

The Poetics of Transgression and Memory in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) remains one of the most influential postcolonial novels of the late twentieth century because of its experimental narrative structure, its critique of caste and gender hierarchies, and its lyrical treatment of memory. This article examines the novel through three interrelated frameworks: the politics of transgression, the aesthetics of fragmentation and memory, and the ethics of "small things" as a counter-discourse to dominant social structures. By foregrounding forbidden love, caste violence, and the intimate perceptions of childhood, Roy constructs a narrative in which the "small" becomes a site of resistance against patriarchy, caste, and state power.

Keywords: Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, caste, gender, memory, transgression, postcolonialism, subalternity, patriarchy

1. Introduction

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* emerges from the socio-political landscape of Kerala in the 1960s, yet its concerns resonate far beyond its regional setting. The novel addresses the policing of bodies, the violence of social norms, and the fragility of human relationships. Roy's Booker Prize in 1997 signaled not only the arrival of a major literary voice but also a shift in Indian English fiction toward more experimental and politically charged forms (Gopal).

Roy's narrative refuses the linearity of traditional realist fiction. Instead, it embraces fragmented temporality that mirrors the ruptures of trauma and memory. The movement between past and present, the recursive narrative loops, and the focus on the sensory world of children create a world in which memory is not passive but active and disruptive (Roy). The novel's political force lies not only in its themes of caste and gender but also in its formal innovations.

2. Transgression as Narrative and Political Strategy

2.1 Caste and the Architecture of Prohibition

At the centre of the novel lies the relationship between Ammu, a Syrian Christian woman, and Velutha, an “untouchable” carpenter. Their love violates the caste system and exposes its continuing violence in modern Indian society (Roy). Roy presents caste not as an outdated institution but as a living social order embedded in everyday practices.

Velutha’s body becomes the site upon which the family, the state, and the community project their anxieties about purity and hierarchy. The novel demonstrates how caste determines who may touch whom, who may enter particular spaces, and who must remain silent. Velutha’s death at the hands of the police is therefore not an accident but the logical consequence of a society that punishes transgression (Spivak).

Spivak’s notion of the silenced subaltern is especially useful in understanding Velutha’s position. Although Velutha is central to the narrative, he is repeatedly denied the ability to speak for himself. His suffering is mediated through others, which reflects the broader exclusion of subaltern voices from structures of power (Spivak).

2.2 Gender, Desire, and the Policing of Female Agency

Ammu’s desire is represented as a political act. Her refusal to conform to patriarchal expectations—marrying outside her community, leaving her abusive husband, and asserting sexual autonomy—renders her a threat to the social order (Chacko). Roy critiques the patriarchal family as an institution that disciplines women through shame, surveillance, and exclusion.

The novel also reflects the gendered realities of Kerala society in the mid-twentieth century. Ammu’s ostracization after her divorce reveals the extent to which women’s identity is shaped by social expectations and familial control (Devika). Her eventual isolation and death demonstrate the punitive consequences faced by women who challenge patriarchal norms.

Recent criticism has similarly interpreted Ammu’s resistance as a redefinition of conventional femininity within patriarchal structures. Mathew and Thakur argue that Ammu’s actions destabilize traditional assumptions about womanhood and domestic obedience (21).

Roy further exposes the double standard that allows male transgression while punishing female desire. Ammu is condemned not only because she loves Velutha but because she claims bodily autonomy. Such gendered repression has also been discussed by Tharu and Lalita in their analysis of women’s writing and social marginalization in India (Tharu and Lalita).

3. Memory, Fragmentation, and Narrative Form

3.1 The Child's Gaze as Epistemological Tool

The novel's twin protagonists, Estha and Rahel, perceive the world through a lens that is both innocent and perceptive. Their fragmented understanding mirrors the structure of the novel itself: nonlinear, recursive, and associative (Roy). Through the child's gaze, Roy reveals the hypocrisies of adult society and exposes the way trauma is absorbed and internalized.

The twins' private language, sensory memories, and imaginative interpretations destabilize adult authority. Their perspective allows Roy to critique caste, family, and state power from the margins. Because the children do not fully understand the social structures around them, their observations often expose truths that adults seek to conceal.

3.2 Temporal Dislocation and the Politics of Remembering

The novel shifts repeatedly between 1969 and 1993, disrupting chronological order and suggesting that trauma cannot be contained within a linear narrative (Roy). The fragmented structure reflects the workings of memory itself: repetitive, intrusive, and unstable.

Memory in the novel is therefore political. To remember is to resist the silences imposed by family, society, and the state. Roy's narrative insists that the violence done to Velutha and Ammu cannot be erased. As Gopal observes, the novel transforms private memory into a form of political resistance (Gopal).

4. The Ethics and Aesthetics of "Small Things"

4.1 "Small Things" as Counter-Hegemonic

Roy's title foregrounds the novel's central philosophical claim: that the "small"—the intimate, the sensory, and the personal—possesses ethical and political power (Roy). In a world dominated by "Big Things" such as History, Nation, Family, and Caste, the small becomes a space of tenderness and rebellion.

Moments such as the twins' private language, Ammu's small acts of resistance, and Velutha's craftsmanship function as forms of micro-resistance. These moments challenge dominant structures and create an alternative narrative grounded in everyday human experience (Gopal).

4.2 Language, Playfulness, and Subversion

Roy's linguistic experimentation—her unusual capitalization, repetition, and phonetic play—creates a textual space in which meaning is fluid rather than fixed (Roy). This stylistic play mirrors the novel's larger political project of challenging authority.

By disrupting conventional syntax and narrative order, Roy exposes the instability of social categories and hierarchical language. Her prose demonstrates that language itself can become a site of resistance.

5. The State, Violence, and the Politics of Accountability

The novel's climactic violence—Velutha's custodial killing—reveals the complicity of the police, the Communist Party, and the family in maintaining caste order (Roy). Roy critiques the postcolonial state not as a liberatory institution but as one that reproduces older systems of oppression.

Spivak's theory of the subaltern further illuminates this critique. Velutha's death is not merely a personal tragedy; it symbolizes the broader silencing of marginalized communities whose suffering is ignored by both the state and dominant society (Spivak).

The novel refuses to offer closure. Velutha's death is not redeemed, and Ammu's suffering is not resolved. Instead, Roy compels readers to confront the continuing realities of caste and gender oppression.

6. Conclusion

The God of Small Things is a novel of rupture—of broken families, forbidden desires, fractured memories, and social violence. Yet it is also a novel of possibility. By focusing on the “small,” Roy challenges the authority of grand narratives and foregrounds the ethical significance of intimate human relationships.

Roy's work remains a powerful critique of caste, patriarchy, and state violence. Through its innovative narrative form and its commitment to marginalized voices, the novel continues to shape contemporary debates about memory, justice, and representation.

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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