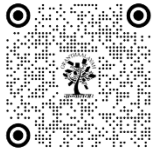


# ARUNDHATI ROY'S THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS AND SOCIAL ACTIVISM

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DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i6.2024.5571](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i6.2024.5571)

**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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## ABSTRACT

The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy received mixed reactions; appreciated and criticized because of its social themes. One of the reasons for its popularity is its social activism themes. Roy is a social activist and though her maiden novel she was so successful that she turned towards social awareness among society. She is considered as the defender of subaltern and marginalized causes as she has devoted her life to uplifting Dalits, preserving the environment due to the Narmada Dam project.

In The God of Small Things, Roy transcribed a personal narrative raising a powerful voice against many forms of injustice in Indian society. She being a social activist is prone to hear all these allegations because when you criticized others you have to tolerate your criticism as well. Nevertheless, it is a controversial novel but still pertinent in overall terms as it has fiercely criticized gender and caste discrimination in India.

In the novel, Roy has depicted the plight of Indian women in a family and society. They are badly treated and subjugated in their family no matter what position they hold.

**Keywords:** Social Consciousness, Caste-Conflict, Class-Conflict, Gender Parity, Childhood Trauma

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Arundhati Roy is one such name in the field of Indian literature that is highly respected worldwide. She is so popular that many people from across the world have preordered her second novel. Her maiden novel, The God of Small Things (1997) was a massive success, has been sold over 6 million copies, and has been translated into 40 languages. It was the second “Booker prize” winning novel from India after Salman Rushdie’s Midnight Children, which won in 1980. She was also awarded the Sydney Prize in the year 2004 for her notable work in societal campaigns and the promotion of non-violence. Her style is considered new and original, different from most of her contemporary novelists.

The God of Small Thing is basically about social consciousness which is the result of her thought-provoking attitude. There are many themes, which she has explored in the novel, caste or class conflict, gender parity, the status of women in Indian society, conflict of regressive forces with liberals, Indian history and politics, short-lived relationships, betrayal, childhood traumatic experiences and love breaking norms and conventions. In his famous critical article, “The Book of the Year”, Ranga Rao describes, The God of Small Things in the following words:

“Roy’s book is the only one I can think of among Indian novels in English, which can be comprehensively described as a protest novel. It is all about atrocities against minorities, small things, children and fourth, woman and untouchable.”

(Roy, 2017)

The narrative technique used by Roy in the novel is unique. She has employed both traditional as well as innovative techniques to create a storyline that depicts Indian consciousness. She has connected the past and present narratives in the form of flashbacks.

## 2. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In the novel, she has described the landscape of Ayemenem with richness along with the description of nature. In the novel, Roy has depicted Ayemenem as a real-life community, which is situated in South Central Kerala and had set it near the fictional river, Meenachal that is quite similar to the river Minachil, near the town Kottayam. Being social activist; Roy depicted sometimes Ayemenem was not polluted. It was a fresh and green river but now everything has changed and it has transformed into the unpolluted river and now instead of greenery and freshness one can see the latest freshly baked, glaring residences built by Indian masons, nurses, wire benders and bank clerks working in Gulf countries. From green pastures, it has turned to an urban locality.

In the novel, Roy has shown the utmost reality of the Indian society which beliefs in the caste system. The caste system is an integral part of Hindu society since ancient times. It is believed that Portuguese travelers were the first to use the word, "caste" in the 16th century. Earlier Indians have always used the word "jati" for the same. This "jatipratha" is part of Varna-vyavastha based on occupation. This Varna-vyavastha implies Brahmins for the priest class, Kshatriyas for the warrior class, Vaishyas for traders and merchant class and Shudras for the lowest class means labors or untouchables. For ages, the upper three classes resulting in their subaltern status have exploited this class. In the novel, Roy has also discussed the large-scale conversions of shudra or lower class Hindus to Christianity for achieving respect and dignity, which they have been deprived of in their religion.

## 3. RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

The novel, *The God of Small Things*, is set in some decades back in Kerala when it was not as educated, liberal as it is in the contemporary scenario; rather it was purely patriarchal. There are many strong women characters depicted whose presence is of great significance in the novel. These women characters like Mammachi, Baby Koachamma and Kachi Maria, the cook, who is a strong advocator of caste, race, and gender.

"Every night he beat her with a brass flower vase. The beatings weren't new. What was new was only the frequency with which they took place. One night Pappachi broke the bow of Mammachi's violin and threw it in the river."

(*The God of small things*, P-47)

When we look at the Kochamma family, we find that they have a history of ill-treating female members. Ammu grew up seeing her mother being abused and beaten by her father. Her father always blamed his mother for all his failures and used to vent out anger, whatever loss he experienced in his business and other matters. This traumatic experience had a great impact on Ammu, as she never gained the confidence to become an independent, strong individual. Later, Ammu herself became a victim of male subjugation after her marriage. Though she had a love marriage with a person of a different religion, this also did not give her security and love which she craved since childhood. After some time, from loving husband, he became a dominating male counterpart, who after experiencing failure in a job, asked her to sleep with his Boss.

