



Voices from the Margins: Dalit Victimhood and Subaltern Resistance in *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract: Dalits have historically occupied one of the most marginalized positions in Indian society, facing systemic discrimination through the caste hierarchy and the practice of untouchability. Although untouchability was legally abolished by the Indian Constitution, caste-based exclusion and oppression continue to shape the lives of many marginalized communities. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* explores these realities through the experiences of Dalits, women, and other socially excluded individuals. This paper examines the themes of victimhood, marginalization, and resistance in the novel, focusing particularly on the character of Velutha, whose life reflects the persistent inequalities embedded within Indian society.

Using the theoretical frameworks of intersectionality and subaltern studies, the paper analyzes how caste, class, gender, and power interact to produce structures of domination and social exclusion. It further investigates the ways in which marginalized characters negotiate and challenge these oppressive systems. The study argues that Roy not only exposes the harsh realities of caste-based discrimination but also highlights forms of resistance that emerge from the margins. Through its portrayal of suffering, exclusion, and defiance, *The God of Small Things* becomes a powerful critique of social injustice and an appeal for equality, dignity, and human compassion in postcolonial India.

Keywords: Dalit narratives, intersectionality, subalternity, victimhood, marginalisation.



Introduction:

Caste can be understood as a rigid social system that maintains hierarchical divisions across generations. These caste distinctions were primarily based on social and economic factors rather than racial differences. Traditionally, various jatis are arranged in a hierarchical order and placed within the framework of the four varnas. However, Dalits occupy a position outside the Varna system and have historically been assigned the lowest social status. They have long faced social exclusion, discrimination, and severe economic deprivation. Dalits were denied many basic rights, including the freedom to worship in temples alongside members of other castes. Although legislation prohibiting caste-based discrimination was enacted in 1950, caste inequalities continue to persist in Indian society.

The God of Small Things (1997), the Booker Prize-winning novel by Arundhati Roy, brought her international recognition and established her as a powerful voice for Dalits and other marginalized communities. Through the novel, Roy effectively exposes the hypocrisy and pretensions of the privileged classes while portraying the relentless struggle of the oppressed to attain dignity and identity within an indifferent social order. Set in Kerala, the novel creates a microcosm that reflects issues such as domestic violence, infidelity, sexual exploitation, emotional insecurity, pride, and death within a single family. The publication of *The God of Small Things* marked a significant moment in Indian English literature. The novel not only received international acclaim through the Booker Prize but also initiated important discussions about caste, gender, and social injustice in contemporary India. Unlike many earlier literary works that focused primarily on nationalist concerns, Roy directs attention toward individuals who exist at the margins of society. Her narrative foregrounds the lives of those who are often excluded from mainstream historical and social discourses.

Having grown up in Kerala, Roy witnessed the complexities of Indian politics and the subtle forms of violence inflicted by the upper classes upon the untouchables. Her mother, a well-known social activist, founded an independent school and provided her with an unconventional education. This intellectually liberating environment enabled Roy to develop her



unique literary voice. Today, Arundhati Roy is recognized not only as an acclaimed novelist but also as a journalist and social activist.

In *The God of Small Things*, Roy highlights both the suffering of the untouchables and the struggles of a woman seeking fulfillment within a patriarchal society. The novel presents two forms of untouchability. The first is represented by the Paravans, who are denied fundamental human rights because of their caste. The second is metaphorical, involving individuals from higher castes who are marginalized in other ways. A comprehensive understanding of the novel requires familiarity with three key elements of Kerala's social structure: the Syrian Christian community, Communism, and the caste system.

The family depicted in the novel belongs to the Syrian Christian community. The term "Syrian" refers to the West Asian origins of the community's ancestors and their historical use of Syriac in religious practices. Despite their relatively high literacy and social standing, Syrian Christians often remained confined within traditional values and social conventions.

