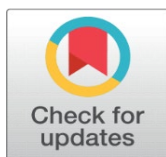
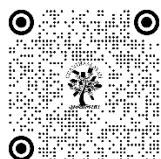


# PLEASURE AND PAIN IN THE FORBIDDEN RELATIONSHIPS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*

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## ABSTRACT

The present paper is a sincere attempt to examine how various characters in *The God of Small Things* suffers as a consequence of breaking the social norms of sexuality, in light of Jeremy Bentham's pleasure and pain theory which emphasizes that an action is a right action when it creates or its consequence is the greatest happiness of the greatest number. The central character of the novel, Ammu, and her copulation with Velutha is implicitly an attempt to break the artificial social norms of love and sexuality. A critical analysis of the novel reveals that Arundhati Roy, through her protagonists, vividly portrays that acting against social norms is not something easy. However, she highlights, that Ammu and Velutha get punished for breaking 'the love laws' does not mean that they deserve it. Roy just shows how the real world works. Pursuing your heart does not guarantee a perfect life because social norms are so deep-rooted in people's minds that one does not even look if they are good or bad.

**Keywords:** The God of Small Things, Love, Sexuality, Social Laws, Pleasure, Pain, Consequences

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Post-independence Indian English fiction constitutes an important part of the world literature today, and women novelists have made significant contributions to it. *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy is a complex novel and can be interpreted in diverse ways. This paper seeks to analyze that how various characters of the novel, touchable and untouchable, master and servant, higher and lower caste become equal in the matter of love/sexuality for inner pleasure and how they suffers because of breaking the prevailing social norms, the so called 'love laws.' The theoretical framework of pleasure and pain as proposed by Jeremy Bentham shall be used for analyzing the research question. Jeremy Bentham's most important theoretical work is the *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789), wherein he described and developed the theory of the greatest happiness principle. His theory introduced two premises, the first one is the belief in consequentialism, and it means morality is concerned with the effects of actions on the happiness of the individuals. The second one is the maximization of happiness. According to Bentham, an action is a right action when it creates or its consequence is the greatest happiness of the greatest number.

Roy presents two kinds of morality in the novel. One of them is social morality, which can be defined as what a group thinks is good and right or the way one should behave. The other one is individual morality, what oneself thinks is the right way to act. These two kinds of morality inevitably clash. In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy presents and, in some way, even encourages her characters to stand in the middle of this clash. She pushes her characters to pursue their personal truths. They are seen reveling in their freedom and courage for doing so. But, eventually, they get punished by their families and society.

The women in *The God of Small Things* belong to men throughout their whole lives. One way to see the oppression of the female characters in the novel is by looking at how she gets married. To have a woman in the family is therefore such a burden that the fathers even have to pay to get rid of them, to "burden another poor soul" (Roy 87) with them. As a young, unmarried woman, Ammu spends a summer in Calcutta with a distant relative. This seems to be when she starts to get into trouble, and when she starts to cross social boundaries. During this summer, she meets her future husband, the father of her future children. This man is not the kind of man her parents want her to marry; he is a stranger to the family, and, worst of all, he is a Hindu. And for a young Christian woman from the upper middle-class, a Bengali Hindu is not the right kind of man to marry. Therefore, by marrying this man, she brings shame to not only herself, but to her whole family, something that the rest of the family of course is not so pleased about.

Because the women are owned by men all their lives, the only way to leave their fathers' home is by marrying their second owner. Just moving on their own is something impossible for these women -and this is also the case for Ammu. When she accepts his proposal, the only thing Ammu has in mind is to get out of Ayemenem, to escape the life she will have if she returns home. At the time, "She thought that anything, anyone at all, would be better than returning to Ayemenem" (Roy 39).

She wants to flee Ayemenem and everything that has to do with her home town; so, for her, marrying him seems to be the only solution of her problems. However, as Nirmala C. Prakash in the article "Man-Woman Relationship in *The God of Small Things*" claims, "this kind of marriage, a marriage of convenience, can be as terrible as any other unsuccessful marriage" (Prakash 81).

