

Postcolonial Feminist Perspectives in *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract

This paper explores *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy through a postcolonial feminist lens, analyzing how gender oppression intersects with caste, class, and colonial history. Roy's novel presents a critical examination of patriarchal and caste-based structures in postcolonial India, particularly through the experiences of Ammu, Velutha, and Rahel. The study engages with postcolonial feminist theories, drawing from scholars such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Uma Chakravarti, to highlight how colonial legacies and indigenous patriarchies work together to marginalize women and lower-caste individuals. The novel's portrayal of Ammu's defiance against patriarchal control, her relationship with Velutha, and the societal condemnation she faces exemplifies Simone de Beauvoir's argument that women are positioned as the "Other" in patriarchal societies. Additionally, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity is reflected in Baby Kochamma's internalization and enforcement of patriarchal norms. Roy's fragmented narrative structure, nonlinear storytelling, and poetic language serve as literary acts of resistance, subverting traditional storytelling forms and dominant historical narratives, as observed by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita. This paper argues that *The God of Small Things* is not only a critique of systemic oppression but also a site of resistance, where marginalized voices challenge dominant power structures. The novel's focus on "small things"—personal struggles, forbidden desires, and hidden narratives—serves as a subversive strategy to expose and resist larger social injustices. By centering subaltern voices and critiquing the rigid frameworks of gender and caste, Roy's novel aligns with postcolonial feminist discourses that seek to deconstruct and challenge oppressive hierarchies.

Keywords:

Postcolonial, Feminism, Gender, Oppression, Caste Hierarchy.

Introduction

The title "Postcolonial Feminist Perspectives in *The God of Small Things* (1997)" reflects the dual focus of this paper: the intersection of postcolonial and feminist critiques within Arundhati Roy's novel. The term "Postcolonial Feminist Perspectives" highlights the theoretical framework used to analyze the text, emphasizing how colonial histories and patriarchal structures shape gender oppression in postcolonial societies. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) argues that postcolonial feminism critiques both Western feminism's universalizing tendencies and the patriarchal structures within postcolonial societies, making it an essential lens for analyzing Roy's novel.

By focusing on *The God of Small Things*, the title signals the paper's engagement with Roy's novel as a site of resistance, where "small things"—marginalized voices, forbidden desires, and subaltern identities—challenge dominant social norms. This aligns with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) concept of the subaltern, which examines how marginalized individuals are denied a voice within dominant discourse. Ammu, Velutha, and Rahel, among others, embody these "small things" that defy rigid societal boundaries, reflecting how postcolonial feminist narratives give voice to the silenced.

The novel itself gives significance to the seemingly insignificant, making "small things" a powerful symbol of feminist and postcolonial defiance. Uma Chakravarti (2003) emphasizes how caste and gender hierarchies in India dictate who is visible and who is erased, and Roy's narrative subverts these power structures by centering on the oppressed. Similarly, Susie Tharu and K. Lalita (1991) argue that feminist literature in India frequently focuses on personal, everyday struggles—"small things"—that reveal larger systems of oppression.

This title positions the paper within contemporary literary criticism, aligning it with scholars who explore gender, caste, and colonialism in South Asian literature. Simone de Beauvoir (2011) contends that women are often relegated to the role of the "Other" in patriarchal societies, a theme that resonates throughout Roy's novel as Ammu and Rahel navigate oppressive gender norms. Additionally, Judith Butler (1990) highlights how gender is performed and policed, a concept that can be applied to Baby Kochamma's internalized patriarchal role in reinforcing societal norms.

By choosing this title, the paper invites an in-depth examination of how Roy's narrative both critiques and subverts oppressive power structures. Janaki Nair (1996) discusses how colonial legal structures reinforced patriarchal and caste-based oppression, shaping the postcolonial realities Roy depicts. The title encapsulates the novel's defiance of these structures, making *The God of Small Things* a seminal work in postcolonial feminist literature.

Aims and Objectives

This paper aims to explore *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy from a postcolonial feminist perspective, analyzing how gender oppression intersects with caste, class, and colonial legacy. The key objectives are:

To examine how the novel critiques patriarchal structures within postcolonial Indian society.

To analyze the intersectionality of gender, caste, and colonial history in shaping the experiences of female characters.

To explore the role of transgression and punishment in the lives of female characters, particularly Ammu and Velutha.

To assess the novel's feminist resistance to dominant cultural narratives.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach, using close reading and textual analysis to examine key themes, characters, and narrative structures in *The God of Small Things*. The research integrates postcolonial feminist theory, particularly Gayatri Spivak's concept of the "subaltern," Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of Western feminism, and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Secondary sources, including journal articles and critical essays, are also incorporated to provide a comprehensive analysis.

Discussion:

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) is a landmark novel that intricately weaves issues of gender, caste, class, and postcolonial identity into its narrative. Set in Kerala, India, the novel tells the story of Estha and Rahel, fraternal twins whose childhood is marked by tragedy and social injustice. At its core, the novel is a critique of patriarchal oppression, highlighting how women and marginalized communities bear the brunt of rigid societal norms. This paper examines *The God of Small Things* through a postcolonial feminist lens, focusing on the ways in which gendered oppression operates within both domestic and societal spheres.