She turned down his malicious offer and divorced him. Returning to her family, she found a lack of comfort for herself, which made her rebellious to go against the norms of the family, which restrained her in achieving freedom and liberty. In nutshell, the novel is a portrayal of social life with all the anomalies.

## 4. DISCUSSION

The caste system has dominated Indian society in terms of occupation and other social obligations. High caste individuals enjoyed all the facilities and opportunities while low caste people performed menial jobs in society. This resulted in the prosperity of the upper caste and the downfall of the lower caste. Moreover, they were not allowed to enter public places like Temples and social gatherings. As Arundhati Roy has presented in the novel:

"To keep the others happy, and since she knew that nobody else would hire him as a carpenter, Mammachi paid Velutha less than she would a Touchable carpenter, but more than she would a Paravan. Mammachi did not encourage

him to enter the house (except when she needed something mended or installed). She thought he ought to be grateful that he was allowed on the factory premises at all and allowed to touch the Paravan."

(The God of small Things, P-68)

This is a very strange notion to believe that Church, where everybody is considered as equal, differentiates between lower caste and upper caste people. By pointing this, she had tried to prove that conversion of lower-class people did not benefit them in any way; rather they remained untouchable in their new community as well.

"Mammachi told... Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sway their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan's footprint. In Mammachi's time, Paravans's like other untouchables were not allowed to walk on public roads, or allowed to cover their upper bodies, not allowed to carry umbrellas. They had to put their hands over their mouths when they spoke, to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed."

(The God of small Things, P-73-74)

Though in the current times, the society has become more liberal and such things as "untouchability" does not exist but still, the society is divided based on upper caste and lower caste. Still, in many places, there is hostility among different castes and people of upper castes do not like to mix up with people of lower castes. The best example is seen in terms of marriages because when it comes to marriage, families are firm in marrying in their caste.

Bestowing to Shruti Gupta,

"The novel is a modern masterpiece, truly telling a sad story in the most appealing and innovative narrative, conveying the feelings of the characters casually, thereby increasing its effect. It is a deep study into rules which society has made and which we follow blindly."

(Gupta, 2010)

With the mass conversions in Kerala advocated by the British, a number of lower caste people (discriminated against all their lives) decided to convert to Christianity. In return, they were given little food and money. However, 'it did not take them long to realize that they had jumped from the frying pan to the fire.' Soon they were compelled to create their own churches, schools, separate priests, and so on. They did not even get reservations in Government Jobs as on paper they were Christians, and thus casteless. Similarly, they had to face social discrimination, lower wages, and poor living conditions.

Roy has tried to make a microcosm, which encircles many activities like unsuccessful relationships, domination of husband over wife, the superiority of male child over female, emotional insecurity, pride and death in a Keralite Christian family. She, as an advocator of social realism, has depicted various social evils like caste system, gender discrimination, corruption in government offices, cultural polarities affecting individuals and other evils present in our society.

Caste taboos though not as strong as in the olden days but are still present in our society. She has dealt with various tragedies happening in the lives of women like divorce, unhappy marriages and social disgrace. She depicts in the following ways:

When the British came to Malabar, several Paravans... converted to Christianity and joined the Anglican church to escape the scourge of untouchability...it did not take them long to realize that they had jumped from the frying pan into the fire they were made to have separate churches, with separate services, and separate priests. After independence, they found they were not titled to any Government benefits like job reservations or bank loans at low-interest rates, because officially, on paper, they were Christians, and therefore Casteless.

(The God of small Things, P-74)

Roy is very realistically portrayed the status of Indian women with all its manifestations; silence, frustration, anguish, disillusionment, subjugation, family and societal pressure, and most importantly, identity crisis. Around the world in the conservative society, women face identity crises throughout their lives, and there is an absence of belonging in their lives, whether they live in their parents' house or husband's, or later, even in their son's house. She is always made to feel she does not own anything, and everything belongs to her father, brother, husband or son. The novelist pronounces Ammu, Rahel and Estha in the following words:

"Perhaps Ammu, Estha and Rahel were the worst transgressors. They all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory. They are all tempered with laws that lay down who should be loved how and how much."

(The God of small Things, P-31)

Ammu has been the victim of the double standard of the gender-biased society because her family and the society in which she lives had ignored the crime committed by Pappachi and Chacko, but the same society humiliated Ammu for being divorced and loving a man of lower caste. Roy has described many political social forces struggling against each other, affecting people and creating chaos and vehemence.

This is portrayed rather well in the social influences of the Ipe family, which wields its power to create internal and external struggle from the beginning till the novel's conclusion. In portraying the Keralite society of 1969, she attempts to show how Marxist ideas were taking root and beginning to affect society, particularly concerning the class system of property owners and labors. It also influences the protagonist's family and characters like Velutha, Chacko and Comrade Pillai and most importantly their factory, Paradise Pickles.

