SP Publications
International Journal Of English and Studies (IJOES)
An International Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Journal; **Impact Factor:** 8.175 (SJIF)
ISSN: 2581-8333|**Volume 7, Issue 7 July, 2025**

Margins of Power: Gender, Patriarchy, and Resistance in *The God of Small Things*

Aradhya Maheshwari[1]
UG student, Department of English, School of Liberal Education
Vivek Kumar[2]
Professor, Department of English, School of Liberal Education

Article Received: 04/06/2025
Article Accepted: 06/07/2025
Published Online: 06/07/2025
DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.18.07.118

Abstract: This paper examines how Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* critiques the pervasive effect of patriarchal control and gendered violence within post-colonial Indian society. Set in Ayemenem, Kerala, the novel unpacks the deeply installed compositions of caste and gender oppression, focusing on characters such as Ammu, Baby Kochamma, and Rahel. It explores how Roy's characters are not merely shaped by personal grief yet more by socially fabricated gender roles that restrict independence, tune female sexuality, and reproduce generational trauma.

Using feminist literary principle-distinctively Judith Butler's belief of gender performativity and Simone de Beauvoir's opinion of woman as "the Other"-as frames of reference, this paper analyzes how Roy reveals and subverts patriarchal norms. It investigates the ways in which female characters are punished for transgressing social boundaries, and how silence, shame, and marginalization event as tools of control. Through a close understanding of the text, this study reveals Roy's narrative as a form of resistance that gives voice to the silenced and challenges the invisibility imposed on women. It positions *The God of Small Things* not just as a story of love and loss, however as a powerful feminist critique of how patriarchy defines, distorts, and disciplines womanhood.

Keywords: Arundhati Roy; *The God of Small Things*; Gender Roles; Patriarchy; Feminist Theory; Gender Performativity; Narrative Structure; Women's Resistance; Caste and Gender Intersectionality

Introduction:

In the challenging tapestry of post-colonial Indian literature, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) stands as a haunting survey of how gender, caste, and memory shape individual and collective understanding. Set in Ayemenem, Kerala, the novel narrates the individual lives of twins Estha and Rahel, and more crucially for this study, their mother Ammu-a woman whose rebellion conflict patriarchal and caste norms turns into the focal point of both social ostracization and literary inquiry. Roy's narrative intricately exposes the

insidious forms of control, silencing, and punishment that women continue in a society that upholds both colonial residues and classical patriarchy. While much has been written about the novel's lyrical language and political undertones, its deeply feminist critique of gender roles is often absorbed into wide-ranging conversations on caste and trauma. This paper brings gender to the foreground by observing how Roy portrays the female physique, voice, and purpose as sites of both prohibition and rebellion. Characters such as Ammu, Baby Kochamma, and Rahel are shown not merely as individuals, regardlessly as embodiments of gendered expectations imposed by family, religion, and community. Roy constructs a narrative where women's choices-significantly those surrounding love and sexuality-are relentlessly scrutinized, punished, or scratched out. Drawing upon Judith Butler's principle of gender performativity and Simone de Beauvoir's proposition that "one is not born, though rather develops into, a woman," the paper investigates how Roy critiques gender as a socially made and harshly enforced identity (Butler 33; Beauvoir 283). The novel questions what happens when women step outside these limits-when Ammu, for instance, loves "outside the bounds of caste," or when Rahel returns to Ayemenem unmarried and rootless. In such transgressions, Roy captures not only personal pain even so a collective indictment of how patriarchal societies sustain control through shame, silence, and memory.

At the same time, Roy's feminist resistance is not didactic. Instead, it is implanted in the narrative's structure, poetic language, and specific temporality. Her storytelling does not simply describe oppression-it performs it, looping through trauma and silence in a way that mirrors how gendered violence lingers, repeats, and reconfigures identity. By placing women at the centre of caste, class, and familial politics, *The God of Small Things* transforms into a subtle even so powerful critique of the machinery of patriarchy. This paper argues that Roy's novel challenges normative gender ideologies by portraying how female characters are shaped and broken by societal hindrances. It explores how Roy employs silence, fragmentation, and non-linear narration to resounding the lived realities of women in patriarchal cultures. In doing so, it contributes to feminist literary criticism by offering a concentrated, notion-informed understanding of gender roles and female resistance in one of the most massive postcolonial novels of our moment. The critical exchange surrounding *The God of Small Things* has largely concentrated on its postcolonial framework, narrative structure, and themes of caste and trauma. Except, its treatment of gender remains a noteworthy however underexplored aspect of the novel's social critique. Scholars and theorists have noticed the importance of Roy's female characters, nevertheless few studies have completely examined how Roy's narrative shape and character arcs systematically disclose and subvert patriarchal norms.

Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity, described in Gender Trouble, serves as a foundational lens for this study. Butler argues that gender is not an innate identity but a set of repeated social performances, enforced through prohibition and punishment (33). This framework proves primary in grasp how Ammu's actions-specifically her romantic and sexual relationship with Velutha-are criticized because they violate gendered expectations of purity, motherhood, and obedience. Her punishment is not simply social rejection but

symbolicly wiping out: she is refused of a respected burial by the church and cast out by her family. Simone de Beauvoir's claim in The Second Sex that "one is not born, however rather transforms into, a woman" over and above that resonates in the text, predominantly in the lives of Ammu and Rahel (283). Both characters resist and are shaped by the patriarchal conditioning of womanhood, revealing the performative and precarious nature of gender roles.

M.Sindhuja's piece "Gender Discrimination in *The God of Small Things*" directly engages with this theme, identifying how the novel exposes a society that treats women as disposable once they deviate from prescribed roles. She notes that women who announce their independence-Ammu by divorcing her husband and Rahel by returning unaccompanied-are denied dignity and voice (Sindhuja 91). This is reliable with Spivak's concept in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" which argues that patriarchal and colonial systems scrub the voices of women, mainly those on the margins (Spivak 104). In Roy's narrative, women speak not through direct resistance but through silence, deportation, and fragmentation. Cécile Oumhani's understandings into Roy's narrative style are again related. However, her work primarily engages with trauma, she suggests that Roy's fragmentation of time and poetic diction mirrors the fragmented identities of her characters (Oumhani 127). This applies strongly to Rahel, who returns to Ayemenem disconnected from both memory and identity, showing what Laurie Vickroy refers to as a "survivor's affective detachment" in *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (Vickroy 11). Although Vickroy is a trauma theorist, her dissection of narrative form as a reflection of interior states offers profitable realization into how Roy depicts Rahel's quiet resistance and expressive numbness. Saman A. Dizayi in addition contributes to this conversation in their inspection of gender marginalization in post-colonial setting. They argue that Roy "gives a voice to the silenced" through pleasing frameworks that blend personal pain with cultural critique (Dizayi 45). Ammu's story, in this light, turns into a feminist testimony written not through confidence however through decay, denial, and final disappearance. The intersection of caste and gender is chiefly accentuated in Velutha and Ammu's doomed relationship, which Dizayi interprets as an behave of social and political rebellion met with vicious containment (46).

Collaboratively, these scholars highlight how Roy's novel disrupts ancient portrayals of femininity and motherhood. Baby Kochamma, for instance, internalizes patriarchal norms so altogether that she changes into a vehicle of punishment, not liberation. Her harshness and resentment toward Ammu reflect what Simone de Beauvoir critiques as the "woman's complicity in her own oppression" (de Beauvoir 289). Miriam Nandi's essay further adds to this picture by examining Rahel's strongly muted feedback to maternal loss and patriarchal judgment, suggesting that Roy's younger female characters inherit gendered trauma rather than overcome it (Nandi 34). Despite these beneficial wisdom, existing literature often isolates gender from Roy's formal choices or from wider critiques of caste and colonial legacy. This paper aims to fill that gap by synthesizing feminist belief with a close reading of narrative strategy and emotive stir. It seeks to demonstrate that gender oppression in *The*

God of Small Things is not only thematic on the other hand structural, encoded in both how the story is told and who gets to tell it.

This exploration adopts a qualitative literary approach grounded in close textual analysis and encouraged by feminist and post-colonial theoretical systems. The plan is to explore how Arundhati Roy critiques patriarchal systems and gendered oppression in *The God of Small Things* through both narrative content and stylistic form. Rather than treating the novel solely as a story about individuals, this study reads it as a wider cultural document reflecting the systemic limitation of female objective, freedom, and identity within a post-colonial Indian society.

The primary process is close reading, which involves an accurate examination of language, imagery, character progress, and narrative outline. Distinct attention is given to the characterization of Ammu, Rahel, and Baby Kochamma, and how their lives are constrained by gendered expectations. Instances of silence, punishment, and marginalization are scrutinized not only as plot events however as indicators of deeper societal mechanisms. Roy's use of fragmentation, repetition, and poetic diction is moreover examined for its role in representing psychological repression and structural subjugation. This evaluation is informed by the theoretical approaches of Judith Butler, Simone de Beauvoir, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Butler's assumption of gender performativity is used to interrogate how Roy's characters perform, resist, or internalize gender norms. De Beauvoir's critique of women's "second sex" status is useful for grasp how female characters are socially diminished when they deviate from ancient roles. Spivak's question-"Can the subaltern speak?"-frames the investigation of how marginalized women in the novel are denied voice, department, and narrative control.

