



A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS: A STUDY

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Abstract:

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* offers a compelling critique of the patriarchal, social, and political structures that shape and restrict women's lives in postcolonial India. Through the lived experiences of female characters such as Ammu, Mammachi, and Rahel, Roy exposes the deeply ingrained systems of oppression operating through family, caste, gender, and tradition. This chapter examines the novel from a feminist perspective, focusing on the marginalization of women, the regulation of female sexuality, and the varied forms of resistance both subtle and overt enacted by women against patriarchal authority. By situating the novel within feminist literary discourse, the study highlights Roy's challenge to dominant socio-cultural narratives and her articulation of female agency within oppressive frameworks.

Keywords: Feminism, Patriarchy, Gender, Postcolonial Literature, Arundhati Roy

Introduction

Arundhati Roy's debut novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997), occupies a pivotal place in Indian English literature due to its innovative narrative form and its incisive critique of social hierarchies. Set in Kerala, the novel intertwines personal trauma with broader social realities, particularly those related to caste, class, and gender oppression. From a feminist standpoint, the text interrogates the mechanisms through which patriarchal norms regulate women's bodies, desires, and identities.

Feminist literary criticism seeks to reveal how literary texts reinforce or resist the subjugation of women (Tyson). Roy's narrative foregrounds female suffering while simultaneously presenting moments of defiance against entrenched patriarchal values. This chapter examines how *The God of Small Things* articulates feminist concerns through its portrayal of women who are silenced, punished, and marginalized for transgressing rigid societal norms.

Feminism and Patriarchy in the Indian Context

Feminism in the Indian context is shaped by the intersection of patriarchy, caste, religion, and colonial history. Unlike Western feminist movements, Indian feminism must negotiate deeply entrenched traditional values that prescribe women's roles within the family and society (Kumar). In *The God of Small Things*, Roy presents patriarchy not merely as individual male dominance but as an institutionalized system sustained by social practices and cultural ideologies.

The Ayemenem household functions as a microcosm of this patriarchal order, where women are expected to conform, sacrifice, and remain silent. Deviations from prescribed gender roles invite social condemnation and punishment. Roy exposes how patriarchy operates through everyday familial interactions, revealing its pervasive and normalized presence within domestic spaces.

Ammu: Female Desire and Transgression

Ammu emerges as the most overtly feminist figure in the novel. As a divorced woman, she occupies a precarious social position marked by economic dependence and moral scrutiny. Her relationship with Velutha, an untouchable, represents a radical transgression of both caste and gender boundaries. Ammu's assertion of sexual desire challenges the patriarchal assumption that female sexuality must be regulated and suppressed.

Roy underscores the severe consequences Ammu faces for defying social conventions. She is denied inheritance rights, emotionally abused by her family, and ultimately expelled from the Ayemenem household. Her lonely death signifies the brutality of a system that punishes women for asserting autonomy. Ammu's fate echoes Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that woman is constructed as the "Other" within a male-dominated social order (Beauvoir).

Mammachi and Internalized Patriarchy

Mammachi, though a victim of domestic violence inflicted by her husband Pappachi, exemplifies internalized patriarchy. She endures abuse in silence and later reinforces patriarchal privilege by favoring her son Chacko, justifying his sexual exploitation of female factory workers as an expression of "man's needs" (Roy).

From a feminist perspective, Mammachi illustrates how women can become complicit in perpetuating patriarchal structures. Her character demonstrates how oppression is normalized and transmitted across generations, complicating simplistic binaries of victimhood and resistance. Roy's portrayal suggests that feminist critique must address not only male dominance but also women's participation in sustaining oppressive systems.

Rahel: Fragmented Identity and Silent Resistance

Rahel, the novel's central consciousness, represents a more subdued yet significant form of feminist resistance. As both a child and an adult, she exists on the margins—emotionally detached, socially displaced, and resistant to conventional expectations of femininity. Her refusal to conform challenges normative ideals of womanhood and success. Rahel's incestuous relationship with Estha, though controversial, may be interpreted as an act of emotional survival rather than moral deviance. It reflects Roy's challenge to rigid social and moral codes governing family, love, and sexuality. Through Rahel, Roy articulates a feminist rejection of prescriptive norms and highlights the psychological consequences of repression.

Narrative Technique and Feminist Expression

Roy's narrative strategy itself functions as a feminist intervention. The novel's fragmented structure, nonlinear chronology, and emphasis on "small things" foreground marginalized voices and suppressed histories. Feminist critics argue that alternative narrative forms resist patriarchal modes of storytelling that privilege linearity, authority, and coherence (Showalter).

By centering women's interior lives and emotional experiences, Roy destabilizes dominant narratives and legitimizes female subjectivity.

Language becomes a site of resistance, enabling the articulation of experiences that conventional discourse often silences.

Conclusion

A feminist reading of *The God of Small Things* reveals the novel as a powerful critique of patriarchal oppression and gender inequality. Through characters such as Ammu, Mammachi, and Rahel, Roy exposes the mechanisms through which women are controlled, punished, and silenced within familial and social structures. Simultaneously, the novel offers moments of resistance that affirm female agency, desire, and subjectivity.

This chapter demonstrates that Roy's work transcends social realism to emerge as a significant feminist text within postcolonial literature. By giving voice to marginalized women and challenging dominant power structures, *The God of Small Things* continues to resonate as a profound exploration of gendered injustice.

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