



Gender, Caste, and Love Laws in *The God of Small Things*: Contradictions and Trauma in a Post-Colonial Panorama

Srija Nandy

Independent Researcher, Formerly MA student, Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University, India

Email: srijanandyenglish@gmail.com

Received: 20 Dec 2024; Received in revised form: 22 Jan 2025; Accepted: 26 Jan 2025; Available online: 02 Feb 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— We identify the fundamental elements of reality and their simultaneous co-existence in Aymenem, a village in the Kottayam district of God's Own Country, Kerala, where the post-colonial novel *The God of Small Things* is set. Arundhati Roy's seminal work portrays those tumultuous times when India was plagued with socio-political malpractices such as poignant post-colonial legacies, political chaos, social discrimination, casteism, racism, class conflict, gender issues, patriarchy, and economic inequality – only to name a few. In this study, we seek to analyze individualistic perspectives, but also the collective effect of these fundamental elements of the societal irrationalities through the lens of post-colonialism, nature's roleplay, casteism, gender, and contradiction. Not only do we briefly review the noteworthy reports and scholarly publications along these lines, but also report our contribution in the form of a holistic analysis of the individual-collective behavior, interpersonal and human-nature relationships presented in the novel. Finally, we also discuss our perspectives on the innate conflict, inner chaos, and contradictions at a time when we almost near three decades of the publication of the masterpiece family drama novel, *The God of Small Things*.



Keywords— Caste, Contradictions, Gender, Love Laws, Post-Colonial, *The God of Small Things*.

I. INTRODUCTION

Almost three decades after its first public appearance (in 1997), and despite an Indian classic in its own right, Arundhati Roy's family drama novel, *The God of Small Things*, is extremely relevant and undoubtedly appeals at a much larger and global scale, thereby pertaining to an universal audience through her vivid portrayal of nature, its lifeforms, the inter-personal relationships between people and also with nature, alongside a multitude of ever-relevant themes such as casteism, gender inequality, class, race, and trauma [1].

Roy has been one of the most influential, highly prominent, prolific, and representative writers of the Post-Colonial Literature. Her daring portrayal of socio-cultural realities, gender issues, casteism, political chaos, and often-restrained sensitive topics that existed around 1960s in the vibrant state of God's own country, Kerala, in her debut novel and magnum opus, not only bought her glory

and an overnight fame, but also accredited her with the Booker Prize for Literature in 1997.

In her novel, Roy develops a dramatic fabric that talks about the subaltern other, and the oppression faced by them due to the colonial repercussions, casteism, and racism. She blatantly and quite bravely exposes the ingrained scars of the colonized land, Aymenem, through her evocative storytelling and candid portrayal of the characters' psyche. Typically, Roy uses a fragmented nonlinear narrative and temporal hybridity to weave a rich tapestry of the contemporary societal potholes such as casteism, chauvinism, misogyny, untouchability, and class inequality, that result in trauma and identity crisis.

Roy's vivid and meticulous rendering of minute details about the natural lifeforms, the sluggishness of time, her discontinuous narrative that often shifts between the 1960s and the 1990s, and her imaginative prose keeps the readers immersed in the turbid air of Aymenem.

Further, we realize that the aftermath of colonialism results in diaspora, orientalism, cultural hybridity, and inherent contradictions, where the voice of the subaltern other lays hidden and confined behind the cacophony and chaos of the colonizer. The novel outlines the pain and agony of its marginalized characters, urging the readers for empathy.

Today, when we mark and celebrate the 28th year anniversary of the publication of *The God of Small Things*, the objective of the present study is not only to analyze the gender dynamics, class, casteism, and love laws in the novel, but also to highlight the fundamental contradictions, potential conflicts, and cursed chaos in Roy's depiction of people and their lives in Ayemenem around those times.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The connections between post-colonial literature, e.g., *Things Fall Apart* (1958) by Chinua Achebe [2], *Midnight's Children* (1981) by Salman Rushdie [3], and *Can the Subaltern Speak* (2009) by Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak [4], and contradiction studies is both pertinent and profound [5]. They reveal how these new contemporary literature grapple with the legacies of colonialism [6].

