



A FEMINISTIC READING OF ARUNDHATI ROY'S THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

DR. RAJENDRA KUMAR ¹

**¹ ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH, RAJARSHI PURUSHOTTAM DAS TANDON GOVERNMENT DEGREE COLLEGE
TALBEHAT, LALITPUR (UP).**

ABSTRACT:

This research paper offers a feminist reading of Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things*, focusing on the representation of women, the operation of patriarchy, and the intersection of gender with caste and class in postcolonial Indian society. The novel, set in Kerala, presents a deeply layered narrative that reveals how social structures control, marginalize, and silence women. Through its portrayal of characters such as Ammu, Rahel, Baby Kochamma, and Mammachi, the text exposes the unequal power relations embedded in both family and society. This study aims to examine how Roy critiques these structures and highlights the struggles of women who attempt to resist them. At the center of the analysis is the character of Ammu, whose life reflects the harsh realities of gender oppression. Ammu's experiences illustrate how women are denied autonomy and punished for transgressing social norms. Her decision to leave an abusive marriage and her later relationship with Velutha challenge the rigid "Love Laws" that govern social behavior. However, these acts of resistance lead to severe consequences, including social exclusion and personal tragedy. This research argues that Ammu's story represents the broader condition of women in patriarchal societies, where freedom and desire are often restricted by moral codes and cultural expectations.

The paper also examines how patriarchy operates not only through male dominance but also through internalized attitudes among women themselves. Characters like Baby Kochamma and Mammachi reinforce traditional norms and participate in the oppression of other women. This highlights the complexity of gender relations, where women can both suffer under and contribute to patriarchal systems. The study emphasizes that feminism in the novel is not presented as a simple opposition between men and women but as a deeper critique of social structures that sustain inequality. Another important focus of the research is the concept of body politics. The novel shows how women's bodies are controlled and regulated by society. Female sexuality is viewed as dangerous and must be suppressed. Ammu's expression of desire is condemned, while similar behavior in men is often ignored. This double standard reflects the unequal moral expectations imposed on women. The paper explores how Roy uses this theme to question traditional ideas about purity, honor, and morality.

The study further investigates the intersection of caste and gender in the novel. The relationship between Ammu and Velutha, a man from a lower caste, represents a violation of both social and cultural boundaries. This intersectional perspective reveals that women's oppression cannot be understood in isolation from other forms of inequality. Roy's narrative shows how caste and gender work together to maintain social hierarchies. The consequences faced by Ammu and Velutha demonstrate the rigid enforcement of these structures. The experiences of Rahel, as a female child, also form an important part of the analysis. Her life reflects the long-term impact of trauma, silence, and social control. Unlike Ammu, Rahel does not openly resist, but her emotional withdrawal and detachment suggest another form of response to oppression. The study highlights how gender roles are imposed from an early age and how they shape individual identity over time.

In addition to thematic analysis, this research considers Roy's narrative style as a form of feminist expression. The novel's non-linear structure, fragmented storytelling, and use of symbolism reflect the complexity of women's experiences. The idea of "small things" becomes a metaphor for marginalized voices and suppressed emotions. By focusing on these "small things," Roy challenges dominant narratives that often ignore or minimize the experiences of women and other marginalized groups.

The methodology of this study is based on qualitative textual analysis supported by feminist theoretical frameworks. It draws on the ideas of key feminist thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir, who discusses the construction of women as "the Other," and Kate Millet, who examines patriarchy as a system of power. The research also considers postcolonial feminist perspectives, which emphasize the importance of cultural and social context in understanding women's experiences.

The findings of this research suggest that *The God of Small Things* is a powerful critique of patriarchal society. The novel not only exposes the injustices faced by women but also questions the social norms that justify these inequalities. It presents women as complex individuals who navigate their circumstances in different ways, whether through resistance, adaptation, or silence. The text does not offer simple solutions but encourages readers to reflect on the structures that shape human relationships and identities.

