
The Anatomy of Prejudice and Power in *The God of Small Things*

Lubna TabassumResearch Scholar, Department of Languages (English), Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Integral University, Dasauli Lucknow, 226022

Article Received: 05/05/2025**Article Accepted:** 07/06/2025**Published Online:** 09/06/2025**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2025.18.06.147

Abstract: The paper studies social bias and politics in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. By focusing on the systemic oppression of Dalits and specifically the tragic destiny of Velutha, it criticizes the persistence of caste-based discrimination in postcolonial India. Even as it becomes more independent and modern, however, new forms of inequality have arisen in its caste hierarchies, worsened by political connivance and police violence. Roy's novel reminds us how colonial chains and internalized social divides hold the nation back. Using critical, thematic, and postcolonial analysis, the article advocates for a society based on dignity, equality, and human rights, transcending caste barriers to create mutual identity and opportunity.

Keywords: Caste discrimination, Dalits, postcolonialism, social injustice, Indian politics, systemic oppression.

Introduction: While we declared political independence in 1947, India remains trapped in social hierarchies of ancient lineage. Foremost among them is the caste system and the entrenched, discriminatory social hierarchy that still forces Dalits, formerly known as 'Untouchables', to the margins. It survives in the legal code of a country that has legally eliminated it. The repercussions of the system are felt not just in remote villages or as isolated incidents but as the fabric of contemporary life in India, influencing everything from jobs and schooling to police practices and political speech.

Literature has, for over a century, been an important arena through which ideas and accounts of caste oppression have been recorded and contested. From B.R. Ambedkar and Mulk Raj Anand to Omprakash Valmiki, writers from oppressed communities have used the weapons of prose, poetry, and autobiography to shed light on the violence, humiliation, and systemic oppression they face. Their work offers a history lesson and a testament to the staying power of marginalized perspectives.

In contemporary India, Arundhati Roy enters this debate, a writer and activist whose writing is a scathing commentary on social and political institutions. Her breakthrough, the Booker Prize-winning 1997 novel *The God of Small Things*, ranks among the most important

literary interventions in recent decades. Roy tells the life story and death of Velutha, a Dalit (Untouchable) man in Kerala, who breaks caste norms by falling in love with Ammu, a woman from an upper-caste Syrian Christian family. This relationship initiates a series of social and political consequences that lead to Velutha's violent death by the police.

Roy's story is more than a forbidden-love melodrama set against a background of social injustice; it is a dense, intricately layered critique of how caste-based oppression functions in concert with modern forms of political power. Her novel shows that even in a "free" India, caste decides who gets justice, love, dignity and a life.

The characters like Baby Kochamma and Comrade Pillai are vivid examples of the inbred casteist prejudices which are worse than HIV & can be passed down monstrously through the nobility of family, religion & politics. Fearsome institutions such as the police and political parties, which ostensibly exist to protect citizens, are instead painted as the keepers of this tyrannical hierarchy.

The objective of this paper is to determine how *The God of Small Things* mirrors post-colonial India's socio-political conditions and offers a counter-position to these conditions. It looks at the convergence of caste, politics, and structural violence as epitomised by Roy, characterisation, narrative structure, and symbolism. The novel is read beyond its status as a literary fiction text and as a socio-political document that challenges India's moral and constitutional commitment to equality.

The purpose of the paper is to answer the following research questions:

1. How is the intersection of social prejudices based on caste with modern political processes represented in Roy's novel?
2. How does caste-based discrimination retard the socio-economic development of India despite the democracy and legal structure in place?
3. In what ways do political forms and institutions continue to reproduce caste hierarchies in the name of modern politics?

Literature Review: The intersection of caste and literature in India is not a recent development. From the writings of social reformers like Jyotirao Phule to the powerful autobiographies of Dalit writers such as Omprakash Valmiki and Baburao Bagul, the struggle against caste-based oppression has found consistent expression in literary traditions. Another key text is the trenchant critique of Hindu casteism by B.R Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), which renders a moral and ethical rationale for the abolition of the Hindu caste system. His clarity breathed life into literature as well as constitutional reform. One of the early English-language novels depicting the everyday life of a Dalit protagonist was Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935), one of the early examples of the Dalit Dasta narrative. In the figure of Bakha, Anand brings to light the psychological and social price of being "untouchable." This novel, though a work of fiction, has strong autobiographical overtones and relates to the lived reality of millions of Dalits in India.