From a foundational perspective, these novels intricately explore social hierarchies and the experiences of the indigenous tribes, marginalized communities, and the subaltern other [7]. Often, they use magic realism and personal storytelling techniques (and linguistics) for representing the quintessential and central themes of social belonging, cultural identity, hybridity, memory, displacement, memory, and resistance to expose the power dynamics embedded in colonial discourse [8].

Roy's *The God of Small Things* offers a rich exploration of gender, caste, cultural dissonance, and colonial legacies to uncover the unresolved contradictions yielded due to hybridity and epistemic disobedience [9]. It is a compelling narration and poignant exploration of love, labor, lost, and repercussions of colonialism in a deeply stratified and oppressed society. Weaving together a traditional storytelling with intricate interplay of memory and time, Roy uses profound imagery, irony, symbols, and language as effective tools to exemplify the contradictions and historical and casteism-induced trauma of the characters throughout the novel [10].

Although known for its 'Unity in Diversity', India has always been plagued and even cursed, by its social tensions and irrational caste system. The society has always found means to segregate its (own) people on the basis of race, color, caste, creed, religion, and what not. Therefore, one section has inevitably been oppressed, excluded, ignored and exploited, while the other has been

prioritized and provided with innumerable benefits for no reason. This social difference, injustice, inequality, and insensibility has caused immense suffering to masses over time and again. This hypocrisy, double standards, and falsification of one's image is evident even in *The God of Small Things* [11].

Roy's novel is sensitive to social injustice and involves feminist politics [12]. It is rather a fantasy and a case of post-colonial ambivalence to herald the lower class subaltern other simultaneously as unreachable, yet desirable with superior morale and physical perfection, but also considering them mean and disgusting. This social discrimination and societal convention have marginalized weaker sections into even bleaker subaltern 'other', who are then filled with nothingness, trauma, and devoid of an individual identity [13].

In the context of national, cultural, and political issues within a Keralite society, we perceive a saga of grief and sadness, where the fate of love ultimately connects either with loss, despair, silence, or death [14]. Roy carefully mirrors both the microcosm of individual characters as well as the macrocosm of the collective society that is grappling with colonial repercussions [15].

The ongoing relevance of post-colonialism in Ayemenem serves as a pitiful reminder of its nuanced echoes. This urges the readers to delve in conversations about the complex interactions between societal transformation, identity, memory, and history that ultimately defines the era shaped by cultural shifts and historical ruptures. We understand that the lasting legacy of the British Raj casts a cursed shadow on the lives of the Indian milieu, but also goes on to influence their interpersonal relationships, status, and socio-economics.

Roy's poignant portrayal of how the 'smallest' things, such as the daily mundane routine and lives of the common people, are affected by (and connected to) the 'bigger' things such as colonialism, caste, class, gender, religion, and history, is hidden in her linguistic strategies and selective capitalization (and emphasis) of specific words that aim at deconstructing the language [16].

She writes, "*Perhaps it's true that things can change in a day. That a few dozen hours can affect the outcome of whole lifetimes. And that when they do, those few dozen hours, like the salvaged remains of a burned house—the charred clock, the singed photograph, the scorched furniture—must be resurrected from the ruins and examined. Preserved. Accounted for. Little events, ordinary things, smashed and reconstituted. Imbued with new meaning. Suddenly they become the bleached bones of a story.*".

It is crucial to note that the subaltern voice is suppressed to voicelessness (and silence) that is marginalized at the dominant discourses. Therefore, it becomes important to hang one's hat on these alternate spaces of co-existence that is constructed by the subaltern to hear them. The latter uses several mechanisms and body languages to resist domination; e.g., Estha refuses to speak, Rahel, Ammu, and Velutha's resistance to the societal love laws that dictate their interpersonal relations.

III. NATURE'S ROLEPLAY

Studies on the human-nature relationship and their harmonious co-existence have been reported that highlights the importance of cultivating empathy towards the environment and the ecosystem [17-19]. The lucid and beautiful depiction of the rich countryside Aymenem involves vibrancy, tropical foliage, backwaters, natural organisms, and monsoons. All the characters have an innate and personal connection with some elements of the surrounding nature – rivers, trees, and even stones.

For example, Ammu has a subtle bond with nature where she finds solace and comforts herself. Her 'unsanctioned' love with Velutha blooms in the calmness that surround the pickle plant. There, the couple finds refuge from the orthodox rules and constraints imposed by the societal love laws. From his young days, Velutha, a carpenter by profession, has a deep relationship and fondness for nature and its wood. Even the Aymenem House is surrounded by nature – a garden and a river. Also, the fraternal twins, Rahel and Estha, also share a strong bond with nature – tress and the Meenachal river.