In inclusion to primary evaluation of the text, this study incorporates peer-reviewed secondary scholarship to position the chat within the open field of literary criticism. Articles by M. Sindhuja, Cécile Oumhani, Saman A. Dizayi, and others provide a critical foundation, while moreover revealing gaps in existing investigation-notably concerning the interplay between gender and narrative form. By relating close studying with theoretical interpretation, this technique defends a nuanced grasp of how *The God of Small Things* portrays gender as a lived, adjusted, and often punished reality. It as well emphasizes how literary form can itself be a mode of critique, resistance, and feminist conveyance. At the heart of Roy's gender critique is Ammu-a woman who embodies both resistance and punishment. Her selection to leave an demeaning marriage and return to her parental home already positions her as socially deviant in the eyes of her community. As a divorced woman, Ammu transforms into doubly marginal: first, by her gender, and second, by her refusal to conform to prescribed norms of fortitude and silence. Her subsequent romantic and sexual relationship with Velutha, a Dalit man, marks the ultimate behave of transgression-not just across caste lines on the other hand across the limits of sufficient womanhood.

Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity explains this transgression well.

According to Butler, gender is a repeated performance shaped by societal norms and disciplinary strengths (Butler 33). Ammu's refusal to perform the foreseen role of a submissive, silent woman-exceptionally through her sexual firm-is met with quick societal condemnation. Her father, Pappachi, never speaks to her again after her divorce. The family after a while casts her out, and the church refuses her burial. Her "crime" is not one of immorality but of stepping outside the tightly policed performance of femininity. Simone de Beauvoir's inspiration of woman as "the Different" is further important. Ammu is not granted the self-sufficiency to define her own life; rather, she is stated by others-by caste, by gender, by her role as a mother, and by her romantic decisions. Her punishment is disproportionate and ultimate: she is scratched out not only from the family's history yet from its rituals of death and mourning. As Roy writes, "Ammu died in a lodge in Alleppey... She was cremated. Alone." (Roy 161). Her death transforms a symbolic culmination of gendered punishment-banishment without redemption.

While Ammu represents open resistance, Baby Kochamma illustrates further affectionate of female tragedy-the woman who internalizes patriarchal foundations and becomes their enforcer. In her youth, Baby Kochamma experiences her own romantic disappointment when Father Mulligan, a celibate priest, does not reciprocate her affections. Instead of transforming that grief into feeling, she reconfigures it into acrimony and control. Baby Kochamma's treatment of Ammu and the twins reveals how patriarchal societies reproduce themselves not only through men yet through women who have come to have faith in its norms. She manipulates the police, falsely accuses Velutha, and aligns with colonial and casteist right. Her policing of Ammu's health and Rahel's freedom shows that the female gaze, when conditioned by patriarchal ethics, can become just as disciplining as the male one. De Beauvoir's warning that women may "compromise with patriarchy to get what little qualification they can" (de Beauvoir 289) is represented in Baby Kochamma's steps. Her character complicates the feminist interaction of the novel. She is not a painless villain regardlessly a product of repressed dream, unfulfilled desire, and social shame. Her complicity in Velutha's death and Ammu's ostracization shows how gender oppression is reproduced not just by men in force although by women who have been denied branch and redirected their trauma into control.

Rahel's trajectory reveals a quieter form of rebellion. Her affectionate detachment and lack of conventional intent are not shown as dysfunction still as refusal. Rahel resists the roles hoped-for of her-wife, daughter, sister-by drifting. She "drifted into marriage like a passenger drifts toward an unoccupied chair in an runway hub lounge" (Roy 19). This passivity, even so, is not nonattendance although a form of self-preservation. Like Estha, Rahel carries the weight of childhood trauma, even so unlike him, she expresses it through moving silence rather than muteness. Feminist trauma theorist Laurie Vickroy notes that trauma fiction often represents sensitive withdrawal as a survival strategy in the face of social effacement (Vickroy 11). Rahel's disengagement is not detachment yet a comment to the impossibility of declaration in a world that punishes female voice and company. Her return to Ayemenem, unmarried and childless, disrupts the expectations of feminine duty. She does

not reclaim a role; she remains unclear, unfulfilled, and unresolved-thus resisting closure. Cécile Oumhani reads Roy's narrative fragmentation as a mirror of Rahel's damaged selfhood (Oumhani 127). The past and present collapse into every opposite, and Rahel's emotions are conveyed not through direct description however through symbols, memories, and small acts of care-specifically toward Estha. Their final reunion, often misunderstood as incestuous, is less about eroticism and more about sensitive reclamation. It represents the only time in the novel when a female character acts without shame or concern, achieving toward connection rather than repression.