In the post-independence era, there is a substantial amount of Dalit literature in other Indian languages; for instance, in Marathi, Tamil, and Telugu. Bama Faustina Soosairaj (*Karukku*) and Meena Kandasamy (*The Gypsy Goddess*) are among those who have contributed to a more nuanced analysis of caste and gender subordination. These books are street-level, they're political, and they're unapologetically combative, and they often feel more rooted in lived experience than in theoretical positions.

Although Dalit literature places the voice of the oppressed as central, *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy is a non-Dalit writer's powerfully disruptive intervention. Roy is not the mere witness or sympathizer — she is the accuser. Her portrayal of Velutha, the Dalit hero, is both ravishing and accusatory. In contrast to such narratives as Munshi Premchand's *Godaan*, which picture caste oppression in passive terms, Roy's novel portrays the active agency of contemporary institutions like the police, political parties, and the family system in perpetuating caste hierarchies.

Cinematic works such as *Article 15* (2019) and *Jai Bhim* (2021) have also framed the narrative around caste-based violence. The movies show how existing legal and policing mechanisms are almost always unable to protect Dalits, and in most cases, are instruments of repression. These representations are similar to those of Velutha's in *The God of Small Things*; police brutality in the novel is not unique, but a condition of the general system of injustice. While there is a substantial literature on caste, what is missing is to demonstration of how current political institutions, not merely tradition, continue to maintain caste divisions. Roy's novel is significant in this connection. It goes further than cultural critique and speaks of political givenness, of how caste ideologies often camouflage themselves as rhetoric of nationalism, development and morality.

This paper draws on these cultural and academic contributions but goes beyond them by examining how Roy's narrative structure, character development, and intertextual allusions build toward a larger critique of Indian society. The intention is not simply to analyze the personal suffering of Velutha and Ammu but to untangle the collective failure of a nation still shunting its people to the margins in the name of progress.

Methodology: The research utilizes qualitative, cross-disciplinary methods borrowed from postcolonial theory, thematic literary criticism, and critical cultural studies. The aim is to find meaning in how Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* identifies the intersection of caste discrimination and Indian politics of today. Instead of quantitative data and statistical analysis, this research emphasises interpretive depth, textual analysis, and comparative grids of literature. The following are the aims and objectives of the research design of the study:

Aims and Objectives: This paper aims to critically analyze how Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* allegorizes the interface of caste social bias and emerging political practices in postcolonial India. With Velutha's tragic existence as a Dalit male, the research attempts to

reveal the persistence of caste hegemony and institutional violence in a democratic and sovereign country.

The objectives of this paper are:

1. To examine in what ways Roy's novel is against institutionalized caste discrimination and consolidation in contemporary political, legal, and social institutions.
2. To analyze how literature and film, and Dalit biographies work as a site of resistance and social critique.
3. To analyze the operation of leading characters and their symbolic functions in reinforcing or reversing caste hierarchies.
4. To contribute to the discourse on postcolonial literature by situating Roy's work in the broader context of connecting literature and lived experience and the failure of institutions.
5. To foster an interdisciplinarity of understanding caste injustice that connects literary analysis with social policy, political theory, and cultural critique.

Through embarking on this exploratory journey, the research aims to discover how caste oppression is a deeply rooted issue in India and how such works of fiction as Roy's can be effective tools for critiquing structural injustice.

Analysis: Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is a richly textured novel that brings to light the dark undercurrents of casteism and political duplicity in post-colonial India. In the tragic tale of Velutha, a Dalit man, Roy lambasts both ancient and contemporary systems of domination, highlighting how notions of caste remain embedded in Indian social and political institutions despite policy declarations of equality.