The latter is personified by Roy, and represents freedom, peace, and solace on one hand, while peril and destruction in the other. While the river lures the siblings into its purity, it also sees a terrible accident, the death of Sophie Mol. With time, the river starts to develop resilience much like the twins. Now, they can find beauty in little things – the sound of running water, the performance of skipping stones, and the magical play of light on surface.

IV. POST-COLONIAL PERSPECTIVES

The aftermath of British imperialism and their sheer dominance runs throughout the novel's narrative. Through temporal hybridity (i.e., shifting backward and forward in time) and usage of recurring dialogues, Roy successfully links the local consequences to the larger political and economic forces as the global level. The misdeeds of one generation passes onto the next generations, and the characters suffer from the deeds of their parents and

elderly (relatives) through transgenerational trauma. This is a manifestation of both race- and history-based trauma.

The remnants and legacy of the (colonial) British Raj clash with the (traditional) Indian caste system to result in cultural contradictions and conventional values (e.g., religious practices) that are never in sync. Therefore, the caste system, racial discrimination, marginalization, subaltern, and diaspora are in constant socio-political conflict with westernism and globalization of British rule.

The nature of subalternization within India and its impact on an individual's psyche as well as on the collective has been analyzed [20]. Roy's description of the political malpractices, personal relationships, class and caste conflicts is a story of alienation, marginalization, identity loss, irrational misogyny, patriarchy, male chauvinism, and above all hypocrisy and insensibility.

In order to create uneasiness, entropy, and chaos in *The God of Small Things*, Roy likely uses the Gothic conventions of dark imagery, doubling, incest, ancestral curse, magic realism, and haunted house to personify bigger cultural horrors of the Indian society [21]. The political uprisings (Marxist and Naxalites movements in Kerala around 1960s) and colonial powershifts infuse elements of confusion, thrill, and uncertainty in Aymenem [22]. The readers are exposed to Gothic elements and ghostly eerie atmosphere through use of the 'small things' such as a cold moth with dense whiskers, a child-sized coffin, a buried wristwatch, and a vanishing footprint. Clearly, Roy adopts a Gothic style writing and conventions to sketch the haunted setting of India's colonial past.

V. GENDER, CASTE & LOVE LAWS

The adverse themes of caste disputes, social stratification, women's misery, class problems, untouchability, gender inequality, chauvinism, misogyny, in contemporary Indian society prevalent around the later half of the 20th century has been delineated in this novel in their raw forms. Roy's female characters create multidimensionality who defies societal norms, expectations, and stereotypes. They are oppressed, marginalized and also face discrimination [23].

The gender issue seems to be the most thought-provoking in *The God of Small Things*. The 'weaker sex' is incessantly exploited because of the patriarchal laws and fortunes that rests in man's hands [24]. These rules decide how a woman should behave and act being within the society. The novel portrays their pathetic plight, intolerable pain and unexplainable struggle. The fact that who could love (and whom), in what ways (and how), and also how much (i.e., severity) were dictated by societal norms (love laws).

Roy writes, “*Love Laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much*” (pp. 188-189). The act of loving someone from a different class was considered grave and looked down upon as a heinous crime. E.g., a Dalit man (e.g., Velutha in the novel) should not be loved by a woman (e.g., Ammu) of higher social category or a richer class (or caste). In the novel, Velutha is treated badly, much like Bakha, a socially shunned untouchable as portrayed by Mulk Raj Anand in his novel *Untouchable*. Therefore, untouchability is not just a Hindu taboo, but the narrow-mindedness of an Indian obsession, where the Dalits suffer and are humiliated by the richer class and caste. It is to say as if, there cannot exist love between a Dalit and a Christian according to the societal love laws, despite their individual decision and desire. Breathtakingly, caste surpasses all, even one’s talent and extraordinary capabilities fail to make a mark.

Furthermore, Roy’s bravest portrayal of physical connection (beyond emotions) between siblings Estha and Rahel blew minds and could not be assimilated by the society. The deep-rooted trauma that was inflicted into their minds during their childhood, after the premature death of Sophie Mol, and followed by the disintegration of their family (due to Baby Kochamma), had continued effects that recurred only to heighten their mental agony and physical distress. This made them believe that they understood each other better than anyone else could.