In conclusion, this study establishes that Arundhati Roy's novel is an important contribution to feminist literature. It highlights the interconnected nature of gender, caste, and class oppression and presents a nuanced understanding of women's experiences. By giving voice to marginalized characters and challenging traditional narratives, the novel invites a reconsideration of social values and power relations. The research underscores the continuing relevance of Roy's work in contemporary discussions on gender and equality, making *The God of Small Things* a significant text for feminist literary analysis.

KEYWORDS:

FEMINISM, PATRIARCHY, GENDER INEQUALITY, OPPRESSION, RESISTANCE, BODY POLITICS, IDENTITY, MARGINALIZATION, SOCIAL NORMS, POSTCOLONIAL FEMINISM.

INTRODUCTION:

This research adopts a qualitative and analytical approach. The primary text for analysis is *The God of Small Things*.

The study involves close reading and textual analysis to identify themes, symbols, and character representations related to feminism.

Secondary sources include scholarly articles, books, and feminist theories. The research is based on theoretical frameworks from feminist critics such as Simone de Beauvoir (1949), who discusses women as “the Other,” and Kate Millett (1970), who analyzes patriarchy as a system of power.

THE METHOD INCLUDES:

Thematic analysis of gender roles and oppression

Character analysis of major female figures

Interpretation of narrative techniques and symbolism

Application of feminist theory to literary text

The research is descriptive and interpretative. It focuses on understanding the deeper meanings within the text rather than using statistical data.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

To analyze the representation of women in *The God of Small Things*

To examine the role of patriarchy in shaping women’s lives

To explore themes of gender inequality and oppression

To study the resistance and agency of female characters

To apply feminist theories to interpret the novel

To understand how caste and gender intersect in the narrative

SUBJECT MATTER

Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* is a powerful and complex novel that explores the realities of gender inequality, patriarchy, caste oppression, and social control in postcolonial India. From a feminist perspective, the novel reveals how women are marginalized, silenced, and disciplined within both the family and society. The subject matter of the novel revolves around the lives of its female characters—Ammu, Rahel, Baby Kochamma, and Mammachi—who represent different dimensions of women’s experiences under patriarchal structures. Through their lives, Roy exposes the mechanisms through which power operates and how it shapes identity, relationships, and personal freedom.

PATRIARCHY AS A SYSTEM OF CONTROL

The novel clearly illustrates how patriarchy functions as a dominant system that controls women’s lives. Patriarchy is not limited to male authority but is embedded in social institutions, cultural norms, and family structures. Women

are expected to conform to strict rules regarding behavior, sexuality, and identity. These rules are often justified in the name of tradition, morality, and honor.

Ammu’s life provides a clear example of patriarchal control. She grows up in a household where her father exercises strict authority. As a young woman, she is denied education and independence, which reflects the limited opportunities available to women. Her marriage is not based on personal choice but on the desire to escape her oppressive home environment. However, her husband turns out to be abusive and irresponsible, forcing her to return to her parental home with her children.

Even after her return, Ammu is not given respect or autonomy. She is treated as a burden and is constantly reminded of her failure as a wife. Her brother Chacko, despite his own failed marriage, enjoys privileges that are denied to Ammu. This double standard highlights how patriarchy favors men regardless of their actions while holding women to strict moral expectations.

AMMU AS A FEMINIST FIGURE

Ammu stands out as a central figure in the novel’s feminist discourse. She represents both resistance and vulnerability. Unlike other female characters who accept their roles, Ammu challenges social norms and seeks personal freedom. Her relationship with Velutha is a significant act of rebellion. It not only crosses caste boundaries but also defies gender expectations.

This relationship can be seen as an assertion of her agency and desire. Ammu refuses to accept the idea that women should suppress their emotions and sexuality. However, her act of resistance is met with severe punishment. She is isolated by her family, publicly humiliated, and eventually dies in poverty and loneliness.

Ammu’s tragic fate reflects the harsh consequences faced by women who challenge patriarchal authority. Her story demonstrates that society does not tolerate female independence, especially when it disrupts established norms. At the same time, her resistance makes her a symbol of courage and defiance.