The figure of Velutha, a talented woodcarver and Paravan caste member, is central to depicting the novel's overriding concern: the chronic and violent exclusion of Dalits. Velutha's intelligence, skill, and politicized consciousness transform him into a symbol of resistance against a historically defined system of hierarchies of caste. But it is the very same brilliance and audacity, especially his illicit affair with Ammu, a Syrian Christian upper-caste woman, that signs his death warrant. Roy narrates:

Maybe it's true that things can change in a day. That a few dozen hours can affect the outcome of whole lifetimes. And that when they do, those few dozen hours, like the salvaged remains of a burned house—the charred clock, the singed photograph, the scorched furniture—must be resurrected from the ruins and examined. Preserved. Accounted for (Roy 32).

This sentence foretells the persecution and punishment Velutha suffers for challenging caste distinctions. The novel tells more than Velutha's fall; it builds a damning critique of the institutions that conspire in his destruction. The police, operating under social and political pressure, beat him to death in custody without ever giving him due process. Inspector Thomas Mathew represents institutional collusion; instead of bringing justice, he serves the caste system. The story clearly outlines how the law is manipulated to fit social bias:

It was not him [Velutha] they saw. It was a man grown insolent. He wasn't accused of any specific wrongdoing. He was accused of breaking the Love Laws. The laws that lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much (Roy 328).

This dramatized portrayal is in tandem with actual cases of caste-based police atrocities witnessed in Anubhav Sinha's movie *Article 15* (2019). Based on the Badaun gang rape and other cases of caste violence, the movie depicts an upper-caste IPS officer who takes on the highly embedded caste prejudices in the police and the political system. Thus, in Roy's novel, too, law enforcement is not a guarantor of rights but a tool of repression. Ayan, the officer, tells in exasperation, "We are still stuck at Article 15 of the Constitution," referring to the legal article that prohibits discrimination on grounds of caste, religion, or gender, but is flagrantly disregarded in practice.

The same sequence of state-sponsored injustice dominates T.J. Gnanavel's movie *Jai Bhim* (2021), which is a dramatization of the true story of Rajakannu, a tribal man who was falsely accused and killed in police custody. The on-screen portrayal of state violence matches that of Velutha. In each instance, the victims are not merely collateral damage but willing targets of an apparatus that chastises disobedience from people it considers inferior. The lawyer Chandru in *Jai Bhim* says, "The system has many loopholes, and they're not accidental. They're designed that way—to keep some people in and some people out."

This casteist marginalization is also not limited to the realm of fiction or the cinema. Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography *Joothan* (2003) is an unforgiving look into what it means to be a Dalit in contemporary India. Like the character of Velutha, Valmiki's life experiences attest to the fact that "caste works in both manifest and subtle ways." He writes, "For me, the pain of living a life comprising daily humiliations, of having my dreams killed before they have a chance to flower, of never being able to escape my identity — this is the pain of being Dalit." Velutha's impunity before the law and Valmiki's story of social disenfranchisement meet in the likeness of structural discrimination. Roy employs several other characters to show how caste ideology is absorbed and transmitted. Baby Kochamma, for instance, serves as a symbol of the elite's moral complicity. She manipulates; Though he ostensibly champions equality, he refuses to support Velutha, fearing that doing so would alienate upper-caste supporters. Roy notes his duplicity: "Change is one thing. Acceptance is another" (Roy 277).

Thematically, the novel shows how modern political discourse masks caste realities. Comrade Pillai's politics are performative, aligning with what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak terms the "politics of representation" (Spivak). While leftist rhetoric calls for class struggle and unity, caste is often ignored or subordinated, revealing the selective vision of such movements. This is evident in Comrade Pillai's statement, "He may be your friend, but he is not your equal" (Roy 267).

Moreover, the novel's structure itself reaffirms its thematic preoccupations. The fractured timeline mirrors the broken nature of Indian society—a society that is trying to find the space to reconcile its democratic ideals with its hierarchical realities. The postmodern narrative strategy adopted by Roy, characterized by non-linearity and redundancy, mirrors the cyclical nature of caste-based injustice that resists historical progress.