The tragedy of the Kochamma family unfolds against a backdrop shaped by social, political, and religious forces. Rejected by upper-caste Hindus, they become excessively concerned with preserving family prestige. The novel portrays conflicts operating at both personal and societal levels and demonstrates how individuals often remain powerless to overcome these tensions. Velutha, an outcaste, cannot peacefully coexist with the touchable communities because of the enduring stigma of untouchability. In contrast, Chacko is able to escape social condemnation for his immoral behavior because of his privileged caste status. Roy succinctly captures this reality when she writes: "Change is one thing. Acceptance is another" (Roy 279).

Research Methodology:

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology based on textual analysis. The primary text selected for analysis is *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy. The study examines the representation of caste discrimination and Dalit experiences in the novel through a close reading of the text. The study employs an intersectional framework to analyze how caste, class, gender and social power interact in shaping the lives of marginalised characters. Secondary



sources including scholarly articles, books, journals and critical essays are consulted to provide theoretical support and contextual understanding.

Discussion:

There are selfish, cruel people in our society who treat the poor and the powerless no better than “small things”. They are voiceless as they cannot resist they are but “small things”, the deserted, the dalits, the marginalised and defenseless. The caste system in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* reflects the real condition of Indian social structure. Throughout the novel, one witnesses numerous encounters between caste and class. Roy has represented the plight of Dalits and subalterns in a hierarchical structure of power in this novel. Roy makes a distinction between the oppressor and the oppressed in the third chapter of the novel and it is being entitled as “Big Man the Laltin, Small Man the Mombatti”. By the term ‘Laltin’, Roy means the high class people and ‘Mombatti’ refers to the weaker section of the society. Both ‘Laltin’ and ‘Mombatti’ give us light. The ‘Laltin’ is well protected. It can bravely face the blowing wind. But on the other hand, the ‘mombatti’ has no glass, no protection and no support, it can easily be blown out by the surge of wind. But the advantage of the ‘Mombatti’ is that it can soon light another lamp. ‘Laltin’ on the other hand, is somewhat stubborn to burn other's light. Thus, through this fine connotation, the author has successfully tried her best to arouse our sense of pity and catharsis for the mombattis, the downtrodden and have not, the dalit and the deserted, the marginalised, the defenseless. The two central characters of the novel Valutha and Ammu constitute the Mombattis in the novel and all the other power exerting people, such as Chaeko, Baby Kochamma and comrade Pillai come under the banner of Laltin. Mombattis and Laltin together reinforce one of the novel's central theme, the contrast between enduring social structures and the fleeting moments of resistance experienced by marginalised individuals.

The novel highlights the issues of atrocities against children, women, and untouchables, all of whom lack identity and a voice. Ayemenem, a small village in Kerala, serves as a key setting. The main character, Ammu, struggles to live with her parents, Pappachi and Mammachi. Her father is a short-tempered man who pretends to be an ideal husband and father in public but



makes life miserable for his family. He often abuses both Ammu and her mother. Ammu is also denied higher education because her father believes college is unnecessary for girls.

"Pappachi insisted that a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl, so Ammu had no choice but to leave Delhi and move with them. There was little for a young girl to do in Ayemenem other than wait for marriage proposals while she helped her mother with the housework" (Roy, 38).

Feeling trapped, Ammu dreams of escaping from her home. "All day she dreamed of escaping from Ayemenem and the clutches of her ill-tempered father and bitter, long-suffering mother" (Roy, 39). Eventually, she moves to Calcutta and marries an assistant manager of a tea estate. Unfortunately, her husband turns out to be an alcoholic who treats her cruelly and even pressures her to meet the sexual demands of his boss to keep his job. Unable to endure such humiliation, Ammu divorces him and returns to her parents' home in Ayemenem with her twin children, Estha and Rahel.

Ammu seeks comfort and security at her childhood home but finds it hostile instead. In traditional Indian society, a divorced woman often receives neither respect nor acceptance from her family. Women are seen as symbols of family honor, expected to conform to social norms, while men face no such restrictions.

Ammu's brother, Chacko, is a divorced man. He married a foreign woman and initially faced some resentment for his choice. However, when he returned home, his family embraced him and he took on the role of head of the household. In contrast, Ammu faced neglect, dismissal, and humiliation upon her return. Her presence became a burden to the family, while Chacko showed indifference to her struggles.

