

## Transgressive Eroticism and the Politics of the Body in

### Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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#### Abstract

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) deploys eroticism as a radical political language that challenges caste, gender, and familial hierarchies in postcolonial Kerala. Rather than functioning as mere sensuality, eroticism becomes a mode of resistance against the "Love Laws" that dictate who may be loved, how, and how much (Roy 33). This article examines eroticism as a subversive force in the novel, focusing on the forbidden relationships between Ammu and Velutha, and between Estha and Rahel. Drawing on feminist theory, subaltern studies, psychoanalytic criticism, and postcolonial theory, the study argues that Roy uses erotic desire to expose the violence of caste patriarchy and to reclaim the body as a site of agency for marginalized subjects. Ultimately, eroticism in the novel becomes a counter-discourse that destabilizes dominant social structures and redefines the boundaries of Indian English fiction.

**Keywords:** Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, eroticism, transgression, body politics, postcolonial theory.

## **Introduction**

Eroticism in *The God of Small Things* is inseparable from the novel's critique of caste, patriarchy, and colonial morality. Roy situates desire within a landscape governed by rigid social codes, which she famously names the "Love Laws" (Roy 33). These laws regulate intimacy according to caste, class, gender, and kinship, transforming erotic desire into an inherently political act. The novel's most controversial relationships—Ammu and Velutha's inter-caste love affair and the adult reunion of Estha and Rahel—are not merely personal transgressions but political ruptures that expose the brutality of social norms.

Eroticism in the novel is therefore not about pleasure alone; it is about freedom, agency, and the right to inhabit one's own body. As Brinda Bose argues, Roy "reclaims the erotic as a feminist and political tool" (Bose 64), challenging the moral frameworks that govern Indian society. The erotic becomes a language through which the marginalized articulate their humanity in a world that denies them dignity.

### **Eroticism as Resistance: Ammu and Velutha**

The relationship between Ammu, a Syrian Christian woman, and Velutha, a Dalit carpenter, forms the emotional and political core of the novel. Their union violates the most entrenched taboo in Indian society: caste purity. Roy frames their erotic encounters with lyrical, almost sacred imagery, elevating their love above the oppressive social order that condemns it.

### **Caste and the Erotics of Transgression**

Velutha's Dalit identity makes the relationship not only forbidden but dangerous. As Gopal Guru notes, caste society "polices the Dalit body as a site of pollution" (Guru 89). When Ammu desires Velutha, she violates the caste order at its most fundamental level. Roy writes that their love "trespassed into forbidden territory" (Roy 316), emphasizing the political stakes of their intimacy.

### **Ammu's Desire as Feminist Rebellion**

Ammu's erotic agency challenges patriarchal expectations of female chastity and obedience. Her desire is not passive; it is assertive, conscious, and deliberate. As Mini Chacko observes, Ammu "reclaims her body from the patriarchal structures that seek to control it" (Chacko 114). Her erotic union with Velutha becomes an act of self-definition.

### **Velutha's Body as Subaltern Resistance**

Velutha's body becomes a site where caste oppression and state violence converge. His physicality—his skill, beauty, and sensuality—threatens the caste order. Roy describes him as "The God of Loss. The God of Small Things" (Roy 265), elevating him to a symbolic figure of resistance. His erotic relationship with Ammu is not merely personal; it is a political challenge to the caste system.

### **The State's Violent Response**

Velutha's brutal death at the hands of the police is the ultimate punishment for erotic transgression. His body becomes the battlefield where the consequences of forbidden desire are inscribed. As Nivedita Menon argues, the state "punishes the transgressive body to restore the symbolic order" (Menon 204). Velutha's death is thus a political execution disguised as law enforcement.

### **The "Love Laws" and the Policing of Desire**

*The "Love Laws" are the novel's central ideological framework. They enforce:*

- Endogamy
- Patriarchal control of women's sexuality
- Caste segregation
- Familial hierarchy
- Christian moral codes inherited from colonialism

Roy's narrative reveals how deeply these laws are internalized. Baby Kochamma's disgust at Ammu's desire—"She had defiled generations of breeding" (Roy 244)—exposes how caste purity is linked to female sexuality. As Sharmila Rege notes, caste patriarchy depends on "the control of women's reproductive and sexual autonomy" (Rege 45).

Eroticism becomes a political language precisely because it violates these laws.

### ***Incest, Trauma, and the Erotics of Memory: Estha and Rahel***

The reunion of Estha and Rahel in adulthood is one of the most debated aspects of the novel. Rather than reading it as sensationalism, scholars interpret it as a moment of trauma-bonded intimacy, where eroticism becomes a language of healing.

### **Trauma and Fragmented Identity**

Estha's childhood molestation by the OrangedrinkLemondrink Man fractures his sense of self. Rahel's emotional abandonment and the twins' forced separation further deepen their trauma. Their adult reunion is an attempt to reclaim a lost unity. Roy writes, "They were strangers who had met in the night" (Roy 328), echoing the language used for Ammu and Velutha.

### **Eroticism as Healing**

Their act is less about erotic desire and more about reclaiming a sense of belonging in a world that has repeatedly denied them love, safety, and identity. As Anuradha Dingwaney Needham argues, the scene "reconfigures incest as a desperate attempt to restore a lost unity" (Needham 158).

### **Breaking the Final Love Law**

The twins' union violates the ultimate taboo: incest. By breaking this final Love Law, they symbolically dismantle the entire structure of social regulation. Their erotic act becomes a radical assertion of agency in a world that has silenced them.

## **Eroticism, the Body, and Subaltern Agency**

Roy's portrayal of eroticism aligns with subaltern studies, where the body becomes a site of resistance for those denied political voice. For Velutha, Ammu, and the twins, the body is the only space where they can assert agency.

## **The Body as Counter-Narrative**

Gayatri Spivak famously argues that the subaltern "cannot speak" within dominant structures (Spivak 287). Roy allows the subaltern to speak through the erotic. Velutha's body, in particular, becomes a symbol of subaltern resistance.

## **Eroticism as Reclamation**

### ***Eroticism becomes:***

- A counter-narrative to caste oppression
- A rejection of patriarchal control
- A reclamation of bodily autonomy
- A language of the subaltern, when speech is denied

Roy's narrative suggests that when society denies freedom, the body becomes the last frontier of rebellion.

## **Narrative Technique and the Aesthetics of Desire**

Roy's nonlinear narrative, sensory imagery, and poetic language create an aesthetic of eroticism that is subtle, symbolic, and deeply emotional.

## **Fragmented Chronology**

The novel's structure mirrors the fragmented identities of its characters. The nonlinear timeline reflects the disjointed nature of trauma and desire.

## **Nature Imagery**

Roy uses nature—rain, river, night—to frame eroticism as organic and inevitable. The river becomes a recurring symbol of forbidden desire, especially in the scenes between Ammu and Velutha.

## **Silence and the Unspeakable**

Roy frequently uses silence, ellipses, and gaps to convey the unspeakable nature of forbidden desire. The erotic becomes a language beyond words.

## **Conclusion**

Eroticism in *The God of Small Things* is a radical political force. It challenges caste hierarchy, patriarchal morality, and the oppressive Love Laws that govern human relationships. Through Ammu and Velutha's forbidden love and the twins' traumatic reunion, Roy reveals how desire becomes a language of resistance for those denied social and political agency.

By transforming eroticism into a site of rebellion, Roy redefines the boundaries of Indian English fiction and asserts the power of the body as a space of freedom, memory, and defiance. The novel's erotic transgressions expose the violence of social norms and offer a vision of intimacy that transcends caste, trauma, and history.

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