Ammu leaves him to live in her parents' house again. Her return, if possible, is seen as more scandalous than marrying a stranger. There are no excuses for divorces; they are just the wrong thing to be part of. Baby Kochamma, who seems to have some "wise" words for every moment someone crosses societal boundaries, explains what she, and the rest of their society, think about the way Ammu lives her life:

She subscribed wholeheartedly to her commonly held view that a married daughter had no position in her parents' home. As for a divorced daughter -according to Baby Kochamma, she had no position anywhere at all. And as for a divorced daughter from a love marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochamma's outrage. As for a divorced daughter from an intercommunity love marriage -Baby Kochamma chose to remain quaveringly silent on the subject (Roy 45-46).

The family actually treats Ammu according to Baby Kochamma's sentiments. When beginning to read this novel, one immediately understands that Ammu and her children must have done something terrible. One section in the novel where this is really shown is during the funeral of Sophie Mol:

Though Ammu, Estha and Rahel were allowed to attend the funeral, they were made to stand separately, not with the rest of the family. Nobody would look at them (Roy 5).

Nobody wants to talk with them, nobody wants to come near them; they are, as Mohit Kumar Ray in her article "Locust Stand I': Some Feminine Aspects of *The God of Small Things*" calls it, "virtually untouchable" (Ray 52).

Ammu, of course, loves her children. All she wants is for them to be loved. But all she sees, and has seen, since the day they were born, in her own, or rather, her parents' home, and in the rest of their community, is her children being unloved. However, this change the day she sees the way Velutha treats them; with him, they can play and laugh as much as they want. All Velutha does is to make them happy, loving them and accepting them. This must be one of the reasons, a big reason, why "She loves by night the man her children love by day" (Roy 44).

Also Velutha does things that he, according to his society, is not supposed to do because he is a Paravan, or an untouchable. The problem with Velutha is that he does not let the caste he is born to prevent him from doing what he wants. Although normally Paravans do not go to school, or at least finish high-school, he does. But were most people would stop, he just continues. He does not think that may be this is too much for a Paravan to do. So he learns to be a carpenter and starts working at a place where he still does not have the rights a touchable would have, but where he is

allowed to do a lot more than other Paravans. It is shown that the way Velutha lives his life, and the way he is treated, is something unique; that he is not really like the other Paravans.

Both Ammu and Velutha have already crossed several boundaries of social norms. Several relationships are described in *The God of Small Things*, but, as Nirmala C. Prakash writes that this relationship between Ammu and Velutha is "...the only one which germinates from the innermost core of two human hearts which actually grows to ...the perfect kind of man-woman relationship, and the only one which is illustrated with scenes resonant with love, sex and feelings of mutual fulfillment" (Prakash 82).

This statement is very true. None of the other couples in the novel are described like this one. In the other relationships, both partners are never really happy in the relationship -one person in the relationship is either beaten or not loved back. There is no giving and receiving in the other relationships, but here, between Ammu and Velutha, there is. Even though this probably is a relationship between two people who have the most difficulty actually meeting and showing their love to each other, they seem to be the only ones who realize what a relationship actually is all about: "He saw too that he was not the only giver of gifts. That she had gifts to give him too" (Roy 176-177).

This couple does not let the rules about how men and women are supposed to stop them; nor do they let the fact that they are from different castes in the way for their love and sexual relationship. The important thing is that they want to be there for each other, in every kind of way. There are not a lot of scenes in the novel depicting Ammu and Velutha together; the only place where one can really read about the two of them together, where one can see how they are to each other, is in the last chapter, the last scene of the book, the love scene. Here, by describing the two of them having sex, Roy shows that they care for each other, that both of them want to make sure that they satisfy the other, and that the satisfaction is mutual.