The lives of the three most important women (Ammu, Mammachi, and Baby Kochamma) also struggle to escape the shackles of traditional caste system, rigid conservative values, colonial oppression, and patriarchal manacles. They are not heard and believed to remain silent, even if they dared to speak up. Their objectification and decimation by the male characters seems quite apparent throughout the novel. As rightly mentioned in a previous study [25], “*Gender as a biological determination and a psychic consciousness assert sexual polarity in the politics of truth and sex. Gender is a geopolitical specialization, but sexuality is an obsession in the human psyche.*”.

VI. CONTRADICTIONS & TRAUMA

In the veins of each character, and in almost every plot and sequence, one can feel the inherent chaos, inner conflicts, and contradictions existing within the social, political, cultural, economic, and value system of the Indian society in the latter half of 20th century.

Through a close textual analysis and research articles reported later, we notice varied aspects of disagreement and clash between different segments of the society, their inhabitants, the law and the order, the nature and its people, and the inner conflict between the inner soul and

the outer portrayal of all the characters. For example, the profound influence of history, race, and caste-based trauma in the post-colonial panorama of Aymenem arising from oppression and slavery upon individual and collective identity and memory has been studied [26].

To further inflict the recurring trauma experienced by the characters, Roy uses temporal shifts and fragmented nonlinear repetitive narratives. At some point, she writes, “Within the first few months of her return to her parent's home, Ammu quickly learned to recognize and despise the ugly face of sympathy” (pp. 43). She represents the intricacies of traumatic experiences and the fractured identities of the land’s survivor that shaped their own perceptions and others around them. The Marxist concerns, Naxalite’s uprising, and the marginalization of lower strata is pertinent at several stages throughout the novel [27-29]. And even today, the lasting effects of post-colonialism, caste oppression, gender issues, and slavery is being studied for individualistic and collective, historical and race-based traumas in contemporary societies [30-33].

VII. CONCLUSION

We explore the multitude of themes, recurring traumas, tortures, inner contradictions, chaos, and psychological conflicts in Arundhati Roy’s semi-autobiographical novel *The God of Small Things* through a close textual analysis and review of previously published significant research articles. We regard this novel as one of the most important novels from the post-colonial literature that is raw and honest about its depiction of the Indian society that is afflicted with social injustice, economic equality, casteism, gender issues, racism, and political hazards. Roy’s seminal work and magnum opus meticulously depicts the aftereffect of post-colonialism on the characters’ psyche, and their interpersonal and human-nature relationships.

In this study, we delve deeper to understand the relevant themes subdued in the novel, but also illustrate the post-colonial perspectives, nature’s roleplay, gender dynamics, casteism, and societal love laws that ultimately manifests in chaos, conflicts, and contradictions. We empathize with Estha and Rahel who are inflicted with childhood exploitation, mental abuse, and historical trauma. Through their writings, social activists, learned researchers, and conscious minds shall continue to protest against the marginalization, subjugation, and ignorance of a colonized state. We encourage the readers and fellow researchers to further investigate, explore and quantify the emotional conflicts, cognitive dissonance, and historical traumas experienced by marginalized communities and the subaltern due to colonial invasion and its lasting legacy.

