

## **Social Influence and Sexual Subjugation: An Analysis of Arundhati Roy's novel '*The God of Small Things*'**

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### **Abstract:**

At the heart of Indian English literature, there has consistently been a significant emphasis on social issues. Authors have always found opportunities to broaden their perspectives by delving into specific social experiences. In Indian society, the interplay of sexuality and social power takes center stage. This paper will examine the themes of social power and sexual oppression through a study of Arundhati Roy's novel '*The God of Small Things*'. Arundhati Roy is one of the most celebrated authors in Indian literature written in English and is most widely recognized for her book '*The God of Small Things*,' which received the Man Booker Prize for fiction in 1997. The relationship between personal connections and societal structures is a significant theme in Roy's novel. Set in Kerala, India, it explores the consequences of violating social and sexual boundaries within private relationships between men and women, affecting the lives of a Syrian Christian family. As the repercussions of these transgressions vary among family members and others involved, it is important to examine how the various relationships are depicted in the novel and how they are perceived by family members and society at large.

**Key Points:** Social authority, Sexual Subjugation, Gender, Marginalization, Caste, Social Isolation, etc.

### **Introduction:**

'*The God of Small Things*' can be seen as one of the most influential novels ever written regarding a specific social issue. Arundhati Roy utilizes precise language and a conventional style to emphasize the essential struggles faced by socially marginalized individuals; this is a significant feature of her narrative technique. The relationship between personal bonds and social class is a key theme in her novel. Set in the Kerala region of India, it examines the repercussions of violating social and sexual boundaries in male-female relationships within a Syrian Christian family. Understanding that the impact of crime differs among various family members and others affected, it is important to analyse how different relationships are portrayed in the novel and how they interact with one another. The narrative critiques these dynamics through the tragic relationship between Ammu, a divorced Syrian Christian woman, and Velutha, a talented Dalit carpenter, highlighting the damaging intersection of social constraints and sexual oppression. (Kumar) In India, social interactions are assessed far more critically than in many other cultures, particularly in terms of how one individual's social position relates to another's. This is evident in family dynamics, caste hierarchies, and gender issues, which further shape numerous vital aspects of life.

### **Social Power Dynamics:**

The narrative unfolds in a caste-driven society in India, where individuals from the untouchable Paravan caste were prohibited from touching members of the upper caste or entering their homes. The central focus of the novel revolves around the romantic relationship between Ammu and Velutha, which ultimately leads to catastrophe and misfortune for everyone involved. On a personal level, their relationship embodies a connection that defies socially established boundaries and fosters a sense of fulfilment. Despite numerous challenges, both characters demonstrate a mutual commitment to each other and find joy in their desires on a dark night by the banks of the Meenachal.(Roy)

A related sense of inferiority is apparent in the dynamics between the untouchables and the touchable in Ayemenem.(*GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*) B.R. Ambedkar's perspective on caste as a system of graded inequality highlights the upper-caste family's hypocrisy: they hire Velutha for low wages, excluding him from their household while commending his talents, and they uphold the "Love Laws" of endogamy that regulate cross-caste relationships as a form of contamination.(Paul) Vallya Paapen's self-hating shift towards upper-caste allegiance illustrates internalized caste discrimination, compelling him to act violently against his own son to maintain the social hierarchy.(Ajeegah) Vallya Paapen exemplifies an untouchable who, out of gratitude, is willing to kill his son Velutha upon discovering that Velutha has violated the most significant rule of their caste system regarding inter-caste sexual relations. Their encounters over a span of thirteen nights within the social context have severe repercussions for them, particularly concerning gender and racial tensions. Both endure profound isolation in their pain, ultimately experiencing cruel and lonely deaths, forsaken by everyone. Upon discovering this, Baby Kochamma expresses her shock at Ammu's actions. She held the belief that, even if Ammu does not consider the family's reputation, she at least thinks of her own interests. Nearly all the relationships in the novel are influenced by cultural and class conflicts, including the twins' bond with Sophie, Chacko's connection with Margaret, Pappachi's interactions with her family, and Ammu's association with Velutha. Characters like Baby Kochamma and Pappachi are the most inflexible and harsh in upholding societal norms, whereas Ammu and Velutha are the most unconventional and bold in challenging them. Arundhati Roy implies that this is the reason their transgressions are met with such severe punishment.(Nandy)

### **Sexual Oppression Manifestations:**

The idea of 'vision' has been portrayed by Indian writers. It represents a form of social behavior in Indian culture where individuals can fulfil their physical desires by observing one amidst the rubber trees, and during this moment, Ammu observes Rachel descending from the tree to join her in play. This short scene is described from Ammu's perspective, highlighting Velutha, whose well-defined body is characterized by muscles that are both

"Contoured and hard. A swimmer's body. A swimmer carpenter's body. Polished with a bright wax body polish." (Roy, 40)

In this instance, the physical allure between the two is depicted. Ammu observed what she observed. She always noticed. She would have acted similarly.