Baby Kochamma, a victim of a male-dominated society, loathed Ammu and her twins. Ammu's situation worsens when she enters an affair with Velutha, an untouchable. Mammachi and Baby Kochamma tolerated and even encouraged Chacko's relationships with low-caste women workers in the pickle factory, framing them as a man's needs. Yet they were horrified by Ammu's relationship with Velutha. The very idea of her "coupling in the mud with a man who was nothing but a filthy coolie" (Roy, 258) repulsed them.



The drowning of Sophie Mol was wrongfully linked to Ammu's affair. Consequently, her family mistreated her and eventually forced her to leave. Both Ammu and Velutha fall victim to a cruel social system. An intersectional analysis of the novel shows that oppression is multi-faceted, operating through various interconnected power structures. You cannot explain Velutha's marginalization only through caste, just as you cannot fully understand Ammu's suffering solely through gender. Their experiences result from the interplay of caste, class, gender, and social status. Ammu's status as a divorced woman leaves her unprotected, while Velutha's caste identity blocks his access to equality, regardless of his talents. Their relationship thus challenges both caste norms and patriarchal authority. Roy illustrates that systems of oppression are rarely isolated; they intersect and compound each other's effects. This approach clarifies why both Ammu and Velutha face social hostility and institutional violence.

Through Velutha's character and the experiences of the Paravan community, Roy reveals the entrenched prejudices that continue to marginalize Dalits, despite constitutional guarantees of equality. The novel gives a voice to those historically silenced and exposes the harsh realities of caste oppression in postcolonial India.

A significant aspect of the novel is Roy's portrayal of Velutha as a skilled, intelligent, and compassionate Dalit man. Although he excels as a carpenter, mechanic, and craftsman, society fails to see him beyond his caste identity. Mammachi acknowledges his skills but cannot escape her caste biases. Her comment that Velutha "might have become an engineer" if he had not been a Paravan emphasizes the contradiction between recognizing talent and denying social equality. This shows how caste acts as a barrier to Dalits' potential.

The novel clearly illustrates that caste discrimination isn't just about economic exploitation; it also affects social relationships and human dignity. Velutha's relationship with Ammu directly challenges the "Love Laws" that dictate "who should be loved, and how." Their love threatens the existing social order by crossing caste lines. As a result, society reacts with violence, proving that caste holds more power than individual freedom and emotions.

Roy presents three responses to caste oppression through the characters of Vellya Paapen, Kuttappen, and Velutha. Vellya Paapen represents the older generation of Dalits who have



accepted the caste system and remain loyal to their upper-caste patrons. His gratitude towards Mammachi's family is so deep that he ultimately betrays his own son. Kuttappen embodies helplessness and social paralysis. His physical disability reflects his inability to confront the oppressive social system. In contrast, Velutha represents resistance and rebellion. He defies the limitations of caste and fights for dignity, equality, and respect. Through these three characters, Roy illustrates various stages of Dalit awareness, from submission to defiance.

Another key point in the chapter is the hypocrisy of social and political institutions. While communism in Kerala claimed to champion equality and workers' rights, leaders like Comrade Pillai fail to protect Velutha when he needs help. Instead, he sacrifices Velutha for political gain. This reveals the gap between political beliefs and social practice. Roy suggests that even progressive movements often remain mired in caste prejudices.

The police's role also exposes the state's complicity in enforcing caste oppression. Velutha becomes a victim of false accusations and police violence. His brutal death in custody symbolizes the systematic silencing of marginalized voices. Roy shows the police not as defenders of justice but as agents of power structures. The destruction of Velutha illustrates how society punishes those who challenge caste boundaries.

The contrast between Velutha and his father, Vellya Paapen, highlights the evolving consciousness within the Dalit community. Vellya Paapen belongs to an older generation that has accepted caste oppression as normal. He views social hierarchy as natural and thinks Dalits must obey upper-caste authority. His willingness to betray his son and even consider killing him shows how deeply oppression can shape one's mindset. In contrast, Velutha embodies a new generation that refuses to accept inherited constraints. He is confident, skilled, politically aware, and determined not to yield to caste limits. His existence itself challenges the social order.

