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Subversion and Silence: Deconstructing Power, Memory, and Marginality in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

Doudu Shulamite Pranitha
Junior Lecturer, Department of English, Sri Medha 'V' Junior College, Kishanpura, Hanamkonda

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Abstract: Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things*, which won the Booker Prize in 1997, is set in Kerala, India, and tells the story of a family that is deeply affected by love, loss, caste, and social rules. It focuses on the lives of the twins, Estha and Rahel, and shows how one tragic incident changes their lives forever. The paper explores the main themes of the novel such as forbidden love, caste discrimination, childhood trauma, and the impact of the past on the present. It also discusses the role of women in a traditional society and how they struggle for freedom and identity. The novel criticizes the rigid social system and questions the way society treats people who do not follow its rules. The paper looks at Arundhati Roy's writing style. Her use of language, structure, and imagery is unique and powerful. She often shifts between the past and present, creating a deep emotional impact on the reader. The use of small details to describe big emotions and events gives the novel its title and special meaning.

Keywords: Marginality, silence, memory, culture

Introduction: Arundhati Roy's debut novel *The God of Small Things* opens with Rahel returning from America after her divorce. She comes back to her ancestral home, the Ayemenem House, to reunite with her twin brother Estha, who is older than her by eighteen minutes. In a moment of emotional intensity and deep loneliness, Rahel breaks social and moral boundaries by sharing physical intimacy with Estha. This act, though disturbing, is portrayed not as one of lust, but as a silent expression of pain, loss, and the deep emotional bond between the twins. It is a return to the "Swadharma," or personal truth, where instinct overpowers societal norms.

Roy uses this moment to challenge the rigid social laws that define what is acceptable, especially in matters of love and human connection. By presenting such a taboo relationship, she forces the reader to question the limits of morality and the role of societal rules in shaping personal choices. The theme of identity is strongly reflected in this act, as both Rahel and her mother Ammu resist social expectations and seek love in forbidden spaces. However, a sharp contrast lies in the outcomes of these acts. Ammu's relationship

with Velutha, a lower-caste man, brings her a fleeting but profound joy, despite ending in tragedy. On the other hand, Rahel's act with Estha brings not happiness, but deep sorrow—what the novel describes as "not happiness but hideous grief" (328). This contrast underlines the complex emotional cost of defying norms in a deeply conservative society.

The novel reaches its tragic conclusion with Ammu, the mother of the twins, returning from the Meenachal River after secretly meeting her lover, Velutha. That moment by the river had felt like "a better, happier place" (232), a brief escape from the harsh realities of her life. As she walks back to the old Ayemenem House, it appears distant and cold, "as though it had little to do with the people that lived in it" (165), reflecting the emotional disconnection and alienation she feels.

Ammu, who had suffered through an abusive marriage with her alcoholic husband, longed not just for love, but for human connection and dignity. Her affair with Velutha, a man from a lower caste and three years younger than her, was not just an act of physical desire, but a powerful act of resistance against a deeply caste-ridden and patriarchal society. In choosing Velutha, Ammu broke the strict social laws of love and caste, but followed her own "Swadharma", her personal truth and emotional need.

Roy uses Ammu's relationship with Velutha to expose the cruelty of social norms that punish women for seeking happiness on their own terms. Ammu's brief moment of love is destroyed by the forces of caste prejudice, family honour, and societal control. Though she promises to return to Velutha the next day, fate does not allow it. The lovers are crushed by the weight of social tyranny; a tyranny that does not forgive those who dare to cross its invisible lines. Roy denies that the novel is autobiographical. Mostly because of the kind of person, that her literary character Ammu is and her mother Mary is, or rather, was not. However, she accepts that some of the experiences are her own. (Sanghvi, 1997)

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In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy draws a poignant contrast between two brothers, Kuttappen and Velutha, both born to Valya Paappen and Chella, yet destined for vastly different lives. Despite sharing the same humble origins as *Paravans* (a lower caste group), their paths reflect the ironic injustices of fate and the unrelenting oppression of caste and class structures in India. Kuttappen, the elder brother, is portrayed as a simple and traditional man. Illiterate and confined to his ancestral occupation, he remained a "safe paravan," obedient to the rules set by society. His life took a tragic turn when he fell from a coconut tree and severely damaged his spine (77). From that moment, he was paralyzed from the chest down and was forced to spend the rest of his life lying on his back, passively watching his youth slip away—an image Roy uses to symbolize helplessness and the quiet suffering of the voiceless.

