

The God of Small Things: Portrayal of Subaltern Suffering and Social Injustice

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Abstract

The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy is a heartbreaking portrayal of subaltern suffering and systemic social injustice, particularly via the character of Velutha, a Dalit who falls victim to caste-based discrimination. This study looks at how the novel portrays marginalized identities within the rigid categories of caste, class, and gender, demonstrating how institutionalized discrimination and power dynamics shape their lives. The study examines Roy's narrative tactics, such as non-linear storytelling and intertextual connections, via a postcolonial lens in order to expose the silencing of subaltern voices. In addition, the article examines periods of resistance and agency in the novel, illustrating how subaltern characters navigate restrictive structures. This study aims to emphasize the novel's impact on current discussions about caste and social inequality in India and the representation of marginalized communities in contemporary Indian literature.

Keywords: Subaltern, caste oppression, social injustice, Dalit identity, marginalization

Introduction:

Arundhati Roy is a renowned Indian writer, activist, and public intellectual. She gained international recognition with her debut novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997), which won the Booker Prize and remains a landmark in contemporary literature. She was born in 1961 in Shillong, India and raised in Kerala, a region whose socio-political landscape profoundly influences her writing. Roy's literary and non-fiction work is deeply intertwined with her activism. She has written extensively on issues of caste, gender, environmental justice, and political oppression. Her notable works include *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), as well as essay collections such as *Field Notes on Democracy* (2009) and *Azadi: Freedom. Fascism. Fiction.* (2020). Through her powerful prose and fearless commentary, Roy continues to challenge dominant narratives,

advocating for the rights of marginalized communities and critiquing state power, capitalism, and nationalism. Her work remains essential in contemporary discussions on literature, politics, and social justice.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is a seminal postcolonial novel that exposes the multilayered injustices faced by subaltern communities in India. Set in Kerala, the novel presents a scathing critique of caste and patriarchal systems that shape the lives of its protagonists, particularly Velutha, Ammu, and the twins, Estha and Rahel. This paper aims to provide an in-depth analysis of how Roy deconstructs power hierarchies through a fragmented narrative and non-linear storytelling, highlighting the ways in which marginalized individuals navigate their oppression. By focusing on Velutha as an archetypal subaltern, this study situates *The*

God of Small Things within the discourse of subaltern studies.

The concept of the subaltern, as theorized by Gayatri Spivak and the Subaltern Studies collective, is crucial in understanding the structural and epistemic violence inflicted upon Velutha. As a 'Paravan' or an untouchable, Velutha is condemned to a life of social invisibility and economic precarity despite his skills and intelligence. His love affair with Ammu, an upper-caste Syrian Christian woman, disrupts entrenched caste norms, resulting in his ultimate victimization by the upper-caste elite. Velutha's transgression is met with brutal state-sanctioned violence, illustrating how the caste system functions as an apparatus of control that extends beyond social ostracization to include institutionalized violence and annihilation.

Roy's depiction of Velutha's suffering is both visceral and allegorical. The scene in which he is falsely accused of abducting the twins and subsequently beaten to death by the police is emblematic of the deep-seated caste antagonism in Indian society. The dehumanization of Velutha's body described in grotesque, fragmented imagery symbolizes the erasure of the subaltern from historical and narrative records. His enforced silence, both literally and figuratively, underscores Spivak's argument that the subaltern cannot speak within dominant epistemological frameworks. Furthermore, Roy juxtaposes Velutha's fate with the hypocrisy of the upper-caste Pappachi and Baby Kochamma, who wield caste privilege to maintain their social dominance. The fact that Velutha's father willingly reports him to the authorities for transgressing caste boundaries further highlights the internalized oppression that

caste systems perpetuate. This self-policing mechanism ensures that, dalits remain complicit in their own subjugation.

While caste determines Velutha's fate, Ammu's suffering is inextricably linked to the intersection of gender and caste oppression. As a divorced woman, Ammu exists in a liminal space where she is neither fully accepted by her family nor by society at large. Her affair with Velutha, a dalit man, further marginalizes her, leading to her expulsion from the family and eventual demise in poverty. Roy's portrayal of Ammu's oppression highlights the patriarchal mechanisms that govern female sexuality and autonomy. Her brother, Chacko, despite engaging in multiple affairs with lower-caste women, is never subjected to the same scrutiny or consequences. This double standard reinforces the intersectionality of caste and gender, showing how upper-caste women are both privileged and oppressed granted social status but denied agency over their own bodies.

The thematic resonance between Ammu's and Velutha's narratives underscores the interconnectedness of caste and gender subjugation. Both characters defy social norms, and both are punished for their defiance. Their tragic love story serves as a microcosm of the broader socio-political injustices that continue to shape Indian society. Roy's non-linear storytelling and fragmented narrative structure mirror the disjointed realities of subaltern lives. The novel's frequent shifts between past and present disrupt conventional narrative coherence, emphasizing how memory, trauma, and history are constructed and reconstructed in ways that exclude marginalized voices.

The use of symbolism further deepens the novel's engagement with subalternity. The motif of the river, for instance, serves as both a site of transgression and a space of erasure. Velutha's story is absorbed into the fabric of history without disrupting anything. Similarly, the motif of silence, particularly through Estha's forced muteness, reinforces the theme of systemic oppression and the suppression of dissenting voices. Roy also employs intertextual references to expose the constructed nature of social hierarchies. Biblical allusions, postcolonial critiques, and indigenous storytelling traditions interweave to create a narrative that resists singular interpretations, challenging the reader to engage critically with history and ideology.