Arundhati Roy has intricately crafted a moving tale filled with various events. The moral decline of society and the discrimination against women have been skilfully illustrated. She has also confronted serious social issues in her depiction. Postcolonial feminism, influenced by Simone de Beauvoir's 'The Second Sex', depicts the oppression of women as closely linked to colonial histories and local patriarchal systems, illustrating Ammu as a "Second Sex" stripped of her agency. Ammu's curtailed education, abusive marriage, and forbidden romance with Velutha demonstrate how Indian women are conditioned to accept subjugation, with their desires deemed criminal due to sexist ideologies. (Kang et al.) Roy challenges this narrative by depicting Ammu's defiance as a pursuit of self-identity in the face of marginalization.

Postcolonial feminism certainly enhances the interpretation of Ammu's suffering in '*The God of Small Things*', integrating de Beauvoir's existential ideas of women as the "Other" with postcolonial analyses of intersecting oppressions in India. (Thirsha) Roy illustrates Ammu's challenges—unfulfilled dreams, domestic violence, and forbidden love due to caste—as representative of how colonial legacies intensify local patriarchal dominance, making the quest for Indian women's autonomy an act of defiance.

The focus will be on Ammu's and Chacko's interactions with their partners and lovers. This article will explore the societal and personal aspects of these relationships along with the circumstances that surround them. There are notable similarities that connect their situations, highlighting the differing perceptions of Indian society and its systems of oppression rooted in patriarchy and the caste system.

An overview of the hierarchies that exist in Indian society, including the family structure, the caste system, and gender dynamics, especially concerning sexuality, provides a foundation for a thorough examination of male-female relationships in the novel. The hierarchical structure is embedded in the framework of the Indian extended family, which consequently shapes children's experiences from an early age. In an ideal extended family setup, sons remain with their parents after marrying, bringing their wives into the family home. Additionally, widowed or abandoned daughters and other relatives, both male and female, who lack their own family, may also be part of the extended family. This living arrangement offers economic benefits, particularly for young couples who are typically only able to establish their own household once their children are older. As a result, it is common for children to grow up surrounded by and influenced by various relatives. Individuals also discover that each role within the family structure has distinct rights and responsibilities, requiring them to adapt to that framework. The older generations are responsible for caring for the younger members of the family hierarchy, while the younger members are expected to show obedience and respect. Nevertheless, this arrangement does not result in generational conflicts, as the importance of family care and unity is prioritized over personal individuality. Even with changing demographics, living in an extended family continues to be the most preferred arrangement in India, underscoring its significance as a social framework. Consequently, the bonds within family

networks, as well as the sense of solidarity and responsibility towards the family, play a crucial role in shaping the self-identity of Indians. Early experiences of hierarchy also influence future interactions with friends and colleagues.

The caste system in India, categorizes society into hierarchically structured social groups. The traditional *Varna* framework includes the various ranked castes of priests, warriors, merchants, and labourers, while the *Jati* system encompasses distinct occupational castes. Individuals in India are assigned to a varna caste at birth (which establishes their fixed social position) and to a jati caste based on their occupation (which defines their status within their local community). (Fating and Kaushik) Members of a jati typically remain within their caste by adhering to the designated profession and by selecting a spouse from the same caste. Interactions with individuals from different castes tend to be more formal, guided by unwritten norms that govern caste relationships. Each caste has its own distinct rules and values that are deeply ingrained in its members, following the family as the next level of identity formation.

In Gayatri Spivak's 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', Velutha represents the marginalized Dalit whose skills—such as carpentry and factory work—are taken advantage of, while his humanity is overlooked due to the stigma of untouchability; his relationship with Ammu serves as a subaltern voice overshadowed by the narratives of the upper caste. ("*Untouchables*" in *The God Of Small Things*) Roy critiques the combined impacts of colonial and caste systems, highlighting that even Christian converts like the Paravans continue to face marginalization, lacking access to reservations, despite their essential yet undervalued contributions.

A caste's status within the caste system is determined by its lifestyle. The higher a caste is regarded, the more pure and clean its way of life is perceived to be. This perceived purity largely hinges on dietary practices and the traditional occupations associated with the caste. For centuries, they have been denied access to temples, educational institutions, and various public spaces. Individuals from higher castes often displayed significant revulsion in the presence of an untouchable. In contemporary society, a lighter skin tone, which is linked to cleanliness and elevated social status, continues to be favored over a darker complexion, which is associated with dirtiness.

Despite shifts in culture, India continues to be a patriarchal society where discrimination against women begins early in life. The arrival of a son is often celebrated, while high rates of abortion and infanticide indicate that female children are frequently unwelcome. A girl is perceived as unlikely to add to the family's financial resources since she will join another household after marriage, with the dowry representing a significant financial burden. Nevertheless, the presence of numerous female relatives within the family support network, who are typically very caring and understanding towards girls, helps to mitigate the undervaluation of females. They serve as role models because they hold a significant influence within the home. Additionally, it's increasingly common for girls to receive an education; middle-class parents even encourage their daughters to pursue higher education. However, unlike their

sons, this education is primarily aimed at enhancing a girl's prospects of marrying a well-educated and wealthy man.