The romantic and sexual relationship between Ammu and Velutha functions as the novel's central rebellion contrary caste and gender regulation. Their love is portrayed as natural, kind, and deeply human-yet it is this exceptionally humanity that society punishes. Ammu, as an upper-caste woman, is assumed to maintain purity and distance from those deemed "untouchable." Velutha, as a Dalit man, is not regular granted the valid to plan an upper-caste woman, let alone be loved by one. Gayatri Spivak's declaration that the subaltern cannot speak turns into tragically literal in Velutha's case. He is overpowered to death not for an literal crime yet for desiring outside the sanctioned norms of caste and gender (Spivak 104). For Ammu, the consequences are fairly fatal-social cancellation, maternal separation, and death in removal. Their love is not only prohibited; it is unspeakable. Saman A. Dizayi interprets their relationship as an perform of rebellion that momentarily destabilizes societal order formerly being fiercely silenced (Dizayi 46). The intersectionality of their transgressions-gender, caste, class-elevates the narrative's critique. Ammu's punishment is not solely because she is a woman, though because she is a woman who dared to love someone the steps deemed unlovable. Roy's narrative hence reveals how systems of caste and gender co-tradition to erase love, voice, and freedom. The punishment of Ammu and Velutha is not only societal but narrative: their story ends in silence, dismemberment, and fragmentation. It is a love story told not in full, however in haunting echoes.

Conclusion

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is not only a narrative about familial dysfunction or political corruption; it is a powerful feminist critique of how patriarchal and caste-rooted ideologies operate through silence, shame, and symbolic violence. The novel's depiction of gender is not constrained to one-dimensional portrayals of victimhood or resistance. Instead, Roy renders gender as a lived practice-performed, policed, internalized, and at times, subversively rejected. Through the lives of Ammu, Baby Kochamma, Rahel, and Velutha, Roy shows how patriarchy functions as a approach that does not simply marginalize women still co-opts them into its own reproduction.

Ammu's rebellion through love and sexuality is met with complete social annulment, symbolizing how female organization is not only repressed though punished. Baby Kochamma's life reveals the tragedy of internalized patriarchy, where feminine mastery is engaged through cruelty when access to dignity is denied. Rahel's detachment reflects a quieter resistance-her refusal to perform femininity according to cultural expectations changes into an act of survival, regular if it is devoid of conventional authorization. And

through Velutha's death, the novel lays bare how gender oppression intersects with caste to heavily control the physical state and voice of the subaltern. Roy's stylistic choices-nonlinear itineraries, poetic diction, and sectional narration-are not stylish flourishes however structural embodiments of how gendered trauma manifests in language and memory. Her characters do not heal, and they do not overcome. Instead, they persist in a state of liminality, suspended relative to memory and silence, action and destruction. This is where Roy's feminist intervention lies-not in offering resolution, though in insisting on complexity. She creates a literary space in which women are not reduced to tropes or symbols, yet are revealed in complete their contradictions: perishable and defiant, shattered and undaunted. By relating feminist concept with literary investigation, this paper has shown that *The God of Small Things* is not merely a story of forbidden love or familial collapse, yet a profound indictment of how gender is socially manufactured, morally enforced, and politically punished. Roy's narrative becomes a site of feminist resistance-where the "small things" of touch, memory, and disobedience turn into acts of survival against the crushing machinery of patriarchal prospect.

References:

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, Vintage Books, 2011.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.

Dizayi, Saman A. "Gender and Marginalization in Postcolonial Literature: A Study of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*." *International Journal of English and Literature*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2015, pp. 43–49.

Nandi, Miriam. "Longing for the Lost (M)Other: Postcolonial Ambivalences in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*." *Journal of West Indian Literature*, vol. 15, no. 1/2, 2006, pp. 28–44.

Oumhani, Cécile. "Dismembered Memory and Multivoiced Recollection in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*." *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2011, pp. 125–33.

Roy, Arundhati. *The God of Small Things*. 20th anniversary ed., Penguin Books, 2017.

Sindhuja, M. "Gender Discrimination in the Novel *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy." *International Journal of English and Literature*, vol. 8, no. 7, 2017, pp. 87–92.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, Columbia University Press, 1994, pp. 66–111.

Vickroy, Laurie. *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*. University of Virginia Press, 2002.