Despite its overwhelming themes of suffering and injustice, *The God of Small Things* also presents acts of resistance. Velutha's quiet defiance, Ammu's refusal to conform, and the twins' subversive childhood behaviors all function as counter-narratives to dominant power structures. Though their resistance does not lead to immediate liberation, it disrupts the normalized discourse of caste and gender oppression, planting the seeds for future dissent. Roy's novel itself can be read as an act of literary resistance. By centering Dalit and female experiences, she challenges the traditional canon of Indian literature, which has historically privileged upper-caste, male voices. Her experimental prose and refusal to adhere to linear storytelling further reinforce her commitment to destabilizing hegemonic narratives.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* offers a searing critique of India's deeply entrenched caste system, showing how it dictates social relationships, love, power, and even justice. Through the tragic fate of

Velutha, a Dalit man, and his forbidden love for Ammu, the novel exposes the brutal realities of caste discrimination. The narrative reveals how caste oppression is upheld not just by religious and political institutions but also by families and individuals who internalize its ideology, making it one of the most pervasive forces shaping Indian society.

The character of Velutha, a Paravan (an untouchable caste), embodies the suffering and marginalization imposed by the caste system. Despite his exceptional skills as a carpenter and his quiet resistance to social norms, he remains trapped by his caste identity. The novel shows that no amount of personal excellence can override the rigid structures of caste; Velutha's very existence is tolerated only as long as he remains within the confines of his assigned social role. His affair with Ammu, an upper-caste Syrian Christian woman, is seen as an ultimate transgression. It is not just a matter of love but a challenge to the deeply ingrained hierarchies that determine "*who should be loved, and how. And how much.*" (Roy, p. 33)

Velutha's love for Ammu is perceived as a violation of the caste order, leading to severe punishment. His father, Vellya Paapen, a man conditioned to accept the inferiority of his caste. Instead of defending his son, Vellya Paapen believes that Velutha deserves to be punished for daring to love beyond his station. This moment reflects how deeply caste ideology is internalized, even by those it oppresses. The true horror of caste discrimination lies not just in external enforcement but in the way it infiltrates the minds of its victims.

The novel also portrays the caste system as being actively maintained through institutional violence. When Baby Kochamma

falsely accuses Velutha of raping Ammu, the police act without question, brutally beaten him to near death. The police officers do not need evidence; they believe that a Dalit man having an affair with an upper-caste woman is reason enough for him to be guilty. The description of Velutha's suffering is strikingly brutal:

"A few blows, a little less blood, and he could have survived. But they didn't stop. They never stopped. They were not arresting him, they were exterminating him. Wiping him off the face of the earth. He was a liability. He was a rake with a future. He had to be removed for his own good. For the good of society." (Roy, p. 310)

Here, Roy presents the police not as enforcers of justice but as instruments of caste oppression. Their brutality against Velutha is not just physical; it is symbolic of the systemic erasure of Dalit voices and lives. The phrase "wiping him off the face of the earth" highlights how the caste system does not merely exclude but actively seeks to annihilate those who challenge its structure. Baby Kochamma, an upper-caste woman, represents how caste discrimination is upheld by those who benefit from it. She is not directly oppressed by the caste system but uses it as a tool to maintain her own social standing. By falsely accusing Velutha, she ensures that the power hierarchy remains unchallenged. Her character reflects how caste oppression is not just an external force imposed by the state but is deeply woven into family structures and interpersonal relationships. Her actions also reveal how caste discrimination intersects with gender oppression. While Ammu, as a woman, is also a victim of societal norms, Baby Kochamma reinforces these norms rather than resisting

them. She internalizes caste and gender hierarchies, using them to manipulate events in her favor. In this way, Roy critiques not only the obvious perpetrators of caste violence but also those who, through silence or complicity, allow it to persist.

Roy situates caste oppression within a larger historical and political context. The novel frequently references Communism in Kerala, which, despite its promise of equality, fails to dismantle caste hierarchies. The Communist Party in the novel recognizes Velutha's skills and political potential but does little to protect him when he is falsely accused. This reflects how even revolutionary ideologies struggle to overcome centuries of social conditioning. Through this, Roy suggests that the caste system is not just a relic of the past but an ongoing reality that continues to shape Indian society, even in supposedly progressive movements. The novel presents caste oppression not as an isolated issue but as one deeply interwoven with history, politics, and social structures.

Conclusion:

Spivak's theory of the subaltern provides a powerful framework for understanding *The God of Small Things* as a novel about silencing, oppression, and the impossibility of true agency for those on the margins of society. Velutha's fate demonstrates how the caste system and institutional violence ensure that the subaltern remains unheard, while Ammu's marginalization highlights the intersection of caste and gender oppression. Baby Kochamma, as a figure who upholds hegemonic discourse, represents the mechanisms through which the subaltern is denied agency. Ultimately, Roy's novel illustrates Spivak's central argument: the

subaltern does not have the space to speak within existing power structures, and when

they do; their voices are distorted, suppressed, or erased entirely.

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