The emphasis on preparing to be an exemplary wife and daughter-in-law takes precedence in a girl's education. It is believed that fulfilling the roles of marriage and motherhood represents a woman's most vital responsibilities in life. Thus, while a girl's transition into puberty is celebrated, her emerging sexuality also poses a risk to the family's honor. A collection of rules governs a girl's life starting from the onset of puberty, limiting her interactions with the opposite sex while allowing boys to move and act without restrictions.

Marriage is also controlled since typically, parents select their child's future spouse. Although children have the opportunity to refuse the chosen partner, discussions with daughters are often brief compared to those with sons. Nevertheless, arranged marriages, which are standard, are generally accepted among young people, as love marriages are considered unfortunate. The Indian perspective on sexuality tends to be quite conservative. Linked to ascetic values, sexuality is often denounced by perceiving women as inherently lascivious, whose purpose is to diminish men's strength through the loss of semen. Only women of ill repute are considered sexually assertive, while a respectable woman must embody chastity or motherhood. As a result, the only acceptable expression of female sexuality occurs within the confines of marriage; women exhibiting even minor traits of sexual behavior beyond these boundaries often face sexual harassment. Even in the context of marriage, sexual relations are viewed primarily as a male desire and entitlement.

The enforced repression of female sexuality results in a specific impact on the dynamics between mothers and their sons. Following childbirth, societal expectations dictate that women become even more sexually reserved. Consequently, her sexual feelings may redirect towards her male infant. In fact, in India, it is quite common for female family members to touch a baby boy's genitals. As they grow up, Indian men often perceive their mothers as more loving and nurturing compared to their daughters' perspectives. Many men additionally feel a greater emotional connection to their mothers than to their wives, often attempting to diminish their independence from their parents.

The relationships depicted in *'The God of Small Things'* illustrate the existing hierarchies within Indian society. Nearly every interaction between men and women is characterized by violations of social norms and boundaries, which are, however, judged differently based on the individual's societal status. Just as connections made beyond community and caste structures pose a threat to society, those who benefit from the established social hierarchies are allowed certain freedoms that result in harsh penalties for the oppressed.

Examining the marriages of Ammu and Chacko reveals the different ways in which the rules of a patriarchal society affect men and women and the impact this has on both family dynamics and individual lives. The events described in the novel take place in the conservative India of the 1960s. Both Ammu and Chacko are divorced; the reader learns through flashbacks how their relationships and lives evolved.

As a young girl, Ammu quickly understands that her future offers nothing extraordinary, except for marriage. Despite her father being a scientist at a Delhi institute, he believes that higher education is pointless for a girl, yet he also fails to make any effort to gather a suitable dowry. Both parents must recognize the implications that a lack of dowry has for a girl, but not even Ammu's mother, Mamacchi, attempts to assist her daughter:

“No proposals came Ammu’s way. [...] Her eighteenth birthday came and went. Unnoticed or at least unremarked upon by her parents.”(Roy, 38)

This evident lack of assistance for the clearly dependent daughter underscores the animosity towards girls in the patriarchal structure of Indian society. Ammu’s sole opportunity to flee this predicament is to accept the proposal from a man she encounters at a wedding reception while spending her summer with a distant relative. Since this marriage is not orchestrated by her parents, they disapprove of what they perceive to be a love marriage, even though it alleviates Ammu’s reliance on them. Furthermore, they refuse to accept Ammu’s choice because her husband does not belong to their social class. Thus, Ammu defies two conventions simultaneously by marrying someone of her own choosing (though not out of love) and outside her caste.

### **Conclusion:**

Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* powerfully demonstrates how societal power dynamics perpetuate sexual oppression in Kerala. The novel challenges caste systems and patriarchal values through the doomed relationship between Ammu and Velutha. (Purushottam and Saraswat) Rigid caste classifications dominate personal relationships, branding Velutha an “Untouchable,” and their closeness defies the so-called “Love Laws.” Family members like Baby Kochamma exert control to maintain these standards, harshly punishing those who violate them. This mirrors the greater Indian societal repression of marginalized groups.(Rahman and Mehnaz)

Ammu’s aspirations as a divorced woman are stifled; her independence erodes under the pressure of family and caste expectations, leading to isolation and demise. Women like Mammachi absorb patriarchal norms, continuing the cycle of violence against female defiance. Roy reveals how “small things”—personal attachments—mortally conflict with “big” societal powers.(*Women’s Place in a Patriarchal Society: A Critical Analysis of Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things - European Journal of English Language and Literature Studies (EJELLS)*) Roy argues that social authority upholds sexual oppression by criminalizing desires that cross boundaries, ensnaring individuals in loops of tragedy and silence. The broken lives of the twins highlight this: innocence gives way to systemic brutality. The novel calls for the dismantling of these hierarchies to affirm human dignity.(Nayar)

**Citation:**

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