Velutha, the younger brother, is presented as talented, curious, and defiant. Educated in the local school for untouchables, he possessed remarkable skill and creativity, crafting intricate toys from palm reeds like a "little magician." Velutha's intelligence and

independence made him stand out, but it also made him dangerous in the eyes of the oppressive social order. His affair with Ammu, an upper-caste woman, was seen as an unforgivable sin. As a result, he was brutally beaten by the police and died in custody, another kind of paralysis imposed by the violence of the system. Despite their differences, both brothers ultimately suffer similar fates. Kuttappen's physical fall left him immobilized, waiting silently for death, while Velutha's symbolic fall, his crossing of caste and social boundaries, brought a quicker, more brutal end. Roy uses these mirrored destinies to underline a tragic irony: whether one submits to or resists the social order, the consequences for those born into the margins are devastating.

A powerful instance of parallelism appears in the climax of *The God of Small Things*, during the final meeting between Ammu and Velutha. This moment marks the beginning of a tragic cycle grounded in emotional urgency and existential despair. Roy writes, "Instinctively they stuck to the Small Things. The Big Things ever lurked inside. They knew that there was nowhere for them to go. They had nothing. No future. So they stuck to the small things" (338). These lines serve as a deeply symbolic statement, capturing the characters' desperate clinging to moments of tenderness and intimacy in a world that denies them larger happiness or justice.

One night, compelled by a mysterious urgency, Ammu rises from her chair and leaves her house without fully understanding why. Drawn by an unspoken emotional pull, she walks to the riverbank, certain that Velutha would be there waiting for her. Roy describes her silent confidence with poetic intimacy: "He would be there. Waiting" (332). However, when she arrives and finds the place empty, she sits on the stone steps and buries her head in her arms, "feeling foolish for having been so sure. So certain" (333). This scene powerfully conveys Ammu's vulnerability, her longing for connection, and the fragility of human hope.

Roy's portrayal of this scene also reveals the psychological toll of living in a society where dreams and love are criminalized. Ammu's certainty and subsequent disappointment capture a universal human experience: the hope for love and acceptance in a world that repeatedly denies it. Her moment of waiting at the river becomes not only a personal moment of loss but a representation of the broader futility of resistance in an unjust society.

In a moving parallel to Ammu's emotional journey, Velutha is also drawn to the river, the symbolic space of forbidden desire and quiet rebellion. He steps into the water and allows himself to float, gazing up at the stars with an unspoken but powerful conviction that Ammu would come to him. This telepathic assurance reflects not just a personal hope, but a deep spiritual connection between the two outcasts. Then, with a blend of anticipation and resignation, he flips over and begins swimming upstream. Just before he leaves, he turns back for one last look at the riverbank, treading water and "feeling foolish for having been sure. So certain" (333). This repetition of emotions mirrors Ammu's earlier doubt, reinforcing the theme of shared vulnerability and the illusion of control in a world governed by rigid social laws.

On the first night, their mutual belief in the possibility of love proves true—they meet in secrecy and give in to their emotions, finding brief solace and fulfillment. At this point, the element of identity is striking; both Ammu and Velutha share a rare emotional alignment and physical union that defies the oppressive structures around them. However, this harmony is short-lived. On the thirteenth night, they once again part with the same certainty that they will meet again. But this time, the promise remains unfulfilled. The brutal machinery of caste, tradition, and social control intervenes. Velutha is betrayed and eventually killed by the very society that forbids love across boundaries. Ammu is humiliated and discarded. The river, once a space of secret unity, becomes a boundary between life and death, hope and devastation.

The element of contrast lies in the transformation of certainty from fulfillment to failure. Roy uses this repetition of emotional assurance to highlight the tragic irony of their love—how a deep emotional truth can exist within a societal framework that will never allow it to thrive. Their telepathic connection is not imagined; it is real and tender. But the reality of the external world, a world dominated by caste, patriarchy, and institutional violence, renders such connection impossible to sustain. Arun R. Kumbhare observes: "domestic violence is a very common thing and serious problem in India. Women in India have been subjected to violence, both physical and mental, for a long time" (134). According to Kumbhare, the roots of violence are poverty, lack of freedom, bad mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships, etc. Domestic violence is also one of the motifs developed in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Throughout this novel, the theme of death operates not merely as an event but as a recurring presence, a mystic force that shadows the characters and shapes their emotional and psychological trajectories. Arundhati Roy carefully explores how different characters respond to death, reflecting both personal loss and cultural attitudes.

