

**Memory, trauma, and identity: A postcolonial
Reading in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things***

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Abstract:

Literature is an art form that allows the human mind to express thoughts, emotions, and stories through written words. It has always been a window into the experiences, struggles, and triumphs of individuals and societies, making it an essential part of human culture. From ancient epics to modern novels, literature serves as a reflection of our world, capturing the complexities of life, society, and the human condition. The aim of this study is to explore how memory, trauma, and identity are portrayed in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* through a postcolonial lens. It seeks to understand how the character's past experiences, societal pressures, and historical context shape their sense of self and influence their lives. The study aims to highlight the lasting impact of colonialism, caste discrimination, and family trauma on personal and collective identities in the novel.

Keywords: Post-independence, Memory, Trauma, Identity

Introduction

Modern Indian literature, especially post-independence, has become a powerful tool for expressing the changing dynamics of society. Indian literature has played a crucial role in shaping and contributing to society in numerous ways, from preserving cultural heritage to fostering social change. Indian literature has made significant contributions to society by preserving cultural values, challenging social injustices, and fostering national identity. Arundhati Roy is a well-known Indian author who is recognized for her powerful writing that touches on social, political, and environmental issues. She gained global fame with her debut novel, *The God of Small Things*, which won the Booker Prize in 1997. The novel, set in Kerala, India, explores the complex lives of twins Estha and Rahel and the challenges they

face due to their family" 's troubled past. The book delves into themes like caste, forbidden love, and the impact of history on personal lives, offering a deep reflection on Indian society. Aside from her fiction work, Arundhati Roy is also a passionate activist. She uses her platform to speak out against injustice, whether it" is related to politics, social inequality, or environmental degradation.

Her non-fiction works include *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, a novel that, like her earlier works, addresses the issues of war, politics, and human rights. Roy is known for her vocal stance against the Indian government" 's policies, especially concerning issues like nuclear power, industrialization, and the rights of Indigenous communities. Roy" 's writing is not limited to fiction; she has also published essays and articles in various international publications. Through her essays, she tackles critical issues such as global capitalism, the Kashmir conflict, and the struggles of marginalized communities in India. Her direct and fearless writing style has earned her both admiration and criticism. While many applaud her for highlighting important social issues, others criticize her for being too outspoken.

The God of Small Things is celebrated for its lush, lyrical prose and its powerful exploration of complex themes. It portrays the beauty of human relationships while also exposing the deep-seated injustices of society. Through its vivid characters and emotional depth, the novel remains an important work in contemporary literature, reflecting the complexities of life in modern India. In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy explores the themes of memory, trauma, and identity, presenting a nuanced and complex narrative that captures the impact of historical and personal events on the lives of her characters. The novel, through its nonlinear structure and intricate storytelling, allows readers to engage deeply with how memory and trauma influence identity formation, particularly in a postcolonial context. Memory in *The God of Small Things* is not linear or fixed. It is fragmented, unreliable, and influenced by both personal and collective trauma. The characters" memories are shaped by their past experiences and the social conditions in which they live. For the twins Estha and Rahel, the memory of a traumatic event from their childhood, the death of their half-English cousin, Sophie Mol, haunts them throughout their lives. The trauma of this incident is intertwined with the oppressive social structures of caste and family dynamics, making it difficult for them to escape the memories that shape their identities. The disjointed flow of the narrative mirrors the fragmented nature of memory as the story moves back and forth between the past and present, showing how past traumas continue to affect the characters in their adulthood.

Trauma is another central theme in the novel, and it is depicted not only as an individual experience but also as a collective one. The trauma of colonialism, the pain of forbidden love, the harshness of the caste system, and the burden of family secrets all contribute to the characters" suffering. For example, Ammu" 's forbidden relationship with Velutha, a man from a lower caste, leads to tragic consequences. The trauma of caste-based discrimination and its devastating effects on individuals and families are central to the novel" 's critique of Indian society. Roy examines how these traumas are passed down through

generations, as each character" 's personal struggles are connected to the larger societal injustices they face.

Identity in the novel is fluid and ever-changing, deeply influenced by both personal and societal forces. The characters are constantly grappling with who they are, where they belong, and how they fit into a world shaped by history, family, and social norms. Estha and Rahel" 's identities are shaped by their experiences of loss, trauma, and separation. The fractured nature of their identities reflects the fractured nature of the society they live in, a society divided by caste, colonial legacies, and gender inequalities. Their search for self-understanding is also a search for belonging as they try to make sense of their place in the world. In a postcolonial context, the novel critiques the lingering effects of colonialism on individual and collective identities. The caste system, which was entrenched during British rule, continues to shape the lives of the characters, even after independence.

The legacy of colonialism is seen in the way the characters are forced to confront their positions in the social hierarchy, as well as in the alienation and sense of displacement felt by those who do not fit into these rigid structures. Roy" 's exploration of postcolonial identity is deeply intertwined with her exploration of memory and trauma, as both personal and historical wounds continue to shape the characters" understanding of who they are. *The God of Small Things* presents a powerful postcolonial exploration of memory, trauma, and identity. Through its portrayal of fragmented memories, personal and collective trauma, and the search for selfhood, Roy highlights the deep psychological scars left by colonialism, social hierarchies, and family dynamics. The novel not only tells the story of individual characters but also captures the larger societal forces that shape their lives, making it a poignant reflection on the complexities of postcolonial identity.