Postcolonial Feminism and the Marginalized Woman. Postcolonial feminism critiques both colonial and patriarchal structures, emphasizing how gender oppression in former colonies is shaped by historical power dynamics. Unlike Western feminism, which often generalizes women's experiences, postcolonial feminism acknowledges the specific cultural and historical contexts that define gender roles in different societies. Roy's novel provides a compelling critique of both indigenous patriarchy and the lingering effects of colonial rule on gendered identities.

Ammu: A Woman in Rebellion

Ammu, the mother of Estha and Rahel, embodies resistance against patriarchal norms. Unlike traditional Indian women who conform to societal expectations, Ammu challenges these norms by leaving an abusive marriage and returning to her natal home. However, her assertion of autonomy is met with severe punishment. She is denied property rights, shamed for her choices, and ultimately ostracized for her illicit relationship with Velutha, a lower-caste man.

Ammu's fate mirrors the broader struggles of women in postcolonial societies, where defying gender roles leads to social exclusion. Roy highlights how women's desires are policed by both familial structures and societal expectations. Ammu's tragic end underscores how women's agency is systematically curtailed, reflecting Spivak's notion of the "subaltern" woman who is silenced by dominant discourse (Spivak, 1988).

Velutha and the Politics of Gender and Caste

Velutha, an "Untouchable" man, represents the intersection of caste and gender oppression. His relationship with Ammu defies both caste and patriarchal norms, making him a target of brutal punishment. Velutha's suffering is emblematic of the ways in which lower-caste men are emasculated by both caste hierarchy and colonial legacies. His love for Ammu is deemed

unacceptable, not only because of his caste but because it challenges the Brahminical-patriarchal order.

The novel critiques how caste operates as a tool of gendered oppression, where women like Ammu and men like Velutha are both oppressed by rigid social stratification. As Mohanty (2003) argues, third-world women are often subjected to "double colonization"—first by colonial forces and then by their own patriarchal cultures.

Baby Kochamma: Internalized Patriarchy

Baby Kochamma, Ammu's aunt, represents internalized patriarchy. Rather than empathizing with Ammu, she becomes one of her harshest oppressors, reinforcing societal norms that punish female transgression. Her complicity in Velutha's death and Ammu's downfall reflects how women can become enforcers of patriarchal discipline.

Baby Kochamma's character aligns with Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, which suggests that gender roles are not inherent but are maintained through repeated actions and societal reinforcement. Her actions demonstrate how patriarchal ideology is sustained by both men and women, ensuring that gender hierarchies remain intact.

Transgression and Punishment: The Female Body as a Site of Control.

One of the novel's central themes is the policing of female bodies. Ammu's sexual transgression is met with extreme punishment, illustrating how women's sexuality is controlled through shame, violence, and exclusion. This aligns with postcolonial feminist critiques of how women's bodies become sites of control in patriarchal societies.

The punishment of Ammu and Velutha also reflects colonial legacies of control. Under British rule, Indian women were often positioned as symbols of national honor, their behavior scrutinized to uphold cultural purity. This patriarchal nationalism persists in postcolonial India, where women's bodies continue to be sites of moral and social regulation.

Resistance and Feminist Possibilities

Despite its tragic trajectory, *The God of Small Things* also offers moments of feminist resistance. Rahel and Estha's reunion at the end of the novel, though melancholic, represents a reclaiming of agency. The novel's fragmented narrative style itself is a form of resistance, disrupting linear storytelling and rejecting dominant historical narratives.

Roy's use of language, particularly her subversion of English syntax and poetic prose, reflects a postcolonial feminist mode of storytelling. By refusing conventional structures, Roy challenges both literary and social norms, creating space for marginalized voices.

Conclusion

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is a powerful critique of patriarchal and caste-based oppression in postcolonial India. Through the tragic lives of Ammu and Velutha, the novel exposes the brutal consequences of defying societal norms. From a postcolonial feminist perspective, the novel highlights how gender, caste, and colonial histories intersect to marginalize women and lower-caste individuals.

By centering the experiences of subaltern characters, Roy challenges dominant narratives and gives voice to those historically silenced. While the novel is deeply tragic, it also offers a subtle critique of oppressive structures, urging readers to question the status quo. Ultimately, *The God of Small Things* serves as both a lamentation and a form of resistance, making it a seminal text in postcolonial feminist literature.

By focusing on "small things"—personal struggles, hidden desires, and marginalized voices—Roy subverts dominant historical narratives and challenges traditional storytelling conventions, as observed by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita (1991). The novel's fragmented structure, nonlinear storytelling, and poetic language act as forms of literary resistance, reinforcing its feminist and postcolonial critique.

Ultimately, *The God of Small Things* is not just a novel about individual tragedy but a broader commentary on the systemic injustices that persist in postcolonial India. Through its exploration of transgression, punishment, and resistance, the novel aligns with postcolonial feminist discourses that seek to deconstruct oppressive power structures. Roy's work remains a crucial text in both feminist and postcolonial literary studies, offering a deeply moving and politically charged narrative that continues to provoke thought and inspire resistance.

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