

# Trauma, Memory, Caste, and Political Resistance in Arundhati Roy's

## The God of Small Things

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### Abstract

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) is a landmark postcolonial novel that intertwines personal trauma with political history, exposing the deep-rooted injustices embedded in Indian society. This research paper examines the novel through the lenses of trauma theory, postcolonial criticism, caste studies, and feminist theory. It explores how Roy's nonlinear narrative structure mirrors the fragmented nature of memory and trauma, how caste and social transgression shape the tragic fate of Velutha and Ammu, and how the novel critiques state violence, patriarchal norms, and political hypocrisy. The analysis argues that Roy's novel is not merely a story of a family's disintegration but a profound commentary on the oppressive structures that govern Indian social life. The paper concludes that *The God of Small Things* exemplifies the power of literature to challenge dominant narratives, expose systemic injustice, and foreground marginalized voices.

**Keywords:** Arundhati Roy, caste, trauma, memory, postcolonial literature, Kerala, Velutha, Ammu

### Introduction

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is one of the most influential works of contemporary Indian literature. Published in 1997 and awarded the Booker Prize the same

year, the novel is celebrated for its lyrical prose, nonlinear narrative, and bold political critique. Set in Kerala during the 1960s, the novel tells the story of twins Estha and Rahel, their mother Ammu, and the tragic love affair between Ammu and Velutha, a Dalit carpenter. Through this intimate family narrative, Roy exposes the violence of caste hierarchy, the brutality of state power, and the suffocating constraints of patriarchal norms.

The purpose of this research paper is to analyze *The God of Small Things* as a complex interplay of trauma, memory, caste, and political resistance. The study examines how Roy uses narrative fragmentation to represent trauma, how caste operates as a system of social control, and how personal transgressions become political acts. The paper also explores the novel's critique of state violence, communist hypocrisy, and the politics of respectability. Through a combination of trauma theory, postcolonial criticism, and feminist analysis, this paper argues that Roy's novel is a powerful indictment of the social and political structures that shape Indian life.

### **Literature Review**

Scholars have extensively analyzed *The God of Small Things* for its thematic richness and stylistic innovation. Meenakshi Mukherjee (2000) highlights the novel's critique of caste and its portrayal of forbidden love as a political act. P. K. Nayar (2008) emphasizes the novel's postcolonial dimensions, arguing that Roy exposes the lingering effects of colonialism on Indian social structures. Aijaz Ahmad (1997), while critical of Roy's political positioning, acknowledges the novel's powerful depiction of caste and class tensions.

Trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth (1996) and Dominick LaCapra (2001) provide frameworks for understanding the novel's fragmented narrative structure. Scholars like Brinda Bose (2003) and Anna Clarke (2010) have examined the novel's feminist dimensions, particularly its critique of patriarchal norms and the policing of female sexuality.

Caste studies scholars such as Gopal Guru (2009), Sharmila Rege (2006), and Anand Teltumbde (2010) provide insights into the structural violence of caste, which is central to the novel's portrayal of Velutha's fate. Their work helps contextualize Roy's critique of caste hierarchy and social exclusion.

This paper builds on these scholarly discussions while offering a comprehensive analysis that integrates trauma theory, caste studies, and political critique.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research paper draws on four major theoretical frameworks:

#### **Trauma Theory**

Cathy Caruth (1996) argues that trauma is not fully experienced in the moment but returns in fragments, memories, and repetitions. Roy's nonlinear narrative mirrors this structure, revealing trauma through disjointed memories and recurring images.

#### **Postcolonial Theory**

Postcolonial critics such as Homi Bhabha (1994) and Gayatri Spivak (1988) emphasize hybridity, subalternity, and the politics of representation. Roy's novel foregrounds subaltern voices, particularly Velutha's, and critiques the lingering effects of colonial power structures.

#### **Caste Studies**

Scholars like Gopal Guru (2009) and Sharmila Rege (2006) highlight caste as a system of social control and structural violence. Velutha's fate exemplifies the brutality of caste hierarchy.