Another significant symbol in the novel is the History House, which represents the burden of the past and the enduring nature of historical inequalities. The house is a reminder that social hierarchies are rooted in history and continue to influence present realities. For Velutha and Ammu, the History House becomes a place where social barriers temporarily disappear, allowing them to experience love and freedom. However, it also becomes a site of tragedy,



indicating that individuals cannot easily break free from the oppressive structures passed down from the past. Through this symbol, Roy underscores the lasting impact of history on present social relationships and the challenges of achieving true social change.

The novel also critiques the failure of religious conversion as a solution to caste discrimination. Despite converting to Christianity, Velutha's family continues to face exclusion and prejudice. Roy suggests that changing religion does not automatically eliminate caste consciousness because social attitudes remain deeply entrenched.

Ultimately, *The God of Small Things* presents Velutha as a symbol of Dalit aspiration and human dignity. Roy's social vision is also strongly feminist. She portrays the suffering of women in a patriarchal society through the character of Ammu. As a daughter, wife, and divorced woman, Ammu experiences constant discrimination and humiliation. She has no inheritance rights, no social freedom, and no independent identity. Her family treats her as a burden, while society punishes her for challenging traditional norms. Through Ammu's life, Roy exposes the double standards that govern women's lives in India. Men are often forgiven for their mistakes, while women are harshly judged and marginalized. Ammu's struggle for love, dignity, and selfhood becomes a critique of patriarchal structures that deny women autonomy and freedom.

Another important dimension of Roy's social vision is her criticism of power structures. She demonstrates how political institutions, social conventions, and state agencies often work together to maintain inequality. The character of Comrade Pillai represents political hypocrisy. Although he publicly advocates equality and workers' rights, he abandons Velutha when support is most needed. Roy suggests that political ideologies frequently fail when confronted with social realities such as caste prejudice. Similarly, Inspector Thomas Mathew symbolizes institutional oppression. Instead of delivering justice, the police become instruments of social control and violence. Through these characters, Roy questions the credibility of institutions that claim to protect the marginalized while actually reinforcing their suffering.

Roy's concern for social justice extends beyond the novel itself. The chapter highlights her activism against nuclear weapons, environmental destruction, and the displacement of tribal communities. In works such as *The End of Imagination* and *The Greater Common Good*, Roy



challenges the policies of governments and powerful institutions that prioritize economic growth and military strength over human welfare. She argues that true progress should be measured not by technological achievements or political victories but by the well-being of ordinary people. This concern for the powerless is consistent with the themes explored in *The God of Small Things*.

A significant feature of Roy's social vision is her critique of social norms and traditions. She does not romanticize Indian culture; instead, she exposes its contradictions and injustices. The "Love Laws" in the novel symbolize the rigid social codes that determine who can be loved and how. Ammu and Velutha's relationship challenges these laws because it crosses caste boundaries. Their tragic end demonstrates how society punishes individuals who defy traditional expectations. Roy suggests that social conventions often serve as instruments of oppression rather than moral guidance.

The novel also reflects Roy's deep understanding of psychological suffering. She is not only concerned with social oppression but also with its emotional consequences. The experiences of Ammu, Velutha, Estha, and Rahel reveal how discrimination, violence, and rejection leave lasting psychological scars. Estha's silence, Rahel's loneliness, Ammu's despair, and Velutha's victimization illustrate the human cost of social injustice. Roy's social vision therefore combines external realities with internal experiences, showing how society shapes individual consciousness and identity.

Furthermore, Roy's vision is rooted in a belief that literature should give voice to those who are usually unheard. She consistently focuses on the lives of children, women, Dalits, and other marginalized groups. Her concern is not with kings, politicians, or heroes but with ordinary people whose stories are often erased from official history. She herself stated that her works attempt to analyze "power and powerlessness." This statement captures the essence of her literary and social philosophy.