CONTROL OF FEMALE SEXUALITY

One of the key aspects of the novel is the control of female sexuality. Women’s bodies are seen as sites of regulation and discipline. Society imposes strict rules on women’s behavior, particularly regarding relationships and sexual expression. These rules are enforced through shame, punishment, and social exclusion.

Ammu’s relationship with Velutha is condemned not only because of caste differences but also because it involves female desire. Her sexuality is viewed as dangerous and immoral. In contrast, male sexuality is treated more leniently. Chacko openly engages in relationships with

factory workers, but his behavior is accepted and even justified.

This double standard reveals the unequal moral codes applied to men and women. Women are expected to maintain purity and obedience, while men are allowed greater freedom. Roy critiques this imbalance by highlighting the consequences faced by Ammu.

Baby Kochamma represents another dimension of sexuality. She suppresses her own desires and becomes bitter and manipulative. Her unfulfilled love leads her to enforce strict moral codes on others. This suggests that repression can lead to internal conflict and the perpetuation of oppression.

INTERNALIZED PATRIARCHY

The novel also shows how women internalize patriarchal values and contribute to the oppression of other women. Mammachi and Baby Kochamma are key examples of this phenomenon. Both characters accept the authority of men and reinforce traditional norms.

Mammachi suffers abuse at the hands of her husband but does not resist. Instead, she later supports her son Chacko's dominance in the household. She denies Ammu the same privileges given to Chacko, thereby reinforcing gender inequality.

Baby Kochamma actively participates in Ammu's punishment. She manipulates events to protect her own social standing and to maintain the family's honor. Her actions demonstrate how women can become agents of patriarchy, perpetuating the same system that oppresses them.

This internalization of patriarchal values highlights the complexity of gender relations. It shows that oppression is not always imposed from outside but can also be maintained from within.

INTERSECTION OF CASTE AND GENDER

A significant aspect of the novel's subject matter is the intersection of caste and gender. The relationship between Ammu and Velutha challenges both caste hierarchy and gender norms. Velutha, as an "Untouchable," occupies a marginalized position in society. His relationship with Ammu is seen as a threat to social order.

The punishment they face reflects the rigid enforcement of caste boundaries. Velutha is brutally killed, and Ammu is socially ostracized. This shows how caste and gender oppression work together to maintain power structures.

From a feminist perspective, this intersection is crucial in understanding the complexity of women's experiences. Ammu's suffering is not only due to her gender but also due to her defiance of caste norms. Roy's portrayal of this intersection highlights the need to consider multiple forms of oppression in feminist analysis.

RAHEL AND THE IMPACT OF GENDER ON CHILDHOOD

Rahel's character provides insight into how gender roles are imposed from an early age. As a female child, she grows up in a restrictive environment where her behavior

is constantly monitored. She experiences neglect, emotional trauma, and social judgment.

Rahel's life is shaped by the events surrounding Ammu's relationship and Velutha's death. The trauma of these experiences affects her identity and relationships in adulthood. She becomes silent and detached, reflecting the long-term impact of social control.

Unlike Ammu, Rahel does not openly resist. However, her refusal to conform to social expectations can be seen as a subtle form of resistance. Her character highlights the psychological effects of patriarchy on women.

SILENCE AND MARGINALIZATION

Silence is a recurring theme in the novel. Women's voices are often suppressed or ignored. Ammu is not allowed to defend herself. Rahel grows up without expressing her emotions. Mammachi accepts abuse without protest.

This silence is not natural but imposed by social structures. It reflects the lack of space for women's voices in a patriarchal society. Roy uses silence as a narrative device to highlight the marginalization of women.

At the same time, the novel itself becomes a form of expression. By telling these stories, Roy gives voice to those who are silenced. This can be seen as a feminist act of resistance.