#### **Feminist Theory**

Feminist critics such as Judith Butler (1990) and Brinda Bose (2003) provide frameworks for analyzing gender, sexuality, and the policing of female bodies. Ammu's transgression becomes a feminist act of resistance.

## **Analysis**

### Narrative Fragmentation and the Structure of Trauma

Roy's nonlinear narrative structure is one of the most distinctive features of the novel. The story unfolds through fragmented memories, shifting timelines, and recurring images. This structure mirrors the psychological fragmentation experienced by the twins, Estha and Rahel, whose childhood trauma shapes their adult lives.

Trauma theorists argue that traumatic events resist linear narration (Caruth, 1996). Roy's narrative reflects this resistance. The novel begins with the adult twins' reunion and gradually reveals the traumatic events of their childhood: Sophie Mol's death, Velutha's murder, Estha's molestation, and Ammu's humiliation.

The fragmented narrative allows Roy to:

- Reveal trauma gradually
- Mimic the workings of memory
- Create suspense
- Highlight the cyclical nature of suffering

This structure also challenges traditional realist narratives, aligning the novel with postmodern and postcolonial literary traditions.

### **Caste, Transgression, and the "Love Laws"**

One of the central themes of the novel is caste. Velutha, a Dalit carpenter, is punished not for a crime but for crossing caste boundaries. His love affair with Ammu violates the "Love Laws" that dictate:

- Who should be loved
- How
- And how much

These laws are not merely social norms; they are instruments of caste control. Velutha's body becomes the site of caste violence. His murder by the police is not an aberration but a predictable outcome of caste hierarchy.

Roy exposes the hypocrisy of the "Touchables," who preach morality while practicing violence. The novel critiques:

- Caste purity
- Social policing
- Institutional complicity
- The myth of Kerala's egalitarianism

Velutha becomes a symbol of resistance, a figure who challenges caste boundaries through love.

### **Ammu: Gender, Sexuality, and Patriarchal Control**

Ammu's character embodies the intersection of gender and caste oppression. As a divorced woman, she is already marginalized. Her relationship with Velutha becomes a feminist act of resistance against patriarchal norms.

Ammu's sexuality is policed by:

- Her family
- Society
- The state

Her punishment—social ostracism, confinement, and eventual death—reveals the brutality of patriarchal control. Feminist critics argue that Ammu's transgression exposes the gendered nature of social norms (Bose, 2003).

### **State Violence and Political Hypocrisy**

The novel critiques state institutions, particularly the police and the Communist Party. Velutha's murder is sanctioned by the police, who act as enforcers of caste hierarchy. The

Communist Party, which claims to fight for the oppressed, betrays Velutha to protect its political interests.

**Roy Exposes:**

- Police brutality
- Communist hypocrisy
- The complicity of political institutions
- The failure of the state to protect marginalized communities

Velutha's death becomes a symbol of systemic injustice.

**Childhood, Innocence, and the Loss of Paradise**

The twins, Estha and Rahel, experience the world with a childlike innocence that is gradually destroyed by social and political forces. Their bond is one of the most poignant aspects of the novel. Childhood becomes a space of:

- Imagination
- Freedom
- Vulnerability

The loss of innocence parallels the loss of paradise—both personal and political.

**Discussion**

Roy's novel is a powerful critique of Indian society. Through the story of one family, she exposes the structural violence of caste, patriarchy, and state power. The novel challenges dominant narratives that portray Kerala as a model of social equality. It also critiques the Communist Party's failure to address caste oppression.

The novel's narrative structure reinforces its thematic concerns. The fragmentation of memory mirrors the fragmentation of identity and the cyclical nature of trauma. Roy's lyrical

prose contrasts with the brutality of the events she describes, creating a powerful aesthetic tension.

### **Conclusion**

The God of Small Things is a landmark work of postcolonial literature. Roy's novel exposes the deep-rooted injustices of caste, gender, and state power. Through its fragmented narrative structure, the novel represents trauma in a way that challenges linear storytelling. Velutha and Ammu's tragic love story becomes a symbol of resistance against oppressive social structures. The novel demonstrates the power of literature to challenge dominant narratives, foreground marginalized voices, and expose systemic injustice.

**Conflict of Interest:** The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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