When Khubchand, the family's old, blind, incontinent mongrel, reaches the end of his life, it is Estha who takes on the role of caregiver. He tends to the dog during his final moments, displaying a deep empathy that belies his age. Estha's reaction to Khubchand's death is not verbal but physical, he begins walking for hours, silently carrying the burden of grief. His grieving process manifests externally, as described: "His face grew dark and outdoors. Rugged. Wrinkled by the sun…" (13). This description signals a premature aging, as if death has imprinted itself upon his very appearance. Estha's silent mourning contrasts with the conventional expressions of grief, suggesting that his trauma is internalized and unresolved.

The death of Sophie Mol, the English cousin, is presented on a much larger scale both in terms of its emotional impact and symbolic resonance. Her drowning becomes a pivotal event in the novel, representing not just personal tragedy but also the crushing consequences of cultural collision, caste boundaries, and suppressed desires. The funeral service is marked by solemn ritual, where the family stands huddled, helpless, and heartbroken around her coffin. Sophie's death evokes a collective mourning, but it is also tinged with guilt, secrecy, and societal judgment. Roy uses these two deaths; one of a dog, the other of a child, as juxtapositions to expose emotional depth and the different values

attached to life and death. Khubchand's passing is met with quiet, intimate sorrow, while Sophie Mol's funeral is marked by spectacle and social performance. Both losses significantly affect the twin protagonists, Estha and Rahel, forming part of the emotional ruins they inhabit as adults.

After the religious rights had been performed Sophie was buried, "Earth to Earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust", the quotation "A Sunbeam Lent to Us Too Briefly" (7) was chiseled on the tombstone. Velutha was beaten to death in the police custody owing to the false allegations of "abduction and rape." Finally, he was unceremoniously dumped in the pauper's pit "where the police routinely dumped their dead" (321).

Ammu, the tragic heroine of *The God of Small Things*, meets her end in isolation, alone in a grimy room at the Bharat Lodge, away from family, love, and dignity. She dies at the tender age of 31, a life prematurely consumed by societal cruelty and emotional disillusionment. Once a young woman full of dreams, Ammu's journey is marked by repeated rejections: first by an abusive husband, then by her family, and ultimately by the society that deems her immoral and impure.

The Church refuses to bury her, branding her an outcaste, not only for marrying outside her religion, but more so for transgressing caste and gender norms by engaging in a forbidden relationship with Velutha, an "untouchable." Her brother Chacko, despite his own privileges and failings, takes responsibility for her remains. He hires a van to transport her body to an electric crematorium, bypassing traditional religious rites. Her daughter, Rahel, accompanies the lifeless body of her mother, an image heavy with symbolic meaning. Rahel's presence silently bears witness to the indignity of a woman crushed under patriarchal and casteist authority.

Ammu's death signifies more than the end of a character's life. It reflects the fate reserved for women who dare to assert agency over their bodies and choices in a rigidly stratified society. Ammu's erasure from both family honor and religious ritual highlights the brutal hypocrisy of a culture that forgives the moral lapses of men while punishing women with social death. Her lonely demise underscores Roy's critique of systemic oppression, revealing how love becomes a crime when caste and gender boundaries are crossed. There "Ammu was fed to fire, her hairs, and her skin. Her smile, her voice" (163). Finally Chacko and Rahel were handed over her ashes, the grit from her bones, and the teeth from her smile. The whole of her crammed into a little clay pot. Receipt No. Q-498673" (163).

Pappachi was the father of Ammu and Chacko. He was an imperial entomologist, who died of a massive heart attack. His death was reported in the Indian Express and his photograph 'framed and put up in the drawing room" (51). Kari Saipu, the black sahib, the English man but gone native "had shot himself through the head ten years ago when his young lover's parents had taken the boy away from him" (52). Miss Mitten, Baby Kochamma's Australian Missionary friend was killed by a Milk van, when it had been reversing. "Miss Mitten was killed by a milk van in Hobart, across the road from a cricket

oval. To the twins there was hidden justice in the fact that the milk van had been reversing. More buses and cars had stopped on either side of the level crossing. An ambulance that said Sacred Heart Hospital was full of a party of people on their way to a wedding. The bride was staring out of the back window, her face partially obscured by the flaking paint of the huge Red Cross" (60). On the way Rahel, saw a frog "It was so dead and squashed so flat that it looked more like a frog-shaped stain on the road than a frog" (82). Chella, Valya Paapan's wife died of T.B. Thus, death deflates all, young and old, one way or the other, sooner or later. And this triggers off the question rose at the outset: who does it all?

The third philosophical question posed in the *Upanishads* finds a subtle yet powerful echo in *The God of Small Things*. This question asks: "Who or what governs the way people speak, wisely or foolishly, sensitively or insensitively, meaningfully or irrelevantly?" In the novel, speech becomes a mirror of both innocence and instinct, revealing hidden truths and unspoken tensions.