The tumultuous relation of Ammu and Velutha is the essence of the novel and the turning point that creates havoc by spoiling many lives. Roy is bold enough to portray the relevant role of physical desire in individual life and affects an individual psyche. This biological need of the universe results in the tragic downfall of Ammu and Velutha, who were earlier busy building their lives. The novelist has presented Ammu as a victim of circumstances because in the olden days a divorced woman was considered unwanted in society as well as in her own house. Ammu, being a divorcee, was leading an insignificant life in her familiar atmosphere. Leading a loveless life, she craved love, which she got from Velutha so she did not care about his social and financial status; she simply cared about love, which a woman needs in life.

"We do it each other to... she turned to repeat it one more: 'Nearly tomorrow.'"

(The God of Small Things, P-32)

However, society did not accept it, as the social status and financial position is more valued. This led to the catastrophe of claiming the lives of both lovers. Ammu's brother, Chacko, whose story runs parallel with her, also has a tragic life. He was sent to Oxford to study where he befriended Margaret. He falls in love with her and married. However, no compatibility existed in their relationship and they separated after the birth of their daughter, Sophie. Chacko came back to India and started looking after his father's business.

However, he separated from his wife, and she married someone else, but he still loved her. His love for his ex-wife and daughter was selfless and unconditional. However, it was unrequited because they both loved Joe, Margaret's second husband. When Joe dies, they both come back to India and welcomed by Chacko.

Thus breaking the societal norms of Indian society, which does not believe in any kind of relationship between the divorced couple, but Chacko did not care about it. Here we see the hypocrisy of the Indian society in terms of dealing with males and females and in terms of dealing with an individual of upper caste and lower caste. Society's attitude towards Velutha is different because he is a person of lower caste; so if he breaks norms, he will be punished, but Chacko, being an upper-caste individual, can get away with his debauchery or, in other terms, we can say "man's needs", as his mother terms it, because he is "touchable". The novelist has highlighted this issue when she utters, "Change is one thing. Acceptance is another."

(The God of small Things, P-86)

Though Chacko finds happiness when Margaret and Sophie come back to live with him in India, this happiness is short-lived. Sophie dies after the catastrophe breaks out, leading to the discovery of Ammu and Velutha's relationship. Since it was forbidden love, both Ammu and Velutha were punished. Ammu's family locked her in her room and put fake charges on Velutha, and he was put behind the bars. Ammu was anguished and in the state of frenzy; she blamed her twin children for her adversity and claimed them to be "millstones around her neck". Being heartbroken, they left their house and ran away. Sophie, their cousin and friend, also went with them. They sailed on a boat and reached an abandoned house across the river.

Here a misfortune, happened as Sophie was stuck in the boat, which overturned, leading to her ultimate demise. Her parents, Margaret and Chacko, were not in Ayemenem; when they returned, they were shocked to see her dead body lying on the sofa. Chacko was outraged, seeing this, and held the twins responsible for it. Chacko loved Sophie a lot; so when Margaret's second husband died in a car accident, he invited both Mother and daughter to stay with him to celebrate Christmas in Ayemenem. In this way, he was trying to heal his wounds, which he got after the separation from his wife and daughter. The whole family went to receive them at the airport. On the route, they also visited a theatre.

There is another incident associated with it, and that is the molestation of Estha. After the episode of the Communist mob, when the family was in the theatre, an "Orange drink Lemon drink Man," a vendor working at the snack counter, sexually molested Estha. It was a shocking experience that he encountered, though being with the family. This tragic event is narrated in such a way by the novelist that it becomes the heart of the narrative. Not only this, but also Estha and Rahel both had encountered many traumatic experiences in their lives, which has made their childhood traumatic. In the end, she was able to receive love, which she craved from her childhood in the form of Velutha, but this did not last long and their family and society separated them both.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In this way, from the novel's beginning, we see women characters are marginalized in the Patriarchal system. In the family, there are other women became prey to the subject of marginalization either on a gender basis or on a caste. In the patriarchal construct, family and society always behave in a hostile manner with women. They demand that women should be meek, fragile and submissive. They do not like bold, daring, self-dependent and confident women. Rebellious women are rejected by these kinds of societies. The status of Indian women is changing now, and everywhere we see examples of modern and strong women. However, this was not the same some decades back. Earlier, their status has been unsteady, insecure, unstable, and uneasy, surrounded by problems.

Roy has dedicated her life to numerous social causes and as a social activist, she probes the existentialism of marginalized groups, be it women or lower class people, in both direct and indirect manners in our democratic and unclear world. She has depicted the continuous fight of women for their identity via the character of Ammu. The battle for survival with dignity postulated through characters such as Velutha. These characters are encountering life's difficulties daily in various forms, which inspires an author like Arundhati to voice their concern through her writing.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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