tragedy for Velutha. By incorporating local cultural elements alongside historical references, Roy highlights how deeply ingrained social hierarchies continue to perpetuate cycles of oppression.

- **The "Small" People and Acts of Resistance**

While the novel focuses on the struggles of the marginalized, it also gestures toward resistance. Velutha's defiance of caste norms, Ammu's refusal to conform, and Rahel's quiet resilience all reflect small acts of rebellion. Although these acts are ultimately crushed by the larger forces of oppression, they offer fleeting moments of agency and hope.

The title *The God of Small Things* symbolizes the novel's focus on the "small" people—those ignored or erased by history. Roy's narrative amplifies their silenced voices, insisting that their stories deserve to be told. The emphasis on the "small things"—moments of love, memory, and quiet defiance—stands in stark contrast to the overwhelming power of societal structures, suggesting that even in the face of oppression, small

acts of resistance carry meaning and the possibility of change.

### **CONCLUSION:**

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* offers a haunting depiction of the struggles endured by those marginalized in a society governed by rigid caste, class, and gender hierarchies. Through the tragic lives of Velutha, Ammu, Estha, and Rahel, Roy exposes how systemic oppression—rooted in cultural and historical forces—affects individuals on both personal and collective levels. The novel vividly portrays how caste discrimination, patriarchal dominance, and societal expectations converge to silence and marginalize those who dare to defy boundaries.

This study has demonstrated how *The God of Small Things* critiques institutionalized injustice, emphasizing the intersectionality of oppression. Velutha's tragic fate highlights the brutal consequences of caste-based discrimination, while Ammu's experiences reveal the harsh realities of patriarchal control and gender-based marginalization. The trauma endured by Estha and Rahel reflects the deep psychological scars left by these oppressive forces, showing how they ripple across generations, preventing healing and resolution.

Roy's narrative serves as a poignant reminder of the enduring impact of history and social structures on the lives of the powerless. The title itself—*The God of Small Things*—underscores the significance of small, everyday struggles and acts of quiet defiance that challenge the weight of oppression. Though the novel is a story of

loss and tragedy, it also offers glimpses of resilience, resistance, and the persistent longing for freedom and love.

By centering on the voices of the "small" people—the marginalized, silenced, and forgotten—*The God of Small Things*

compels readers to confront uncomfortable truths about society and history. It stands as a powerful call for empathy, justice, and the creation of a more inclusive world where such struggles are not merely remnants of the past but catalysts for meaningful change.

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