A striking illustration of this mystery occurs during a seemingly ordinary moment. On the day before Sophie Mol's arrival from America, Chacko, Ammu, Estha, and Rahel stay at Hotel Sea Queen in Cochin. That evening, they watch a film at Abhilash Talkies, after which Estha becomes ill—a foreshadowing of deeper trauma. On their way back to the hotel, Ammu casually compliments the "Orange-drink Lemon-drink man"**,** an innocuous remark made in passing.

Rahel, Ammu's perceptive seven-year-old daughter, innocently and instinctively blurts out: "So why don't you marry him then?" a question that cuts through social norms and emotional barriers. Rahel's childlike honesty momentarily destabilizes the adult world. She immediately feels deep remorse**,** not because her comment was wrong, but because it unearthed something too raw, too close to her mother's unacknowledged desires. She wondered, "Where those words had come from. She didn't know that she had them in her. But they were out now, and wouldn't go back in. They hung about that red staircase like clerks in a Government office. Some stood; some sat and shivered their legs" (112).

Upon her return from America, Rahel found herself retracing familiar paths through the quiet, humid streets of Ayemenem. During one of her solitary walks, intended perhaps more as a silent reflection than a purposeful review of her hometown, she unexpectedly encountered Comrade Pillai. Sensing his presence, Rahel instinctively tried to avoid being seen. However, Comrade Pillai recognized her and promptly intercepted her, initiating a conversation under the pretext of curiosity.

What followed was a barrage of personal and intrusive questions. He inquired enthusiastically about her time in America, her marital status, her husband's name, whether she had his photograph, and if she had children or was expecting one. His insistence that she must have a child, regardless of gender came not from genuine concern, but from a socially ingrained belief in normative familial structures. When Rahel revealed that she was divorced, Comrade Pillai responded with exaggerated shock, the word "divorced" hanging in the air

like a cultural taboo. His tone was not one of compassion but of calculated performance, highlighting the community's discomfort with women who defy traditional roles.

After this encounter, Rahel was left bewildered. She could not fathom what Comrade Pillai gained by probing so insistently into her private life, only to render her responses irrelevant with his dismissive attitude. The interaction lays bare a deeper critique of societal norms: Pillai's questions were less about learning the truth and more about reinforcing control through social surveillance. His interrogation disguised as concern reflects the patriarchal tendency to monitor and judge women's lives, particularly when they step outside prescribed roles.

This moment underscores the tension between individual identity and collective expectation. Comrade Pillai, representing a politicized, patriarchal community voice, seeks to reframe Rahel's life into a narrative that aligns with conventional ideals such as marriage, motherhood, and social stability. Her truth, especially her independence and emotional estrangement, holds no value for him. This encounter subtly exposes the hypocrisy of ideological figures like Pillai, who champion progressive causes publicly but perpetuate regressive attitudes in personal interactions.

Eyes and ears are among the most remarkable gifts bestowed upon humans, enabling us to perceive the world in complementary yet interconnected ways. Through the eyes, we see and, metaphorically, hear the unspoken emotions in expressions; through the ears, we listen and, in turn, visualize images evoked by sound. Reflecting on this profound relationship, the Rishi in the Kena Upanishad wonders, "Cakshuh-srotroh Kau Deo Yunakti?" which means, who or what divine power has intertwined or fused these two senses 'eyes and ears'? This profound question about the unity and interdependence of sensory perception resonates deeply within Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*.

A vivid moment in the novel captures this mystical fusion of seeing and hearing. Velutha, standing in the cool shade of rubber trees, is bathed in "coins of sunshine dancing on his body." As he holds Rahel in his arms, he inadvertently glances up and meets Ammu's gaze. That brief exchange of looks is charged with unspoken meaning and silent communication; a silent conversation more powerful than words. Roy's depiction emphasizes how sensory experiences are not mere physical functions but vehicles for profound human connection and revelation**.** The novel suggests that in these fleeting, silent moments, truths about identity, desire, and social taboo surface with striking clarity. Moreover, the Kena Upanishad's wonder at the unity of senses is echoed here as Roy probes the limits of perception how much do we really see or hear, and how much remains hidden beneath the surface? "The man standing in the shade of the rubber trees with coins of sunshine dancing on his body, holding her daughter in his arms, glanced up and caught Ammu's gaze. Centuries telescoped into one evanescent moment. History was wrong-footed, caught off guard. Sloughed off like an old snakeskin" (176).