What in a way unites this couple, except the physical attraction, is the fact that neither of them seem to care about the social norms of love and sexuality i.e. 'the love laws.' They both know that the relationship they have is never going to be accepted in their community. Nevertheless, they will not let that obstacle stop them. They always seem to do exactly what they want to do, although they always are aware of the opinions of others that actions are going to lead to. At the beginning of *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789), Bentham offered the famous declamation that underscores the primacy of pains and pleasures in utilitarian theory:

Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think (Burns and Hart 11).

There are two forms of hedonism expressed in this seminal passage: (1) psychological hedonism, which states that all motives of action are grounded in the apprehension of pain or the desire for pleasure; and (2) ethical hedonism, which holds that pleasure is the only good and actions are right in so far as they tend to produce pleasure or avoid pain. As Bentham went on to explain, allowing for "immunity from pain", pleasure is "the only good", and pain "without exception, the only evil" (Burns and Hart 100). As such, pain and pleasure are the *final* cause of individual action and the *efficient* cause and means to individual happiness.

Ammu knows that intercommunity love marriages and divorces will upset both her family and society. But neither of them seems to care about what other people think. They always seem to act according to what they themselves think is best (Swami 111). This, the fact that they both are rebels against some kind of repression, unites this couple. An example that shows that at least Ammu is attracted by the fighter in Velutha is when Rahel says she sees him in the march. Ammu later wishes that it really was him, that: "...he housed a living, breathing anger against the smug, ordered world that she so raged against" (Roy 175-176). Because they both are rebels against the social norms, they do not cross a lot of individual boundaries. Most of the time, they decide to cross societal boundaries so that they will be spared from crossing their individual boundaries.

In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy writes about 'the love laws', "the laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much" (33). These love laws are in a way another word for social boundaries. In the novel, Roy writes about the love laws as something that has always existed and that probably will always be there. She claims that it came before Marxism arrived to Kerala, before the British, the Dutch and the Portuguese, and that they even existed there before Christianity came to Kerala.

Some specific characters represent society and its social norms. One of these, and the most important one, is Baby Kochamma. She has always got something to say about when someone else acts against the social norms. She seems to look for mistakes being made by other people all the time, and she is always ready to at least take note of the “mistake” being done. It is as if she wants to prove her innocence and goodness by showing how much worse other people behave. For example, when Ammu and Velutha’s love affair is revealed, Baby Kochamma is very quick to ask how Ammu can stand that awful smell the Paravans have. She keeps “an organized, careful account of Things She’d Done For People, and Things People Hadn’t Done For Her” (Roy 98).

In her eyes, she sacrifices herself for people. She is flawless and free from sin, while she very quickly judges other people and points out their burdens and sins. The police also function as social norm controllers. They are the ones who beat Velutha to death when the affair is discovered. After Sophie Molis’ funeral, when Ammu finds out what has happened to Velutha, and tells them that it all is an awful mistake, they do not listen. Instead of regretting causing the death of Velutha, the police tap Ammu’s breasts with their baton to show that they think that it all happened because of her inappropriate behavior.

What is frightening with the police is that they have the power to punish people for acting against the love laws. Baby Kochamma, in that way, seems rather harmless. She says a lot, and tries to rule, but she does not really have the power to directly and physically punish people for not acting as she thinks they should. The police, on the other hand, have this kind of power, and they are not afraid of using it. Proof of this is Velutha. He acts against the social norms, and, for this, the Police beat him to death. However, the reason why they attack him in the first place is Baby Kochamma. She is the one who tells the police what they need to hear to be able to punish Velutha as they do. So harmless is perhaps not the right word to describe Baby Kochamma. She lies and manipulates to get what she wants and again, to show that she is much better than everyone else, no matter what the cost is, even if the cost is somebody else’s life.

The major way Ammu crosses boundaries is by acting against the gender roles in her society. The Indian Syrian Christian family she is a part of does not accept any behavior that in their society is seen as immorally wrong from women. And Ammu’s actions are the total opposite from what she is expected to do. One way to see the difference between women’s and men’s roles is by comparing the way Ammu is treated by society, and especially her own family, with the way her brother Chacko is treated. As in most societies in the world -if not all -there are a lot of differences and double standards in the way people expect the two sexes to act. All in all, Ammu and Chacko act very similarly throughout their lives; however, because of their sexes, they get treated very differently for their actions.