Memory, trauma, and identity

The novel examines how British colonial rule not only imposed economic and administrative structures but also entrenched rigid hierarchies of caste, class, and gender. Even after India's independence, these colonial ideologies persisted, influencing the ways in which individuals viewed themselves and interacted with the world around them. The impact of colonialism is evident in the characters' struggles with displacement, cultural alienation, and fractured identities. Through an exploration of the novel's setting, historical context, and character experiences, it becomes clear that *The God of Small Things* is not just a personal tragedy but also a postcolonial critique of continued social and psychological colonization.

Colonial rule in India formalized and institutionalized the caste system in a way that reinforced social hierarchies. The British relied on caste divisions to maintain control, often privileging upper-caste elites in administrative and educational institutions while further marginalizing lower-caste and untouchable communities. As Gauri Viswanathan notes in *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*, "Colonial education not only created a class of subjects who could serve the empire but also deepened social divisions by reinforcing existing inequalities" (Viswanathan 82). This colonial legacy is evident in the ways that the Ipe family interacts with Velutha, an untouchable Paravan, despite his

indispensable role in their lives. *The God of Small Things* is a novel deeply concerned with the concept of memory, both personal and collective. Memory functions in the novel as a fragmented and nonlinear force, shaping the identities of its characters and revealing the trauma they endure. The narrative structure itself reflects this theme, with events unfolding in a non-chronological order, mirroring the way trauma disrupts the continuity of memory. For Rahel and Estha, the protagonists, memory is not simply a recollection of past events but a persistent and haunting presence that defines their present selves. The novel opens with an evocation of memory, setting the tone for its exploration of the past" 's inescapability:

May in Ayemenem is a hot, brooding month. The days are long and humid. The river shrinks, and black crows gorge on bright mangoes in still, dust-green trees. Red bananas ripen. Jackfruits burst. Dissolute blue bottles hum vacuously in the fruity air. Then they stun themselves against clear windowpanes and die, fatly baffled in the sun (Roy 1).

The novel also explores the role of intergenerational trauma, showing how the suffering of one generation is passed down to the next. Ammu, whose own life is marked by patriarchal oppression and social ostracization, unknowingly transmits her trauma to her children. Her desperate attempt to find love and autonomy through her relationship with Velutha ultimately leads to her destruction, and her children bear the burden of her suffering. Rahel and Estha" 's trauma is not merely the result of the events they experience directly but also of the inherited pain of their mother" 's struggles. As Marianne Hirsch argues in *The Generation of Post memory*, "the trauma of one generation can become the memory of the next, shaping identity in profound and often unconscious ways" (Hirsch 103). Rahel and Estha" 's fractured identities can thus be seen as the result of a long history of oppression and violence that extends beyond their own lifetimes. The novel also highlights the unreliability of memory, showing how different characters remember the same events in different ways. Baby Kochamma, for instance, rewrites history to justify her own actions, convincing herself that Velutha is a threat rather than a victim.

Conclusion

Arundhati Roy" 's *The God of Small Things* is a novel that intricately weaves together themes of memory, trauma, and identity within a postcolonial setting. The novel is set in Kerala, India, and follows the lives of Rahel and Estha, fraternal twins whose childhood is marked by tragic events that shape their futures in profound ways. Through a nonlinear narrative structure, Roy constructs a fragmented, cyclical story that mirrors the way memory operates, revealing how past events do not simply remain in the past but continue to dictate present realities. At the heart of the novel is the impact of social hierarchies particularly caste, gender, and colonial influence on the lives of individuals who attempt to defy these rigid structures. The title, *The God of Small Things*, suggests a focus on the seemingly insignificant moments and choices that accumulate to determine the course of the characters" lives. It also reflects the novel" 's exploration of power, as it contrasts the powerless to the small things of the world with the dominant forces that control their destinies.

Caste oppression is one of the most brutal legacies of colonial and pre-colonial India, and Roy exposes its enduring influence through Velutha" 's character. Although technically free

under the law, Velutha remains bound by the social and economic restrictions imposed on Dalits. His intelligence and skills do not grant him mobility, and his relationship with Ammu is perceived as an unforgivable violation of caste purity. His brutal punishment at the hands of the police demonstrates how systemic violence enforces caste boundaries, making it clear that postcolonial independence has not dismantled the deeply ingrained structures of oppression. Through these characters, *The God of Small Things* critiques the illusion of progress and exposes the ways in which colonial legacies continue to shape personal and collective identities in independent India.

The God of Small Things presents a poignant commentary on the lasting effects of historical and personal trauma. The title *The God of Small Things* holds deep symbolic significance, reflecting the novel's central themes of power, oppression, and the consequences of seemingly minor choices. Throughout the narrative, Roy emphasizes how small moments, acts of love, and seemingly insignificant details can have devastating repercussions within the rigid structures of caste, gender, and social hierarchy. The title suggests a contrast between the powerless individuals whose lives are dictated by these structures, the "small things," and the overarching forces of history, tradition, and systemic oppression that shape their fate.

There is significant potential for further research on *The God of Small Things*, particularly in the areas of postcolonial studies, trauma theory, gender studies, and literary form. The novel's intricate exploration of caste oppression, memory, and transgression makes it a rich text for comparative analysis with other works that examine similar themes. Future studies could investigate the novel's place within the broader landscape of postcolonial literature, analyzing how it interacts with other narratives of identity, marginalization, and resistance in formerly colonized societies.

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