Stylistically, Roy reinforces her social vision through innovative language and narrative techniques. She blends memory, history, and personal experience to create a fragmented narrative that reflects the complexity of social reality. Her vivid imagery, symbolism, irony, and



poetic language transform individual experiences into universal human concerns. The novel's non-linear structure allows readers to understand how past injustices continue to influence present lives. Roy's artistic choices therefore serve her larger purpose of exposing hidden forms of oppression and encouraging critical reflection. Children also occupy the category of "Small Things" in the novel. Estha and Rahel suffer because they are powerless and dependent on adults. They are treated as outsiders within their own family and constantly reminded that they do not belong. Baby Kochamma, Kochu Maria, and even Chacko make them feel unwanted and inferior. Their childhood is marked by emotional neglect, guilt, and trauma. Estha's encounter with the Orange Drink Lemondrink Man and Rahel's experience of loss leave deep psychological scars. Roy suggests that children, like Dalits and women, become victims of systems they neither create nor understand. Roy's narrative technique contributes significantly to the novel's exploration of oppression and victimhood. The fragmented and non-linear structure mirrors the fractured lives of the characters and reflects the lasting impact of trauma. Rather than presenting events in chronological order, Roy gradually reveals crucial incidents through memories, flashbacks, and shifting perspectives. This technique encourages readers to actively engage with the narrative and understand how past injustices continue to shape present realities. The fragmentation of the narrative also reflects the fragmented identities of marginalized individuals whose lives are disrupted by social exclusion and violence. Consequently, the form of the novel becomes inseparable from its thematic concerns.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* offers a powerful critique of the social structures that perpetuate oppression, marginalization, and inequality in Indian society. Through the experiences of Dalits, women, and children, Roy exposes the harsh realities of caste discrimination, patriarchal domination, and institutional injustice that continue to shape the lives of the powerless. The novel demonstrates that although legal measures have abolished untouchability, deeply rooted social prejudices and hierarchical attitudes remain embedded within society.



The study reveals that victimhood in the novel is not determined by a single factor but emerges through the intersection of caste, class, gender, and power. Velutha, as a Dalit, becomes a victim of caste oppression despite his intelligence, talent, and humanity. Ammu suffers because of patriarchal restrictions placed upon women, while Estha and Rahel endure emotional neglect and psychological trauma as vulnerable children trapped within a hostile social environment. Through these characters, Roy illustrates how different forms of marginalization overlap and reinforce one another.

A significant contribution of the novel lies in its portrayal of resistance. While characters such as Vellya Paapen represent acceptance of caste hierarchy, Velutha symbolizes a new consciousness that challenges social boundaries and seeks dignity and equality. His relationship with Ammu becomes an act of defiance against the rigid "Love Laws" that govern society. However, the tragic consequences of their relationship reveal the violent mechanisms through which dominant social groups preserve their power and privilege.

The novel also exposes the hypocrisy of institutions that claim to promote justice and equality. Through characters such as Comrade Pillai and Inspector Thomas Mathew, Roy demonstrates how political organizations and state agencies often become instruments of oppression rather than agents of social change. Their betrayal of Velutha highlights the gap between ideological promises and social realities. Similarly, the novel critiques the inability of religious conversion to eliminate caste prejudice, showing that social discrimination often survives despite changes in faith or legal status.

Furthermore, Roy's concern extends beyond social structures to the psychological impact of oppression. The silence of Estha, the loneliness of Rahel, the suffering of Ammu, and the tragic death of Velutha reveal the emotional and psychological costs of injustice. In doing so, Roy humanizes the experiences of the marginalized and compels readers to recognize the human consequences of discrimination.

Ultimately, *The God of Small Things* is not merely a story about individual tragedy but a profound commentary on power and powerlessness in postcolonial India. By giving voice to the silenced and exposing the realities of caste-based discrimination, gender inequality, and social



exclusion, Roy advocates a society founded on justice, equality, and human compassion. The novel remains a significant literary intervention that challenges readers to question oppressive social norms and to acknowledge the dignity and humanity of those who have long been treated as "small things." By presenting the perspectives of those who are traditionally denied a voice, the novel contributes to broader conversations about equality, dignity, and democratic citizenship.

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