By her use of poetry as a style and political activism, Roy proves that caste is not only a remnant of history but a persistent crisis that is deeply intertwined with contemporary governance, law, and ideology. Her novel echoes postcolonial debates by Frantz Fanon, who stressed how colonial orders restructure local hierarchies, frequently making divisions such as caste more severe to preserve social domination. In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), Fanon contends, freedom from colonial domination is no promise of emancipation where internal structures of oppression are not confronted.

Findings: Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* demonstrates how caste operates in contemporary institutions like political parties, the police, and religious institutions. These organisations consciously perpetuate the caste order, not break it up. *Jai Bhim*, Article 15, and the novel exemplify how violence against Dalits is a function of the system and not a one-off event. The state machinery perpetuates caste divisions through legal, political, and social structures. Baby Kochamma and Comrade Pillai characters depict how and why casteism becomes internalized by those who employ social standing, religion, and politics to rationalize or turn a blind eye to injustice.

Roy's storytelling techniques — nonlinear narrative, symbolic discourse and intertextual references — position her novel not only as an indictment but as resistance writing, akin to Dalit autobiographies and socially aware cinema.

Despite the legal guarantees of equality (e.g., Article 15), the fact and fiction narratives indicate that 'the internal organization of the state' is unable to deliver substantive justice, confirming the fears of postcolonial theorists about the incompleteness of the decolonization of internal arrangements.

Conclusion: Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is not only a literary tragedy but also a scathing attack on the Indian state, society, and its persistence with caste. By placing the narrative of Velutha in the foreground, the novel reveals how contemporary political machinery, such as law enforcement, democratic politics, and institutional governance, reinforces the ancient hierarchies that they profess to dismantle. Coupled with the films such as *Article 15*, *Jai Bhim* and autobiographies such as Valmiki's *Joothan*, Roy's story adds to a larger narrative of resistance against caste-based injustice.

Caste oppression endures, constitutional guarantees notwithstanding, which suggests the land remains in thrall, suspended as it were in between the dead weight of tradition and the promise of modernity. Literature such as Roy's is thus both a mirror and a provocation. A

mirror to the unattractive realities of Indian life, and a provocation to readers, scholars, and citizens to divest the structures that support injustice.

Contribution of the Study: The present paper adds to postcolonial literary criticism by placing *The God of Small Things* in a larger socio-political context that crosses caste, modern state, and institutional violence. In contrast to previous studies that mainly read Roy's novel as an individual tragedy or postmodern narrative technique, the present work brings to the centre the political awareness of the novel and its critique of caste-based injustice rooted in India's democratic state. In intertwining the comparative readings of *Joothan*, *Article 15*, and *Jai Bhim*, the analysis traverses literary, filmic, and autobiographical genres to draw attention to the continuity of Dalit subjugation across the cinematic and literary terrains. Furthermore, the article is held as useful by offering multilayered character readings that helped unveil how internalized and institutional complicity influence the fates of subjects at the margins.

Recommendations: Schools and colleges need to include postcolonial literature like *The God of Small Things*, autobiographies such as *Joothan*, and films such as *Article 15* and *Jai Bhim* in their syllabus for literature and sociology to develop intersectional learning among students. Literature and cinema should influence caste-sensitive policymaking. Cultural texts graphically capture the lived experiences behind statistics, such that qualitative depth is available for social justice reforms.

There is an urgent need to scale up Dalit representation and narratives in literature as well as popular culture, beyond tokenism. There needs to be space given to marginalized writers and filmmakers for genuine portrayal.

Future research might delve deeper into the intersection of caste and gender in Roy's novel, specifically in the social exclusion of Ammu and the ways it intersects with Velutha's tragedy in the same oppressive systems.

Works Cited:

- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Constance Farrington, Grove Press, 1963.
- Gnanavel, T. J., director. *Jai Bhim*. 2D Entertainment, 2021.
- Roy, Arundhati. *The God of Small Things*. IndiaInk, 1997.
- Sinha, Anubhav, director. *Article 15*. Zee Studios, 2019.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 271–313.
- Valmiki, Omprakash. *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*. Translated by Arun Kumar, Columbia University Press, 2003.