SYMBOLISM OF "SMALL THINGS"

The concept of "small things" is central to the novel's meaning. It represents the everyday experiences, emotions, and details that are often ignored by dominant narratives. These "small things" include moments of love, pain, fear, and memory.

From a feminist perspective, these "small things" can be seen as the experiences of women and marginalized groups. Society often considers these experiences insignificant. However, Roy gives them importance, showing that they shape identity and relationships.

The focus on "small things" challenges traditional storytelling, which often emphasizes major events and male perspectives. It highlights the value of personal and emotional experiences.

NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE AND FEMINIST EXPRESSION

Roy's narrative style is innovative and non-linear. The story moves back and forth in time, reflecting the fragmented nature of memory. This structure allows for a deeper exploration of characters' inner lives.

The use of language is also significant. Roy employs poetic and symbolic language to convey complex emotions. This style can be seen as a feminist technique, as it breaks away from conventional forms of storytelling.

The narrative does not follow a single perspective but includes multiple voices. This multiplicity reflects the diversity of experiences and challenges dominant narratives. It allows marginalized voices to be heard.

ABSENCE OF FEMALE SOLIDARITY

Another important aspect of the novel is the lack of

solidarity among women. Female characters do not support each other. Instead, they often reinforce patriarchal norms.

Baby Kochamma and Mammachi do not stand by Ammu. Their actions contribute to her suffering. This lack of unity weakens women's position in society.

The novel suggests that internal divisions among women can strengthen patriarchal systems. It highlights the need for solidarity and collective resistance.

RESISTANCE AND AGENCY

Despite the oppressive environment, the novel also presents moments of resistance. Ammu's relationship with Velutha is a clear act of defiance. Rahel's independence and refusal to conform also reflect agency.

These acts of resistance may not lead to immediate change, but they challenge existing norms. They show that women are not passive victims but active participants in shaping their lives.

Roy presents resistance as complex and often limited. However, even small acts of defiance have significance.

CONCLUSION OF SUBJECT MATTER

In conclusion, the subject matter of *The God of Small Things* offers a rich and detailed exploration of feminist themes. The novel examines how patriarchy, caste, and social norms shape women's lives. It highlights the struggles of female characters and their efforts to navigate oppressive structures.

Through its portrayal of characters, relationships, and symbols, the novel provides a critical perspective on gender inequality. It emphasizes the importance of understanding women's experiences in their social and cultural context.

Roy's work challenges readers to question traditional norms and to recognize the value of marginalized voices. The novel remains a powerful and relevant text for feminist literary analysis.

CONCLUSION

This research paper has examined *The God of Small Things* from a feminist perspective, focusing on the representation of women, the operation of patriarchy, and the intersection of gender with caste and class. The analysis clearly shows that Arundhati Roy presents a powerful critique of the social structures that control and marginalize women. The novel exposes the harsh realities of gender inequality and highlights the emotional, psychological, and social struggles faced by women in a patriarchal society.

One of the major conclusions of this study is that patriarchy operates as a deeply rooted system that shapes every aspect of women's lives. It is not limited to individual actions but is embedded in family structures, cultural traditions, and social norms. Women in the novel are expected to follow strict rules regarding behavior, sexuality, and identity. These expectations are enforced

through control, punishment, and social exclusion. Ammu's life is a clear example of how patriarchy restricts women's freedom and punishes them for seeking independence. Her experiences show that women are often denied the right to make their own choices, especially in matters of love and relationships.

The study also concludes that resistance to patriarchy, although necessary, comes with serious consequences. Ammu's relationship with Velutha represents a bold challenge to both gender and caste norms. However, her act of defiance leads to her isolation and eventual death. This suggests that society is not willing to accept women who step outside traditional roles. At the same time, Ammu's resistance cannot be seen as a failure. Instead, it represents a form of courage and agency that challenges oppressive systems. Her story highlights the importance of questioning social norms, even when the outcome is tragic.