In that fleeting moment, Velutha looked up and perceived something entirely new—something he had never before seen or heard. He saw Rahel's mother not just as a familiar figure, but as a woman, with arms that were round, firm, and perfectly shaped, and shoulders that shimmered in the light. At the same time, Ammu noticed that Velutha was seeing her in this way. In that shared gaze, both recognized and silently acknowledged a deeper, unspoken message. This mutual perception was not just visual; it was a profound exchange of understanding and emotion, where both "simply saw and sensed the message proper." This scene is pivotal because it reveals how the eyes become a medium for silent communication that transcends words. The novel shows that through a simple look, two individuals can connect on an intimate level, confronting societal barriers and personal desires. It emphasizes the power of the gaze to communicate truths about identity, attraction, and forbidden love; truths that words alone might fail to express or might be too dangerous to speak aloud.

The narrative then shifts to Estha's experience in the theatre. Feeling unwell and nauseous, Estha leaves the group Ammu, Rahel, and Baby Kochamma and returns quietly to the hotel. It is decided that Estha, being sick, will share a room with his mother while Rahel stays in the adjacent room with their uncle, Chacko. However, after some time, Estha quietly leaves his room, vomits, and then approaches Rahel's door.

Estha Alone walked wearily to the bathroom. He vomited a clear, bitter, lemony, sparkling, fizzy liquid. The acrid after taste of a Little Man's first encounter with Fear. Dum dum. He felt a little better. He put on his shoes and walked out of his room, laces trailing, down the corridor, and stood quietly outside Rahel's door" (119). At this, Rahel without being called to open the door, got up, went up to the door in the dark and "unlatched the door for him" (119). Similarly, when Rahel, now an elderly lady, was watching the Kathakali show, Estha came. Then something altered in the air and Rahel sensed the change and felt that Estha had come. The mystery is that Rahel didn't turn her head, but "a glow spread inside her; he has come, she thought. He's here. With me" (234). Similar is the case with Ammu and Velutha. They were so certain about their meeting. And they did meet and have their fill. Then Mc Caslin first saw a sort of "a jazz tune" in Rahel's walk and then was offended by her eyes. "Larry McCaslin saw in Rahel's eyes was not despair at all, but a sort of enforced optimism. And a hollow where Estha's words had been. He couldn't be expected to understand that. That the emptiness in one twin was only a version of the quietness in the other. That the two things fitted together. Like stacked spoons. Like familiar lovers' bodies" (19) and this led to their divorce. Thus, Arundhati Roy has raised the eternal question who does it? From various angles, she has also tried to answer it as "God". But then her answer is equivocal and has the air of uncertainty as the answer is in the form of statement-cum-question as, "Who was he, the one-armed man? Who could he have been? The God of Loss? *The God of Small Things*? The God of Goosebumps and Sudden Smiles? Of Sourmetal Smells" (217, 330). That is, which of these Gods? But the answer to all such questions in The Kenopnishad is unequivocally one, viz., "tadev Brahmah tvam Viddhi", that is, you must know that there is only one supreme power "Brahma" and that alone is at the root of all that happens. Then the writer has beautifully brought out the ultimate destiny of man thus: Ammu sees a dream in which she sees "a cheerful man with one arm" who holds her close. Then he

does one thing at a time, viz, "If he touched her, he couldn't talk to her, if he loved her, he couldn't leave, if he spoke, he couldn't listen, if he fought, he couldn't win" (217).

The figure of the one-armed man in *The God of Small Things* serves as a powerful symbol of the inherent incompleteness of human existence. This imagery reflects a fundamental truth about human destiny: a person can engage in or accomplish only one task at a time, embodying the limitations and fragmented nature of human life. This theme of human limitation is subtly echoed in the symbolic detail of Rahel's toy wristwatch, which permanently displays the time as "Ten to Two." Rahel's childhood desire to own a watch on which she could adjust the time at will represents a deeper, universal yearning, the wish to control or manipulate time itself. This wish remains an illusion because, in reality, time is the ultimate mover, the irreversible force that governs human life. This tension between human desire and cosmic reality is cleverly hinted at through the homophone "Ten to Two," which phonetically resembles the word "tentative." This wordplay suggests the provisional, uncertain nature of human plans and actions. It conveys that human efforts and decisions are often tentative, incomplete, and subject to forces beyond their control. The ultimate authority over time and destiny belongs to the divine, often symbolized by Brahma in Indian philosophy, who is described as *purna*—the complete and perfect one. This juxtaposition between human limitation and divine completeness provides a philosophical underpinning to the narrative and invites readers to reflect on the nature of existence, fate, and free will.

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