REFERENCES

- [1] Arundhati Roy (2001). *The God of Small Things*. Mehta Publishing House.
- [2] Chinua Achebe (1958). *Things fall apart*. London: Heinemann.
- [3] Salman Rushdie (2010). *Midnight's children*. Vintage Canada.
- [4] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2023). Can the subaltern speak? *Imperialism*, 171-219. Routledge.
- [5] Sudipta Kaviraj (2003). A state of contradictions: the post-colonial state in India. *States and Citizens: History, Theory, Prospects*, 145. Cambridge University Press.
- [6] Jennifer Lavia (2007). Repositioning pedagogies and postcolonialism: Theories, contradictions and possibilities. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 11, 3, 283-300. Taylor & Francis.
- [7] Russel Ferguson, et al. (1992). *Out there: Marginalization and contemporary culture*. MIT Press.
- [8] Nasir Abbas Nayyar (2024). Cultural Narratives in Postcolonial Literature: Exploring the Legacy of Empire. *Ma-Hasal*, 1, 2, 11-20.
- [9] Sushmita Chatterjee (2024). *Postcolonial Hauntings: Play and Transnational Feminism*. University of Illinois Press.
- [10] Arundhati Roy (2008). *The shape of the beast: Conversations with Arundhati Roy*. Penguin Books India.
- [11] Tattvi Pandit (2021). Book Review: *God of Small Things*. HeinOnline. https://heinonline.org/hol-cgi-bin/get_pdf.cgi?handle=hein.journals/juscrp2§ion=542.
- [12] Miriam Nandi (2010). Longing for the lost (m) other--Postcolonial ambivalences in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 46, 2, 175-186. Taylor & Francis.
- [13] Israt Jahan Nimni (2016). *The God of Small Things: Speaking Subalterns*. *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 21, 2, 21-26.
- [14] Brinda Bose (1998). In *Desire and in Death: Eroticism as Politics in Arundhati Roy's "The God of Small Things"*. *ARIEL: A review of International English literature*, 29, 2.
- [15] V. S. Gladio Shilpa Vince (2020). Post-Colonial Aspects in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. *Contemporaneity of Language and Literature in the Robotized Millennium*, 2, 3. <https://restpublisher.com/book-series/cllrm/>
- [16] Nesrin Koc (2023). Deconstructing the Language Laws: Arundhati Roy's Linguistic Strategies in *The God of Small Things*. *Journal of Human and Social Sciences*, 6, 1, 126-143.
- [17] Reena Ranjith and Dr. Manjula K. T. (2024). The Human - Nature Relationship in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, 9, 4.
- [18] Soga, M., & Gaston, K. J. (2016). Extinction of experience: the loss of human-nature interactions. *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, 14, 2, 94-101.
- [19] Sushma, B. (2018). Interconnectedness of Man and Nature in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. *International Journal on Multicultural Literature*, 8(2).
- [20] Md. Hafizur Rahman (2015). *Manarat International University Studies*, 4, 1.
- [21] Michelle Giles (2011). Postcolonial Gothic and *The God of Small Things: The Haunting of India's Past*. *Postcolonial Text*, 6, 1.
- [22] Md. Abdul Momen Sarker and Md. Mominur Rahman (2018). Intermingling of History and Politics in *The God of Small Things*. *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, 9, 4.
- [23] Neelam Tandon (2022). Women and Children: Oppression in *The God of Small Things*. *Multidisciplinary International Journal*, 8.
- [24] Jyotirmayee Ojha (2018). A Gender and Caste Conflicts in Own Country: A Perspective on *The God of Small Things*. *International Journal of Human Resource Management and Research*, 8, 6, 121-130.
- [25] Rekha Tiwari and Vishnu Kumar Sharma (2018). The theme of patriarchal arrogance against females in *The God of Small Things*. *Journal of English Language and Literature*, 5, 1.
- [26] Muhammad Asif Asghar, et al. (2020). A Study of Marginalized Groups in Our Lady of Alice Bhatti and *The God of Small Things*. *International Journal of English, Literature and Social Sciences*, 5, 1. <https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijels.51.39>
- [27] Jane Poyner (2018). Subalternity and Scale in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, 51, 3, 53-69. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26974110>
- [28] Mohd. Farhan Saiel (2022). The Plight of Dalit and Cultural Tension in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. *NEW ACADEMIA: An International Journal of English Language, Literature and Literary Theory*, XI, II.
- [29] Dr. Vinod Kumar (2015). An Analysis of Class Struggles in *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy. *Ascent International Journal for Research Analysis*, 2, 4.
- [30] Fahimeh Nazari and Hossein Pirnajmuddin (2013). Revisiting Colonial Legacy in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. *Journal of Educational and Social Research*, 3, 1.
- [31] Ebrahim Sk. (2016). *Heart of Darkness* in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. *International Journal of English, Language, Literature and Humanities*, 4, 146-156.
- [32] Youngsuk Chae (2015). Postcolonial ecofeminism in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 51, 5, 519-530. Taylor & Francis.
- [33] Alex Tickell (2003). *The God of Small Things: Arundhati Roy's Postcolonial Cosmopolitanism*. *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 38, 1, 73-89. Sage Publications Sage CA: Thousand Oaks, CA.