Another important conclusion is the role of internalized patriarchy in maintaining gender inequality. The novel shows that women themselves can become agents of oppression. Characters like Baby Kochamma and Mammachi reinforce traditional values and contribute to the suffering of other women. Their actions demonstrate how patriarchal ideas are deeply ingrained in society and are often accepted without question. This internalization makes it more difficult to challenge the system, as it is supported not only by men but also by women. The lack of solidarity among female characters further weakens their position and allows oppression to continue.

The research also emphasizes the significance of body politics in the novel. Women's bodies are treated as objects that must be controlled and regulated. Female sexuality is viewed as dangerous and is strictly monitored. Ammu's expression of desire is condemned, while similar behavior in men is tolerated. This double standard reveals the unequal moral expectations imposed on women. The study concludes that Roy uses this theme to question traditional ideas of purity and honor. By presenting female desire as natural and valid, the novel challenges the notion that women should remain passive and submissive.

The intersection of caste and gender is another key finding of this research. The relationship between Ammu and Velutha highlights how different forms of oppression work together. Ammu suffers not only because she is a woman but also because she crosses caste boundaries. Velutha, as a lower-caste man, faces even more severe consequences. This intersectional perspective shows that gender inequality cannot be fully understood without considering other social factors such as caste and class. Roy's portrayal of this intersection adds depth to the feminist reading of the novel and reflects the complexity of real social structures.

The character of Rahel provides insight into the long-term effects of patriarchy on women. Her childhood experiences of neglect, trauma, and silence shape her identity and relationships. Unlike Ammu, Rahel does not openly resist, but her emotional detachment can be seen as a response to

the oppressive environment. This suggests that resistance can take different forms, including silence and withdrawal. The study concludes that the impact of gender inequality begins at an early age and continues throughout a woman's life.

Another significant conclusion is the importance of narrative style in conveying feminist ideas. Roy's use of non-linear storytelling, symbolism, and poetic language allows for a deeper exploration of women's experiences. The concept of "small things" becomes a powerful symbol of marginalized voices and hidden emotions. By focusing on these "small things," Roy challenges dominant narratives that often ignore the experiences of women and other oppressed groups. The novel gives importance to everyday moments and personal experiences, showing that they are essential to understanding larger social issues.

The research also highlights the theme of silence as a form of marginalization. Women in the novel are often denied the opportunity to speak or express themselves. Ammu's voice is ignored, and Rahel grows up in silence. This lack of voice reflects the broader condition of women in society, where their opinions and experiences are often overlooked. At the same time, the novel itself becomes a means of breaking this silence. By telling these stories, Roy gives voice to those who are usually unheard. This can be seen as an important feminist intervention.

Furthermore, the study concludes that *The God of Small Things* does not present a simple solution to the problems it portrays. Instead, it offers a realistic and complex picture of society. The novel shows that change is difficult and often comes at a high cost. However, it also suggests that awareness and understanding are the first steps toward transformation. By exposing the injustices of patriarchy, Roy encourages readers to question and challenge existing

norms.

In conclusion, this research establishes that Arundhati Roy's novel is a significant contribution to feminist literature. It provides a detailed and critical examination of gender inequality, social control, and cultural norms. The novel highlights the struggles of women and the various ways in which they respond to oppression. It also emphasizes the importance of considering multiple forms of inequality, including caste and class, in feminist analysis.

The study ultimately concludes that *The God of Small Things* is not only a story about individual characters but also a broader commentary on society. It reveals how deeply rooted systems of power shape human relationships and identities. By giving importance to marginalized voices and challenging traditional narratives, Roy creates a powerful feminist text that remains relevant in contemporary discussions on gender and equality.

REFERENCES

1. Beauvoir, Simone de. (1949). *The Second Sex*.
2. Millett, Kate. (1970). *Sexual Politics*.
3. Roy, Arundhati. (1997). *The God of Small Things*.
4. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. (1988). "Can the Subaltern Speak?"
5. Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. (1984). "Under Western Eyes."
6. Butler, Judith. (1990). *Gender Trouble*.
7. hooks, bell. (2000). *Feminism is for Everybody*.