For example, Chacko marries a British woman, has a child with her, and later gets divorced. When he returns to Ayemenem, without his family, he is still welcomed with open arms and continues to be the rightful inheritor of the family fortune as well as keeping an important place in the family. Ammu’s life, on the other hand, is not as easy to live. The things she does in her life are very similar to the actions of Chacko: she marries someone outside her own community, has children with him, divorces him and returns to her parent’s home.

Although Chacko does the same, none of the things Ammu does seem to be accepted by her society or her family. Marrying outside her community is wrong, but divorcing him is, no matter how good the reason, even worse. It seems like whatever Ammu decides to do, she is already doomed: “She was twenty-seven that year, and in the pit of her stomach she carried the cold knowledge that for her, life had been lived. She had had one chance. She made one mistake. She married the wrong man” (Roy 38). But Chacko, the man, can make the same mistake, ten times worse, and still get away with it.

Another way to see that the two siblings are treated very differently is by looking at the way they are viewed and treated for having extramarital sex. Chacko has several lovers who he often invites to the Kochamma house for some special one-on-one time. Instead of condemning extramarital sex inside the walls of her house, Mammachi has a separate entrance built for Chacko’s mistresses so that she does not have to see them go through the house. And, additionally, Mammachi’s only explanation for accepting this behavior from Chacko is that “.....he can’t help having a man’s needs” (Roy 168). However, the women who help him with these needs are never seen as normal human beings with needs or feelings. After they have “done their job”, Mammachi puts money in their pockets “because in her mind, a fee clarified things. Disjuncted sex from love. Needs from Feelings” (Roy 169).

In Mammachi’s eyes, these women are nothing else than prostitutes hired to satisfy her son. She never thinks about the reason why these women do what they do with Chacko. She never seems to think about what Ammu says about Chacko being “a landlord forcing his attentions on women who depended on him for their livelihood” (Roy 65). Neither

Mammachi nor the rest of the family stops to think that maybe Chacko's behavior should not be accepted, that Chacko is using these women, who do not really have a choice if they want to be there for Chacko and his 'needs' or not. They all seem to hold the opinion that these women, and all other women too, for that matter, are just supposed to be there for a man like Chacko. However, when Ammu's relationship with Velutha is revealed, hell breaks loose. In this particular matter, needs and feelings do not mean anything; they do not even seem to exist to Ammu's family. This relationship includes their daughter, and is therefore an insult to the family. A daughter, a woman, is not supposed to have a sex life, at least not until she gets married, and even then, the only times she is supposed to have sex is for breeding, or, of course, to satisfy her husband and his needs. The fact that a woman can have sexual needs is unthinkable to the Kochammas and the rest of the Ayemenem community.

The main character, Ammu's rebellion against the social norms is a direct resistance over the socio-cultural discourses set by the Indian society. This is, thus the story of forbidden cross-caste love affair ad sex, and what a community will do to protect the so-called moral norms and cultural systems. Sexuality is a form of resisting tool against the so-called elite group. Ammu herself discovers that it is sexuality which is a means of gratifying the baser desires where all the forms of distinctions are just nothing.

## 2. CONCLUSION

Arundhati Roy in *The God of Small Things*, through Ammu and Velutha, mirrors a frontal challenge to patriarchal thoughts, inalienable social laws and control mechanism prevailing in the real world. She has bared the face of true love in the love shared between Ammu and Velutha. A love that embodies the existence of such contrasting emotions that pleasure and pain come hand in hand for them. Roy aims at bringing out a moral revolution for the betterment of the world, and seeks more meaningful relationship based on trust and companionship. Her urge is to re-evaluate the restrictions one places on love and its expression.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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