

Women and Children: Oppression in The God of Small Things

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ABSTRACT

"The God of Small Things" is a poignant exploration of love, loss, social injustices, and the repercussions of breaking societal norms. The novel's intricate narrative and vivid character portrayals have earned it critical acclaim and recognition as one of the most significant works of contemporary Indian literature. Throughout the novel, "The God of Small Things" examines the complexities of family dynamics, societal norms, caste discrimination, and the lasting impact of tragic events on individuals' lives. Arundhati Roy's evocative writing style and non-linear narrative structure add depth to the novel, making it a compelling exploration of the human experience.

"The God of Small Things" by Arundhati Roy addresses a wide range of complex social issues that were prevalent in Kerala, India, during the 1960s. The novel skillfully weaves these issues into the narrative, providing a profound commentary on various aspects of society. Through its intricate narrative and nuanced character portrayals, "The God of Small Things" serves as a powerful exploration of these complex social issues. Arundhati Roy's masterful storytelling brings these themes to life, shedding light on the deep-rooted problems that have shaped Indian society and continue to resonate globally.

Keywords: *The God of Small Things; Arundhati Roy; contemporary Indian literature; caste discrimination; human emotions; societal complexities*

INTRODUCTION

"The God of Small Things" (1997) is Arundhati Roy's debut novel and is known for its intricate exploration of various themes that shape the lives of its characters. The novel beautifully weaves together a poignant narrative, delving into the lives of the fraternal twins, Estha and Rahel, and the repercussions of the events they experienced during their childhood. Arundhati Roy's writing in "The God of Small Things" is celebrated for its lyrical prose, vivid imagery, and profound exploration of human emotions and societal complexities. The novel has earned critical acclaim, winning the Booker Prize in 1997 and cementing Roy's position as a significant voice in contemporary Indian literature. Its portrayal of the intricacies of human relationships, coupled with its exploration of larger social issues, makes it a compelling and thought-provoking read. The title of the novel itself suggests the significance of small incidents and seemingly minor actions in shaping people's lives. The butterfly effect of these small things ripples through the characters' lives, impacting their present and future. The novel exposes the caste discrimination prevalent in Indian society during the 1960s. The rigid social hierarchies and class relations play a significant role in the characters' lives, affecting their choices and opportunities. The story portrays instances of betrayal and misogyny, particularly in the treatment of women. Female characters, like Ammu and Margaret Kochamma, face oppressive treatment and judgment for their actions, while male characters often wield power and control.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Nanda, S. (2012) In the novel, traditional gender roles and social norms restrict women's agency and freedom. Women are expected to conform to certain expectations and follow the prescribed roles of wives, daughters, and

mothers. Ammu, the twins' mother, experiences this oppression as she is trapped in a loveless and abusive marriage.

Ghosh, Tapan Kumar (1999) Ammu's relationship with Velutha, an Untouchable and a family servant, is deemed forbidden due to the rigid caste system. Their love defies societal norms and results in severe consequences for both of them.

Prakash, Nirmala C (1999) The novel explores the harsh reality of untouchability and the discrimination faced by the Untouchable communities in India. Velutha, as an Untouchable, is treated as a lesser human being and is subjected to violence and exploitation.

Verma, Pratibha(1999) Estha and Rahel, the young twins, are also victims of oppression. They experience the loss of innocence due to the traumatic events they witness, including the death of their cousin, Sophie Mol, and the separation from their mother.

Dhawan, R. K. (1999) The tragic outcome of Ammu and Velutha's love story illustrates the suffocating nature of societal norms and the profound impact of oppression on individuals who dare to challenge these norms.

STORY SET: THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

"The God of Small Things" by Arundhati Roy is a complex and multi-layered novel that weaves together various narrative threads, spanning different time periods. The story is set in the Indian state of Kerala and follows the lives of fraternal twins, Estha and Rahel, as they navigate a deeply stratified and oppressive society. The novel's non-linear narrative jumps between past and present, revealing the events that shaped the twins' lives and the tragic incident that haunts their adulthood.

- **Setting and Introduction:** The novel is set in Ayemenem, a small town in Kerala, India. The story begins in 1969 when Rahel, one of the twins, returns to Ayemenem after being away for many years. The narrative switches between the present time and the past to unveil the events that led to the current state of the characters.
- **Family Background:** The story revolves around the Ipe family, particularly the fraternal twins, Estha and Rahel. Their mother, Ammu, is divorced and lives with her mother, Mammachi, and their extended family in the ancestral home.
- **Introduction to the Family:** The novel begins with an introduction to the main characters and their family. Estha and Rahel are seven-year-old twins, and their family is from the influential and wealthy Ipe family in Ayemenem, Kerala. Their mother, Ammu, is a divorced woman who returned to live with her parents, Mammachi and Pappachi, along with her children.
- **Childhood Memories:** The story delves into the twins' childhood memories, where they reminisce about their beloved cousin, Sophie Mol. Sophie is the daughter of their English uncle, Chacko, and his ex-wife, Margaret Kochamma.
- **Social Tensions:** The novel delves into the social and political issues prevailing in Kerala during the 1960s, including the caste system, communism, and economic disparities. The tensions between the upper-caste Syrian Christian Ipe family and the lower-caste Paravan community, to which Velutha belongs, play a significant role in the story.
- **Sophie Mol's Arrival:** Sophie Mol comes to visit Kerala along with Margaret Kochamma and her new husband, Joe, an American. Sophie's arrival brings excitement to the family, and the twins are thrilled to be reunited with their cousin.
- **Forbidden Love:** As the story unfolds, it is revealed that Ammu falls in love with Velutha, a skilled and compassionate untouchable carpenter who works for the family. Their love defies societal norms and caste boundaries, leading to dire consequences.
- **Tragic Incident:** The narrative eventually reveals the tragic incident that occurred during Sophie Mol's visit. The twins, along with Sophie, sneak out to the river, and a heartbreaking event unfolds, leading to Sophie's death.

- **Fallout and Estrangement:** Following the incident, the family faces significant consequences. Velutha is unjustly accused of wrongdoing and faces brutal punishment. Ammu is ostracized and blamed for the tragedy, leading to her estrangement from her family.
- **Adult Lives:** The story then shifts to the twins' adult lives. Estha and Rahel have grown apart and lead separate lives. Estha is broken by the events of the past and becomes reclusive and emotionally scarred. Rahel, on the other hand, has lived abroad but returns to Ayemenem to see her family.
- **Reunion and Redemption:** Rahel's return to Ayemenem sparks a reunion with Estha, and their shared memories come to the surface. The novel explores their attempts to heal the wounds of the past and find redemption amidst the shadows of their childhood.
- **Flashbacks and Memories:** The novel employs flashbacks and memories to reveal the childhood experiences of Estha and Rahel. Their lives are deeply affected by their mother's struggles, the oppressive behavior of their grandfather, and the presence of their estranged father, Chacko.
- **Return of Sophie Mol:** Sophie Mol, the twins' cousin and the daughter of Chacko, returns from England to Ayemenem, along with her mother, Margaret Kochamma. Her arrival brings both joy and sorrow as old wounds resurface.
- **Climactic Events:** As the past and present converge, the story reaches its climactic events, shedding light on the reasons behind the estrangement of the twins and the tragedies that unfolded in their childhood.
- **Resolution:** The novel concludes with a sense of loss and reconciliation as the adult Estha and Rahel come to terms with their past and attempt to find closure.

FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON ARUNDHATI ROY

Arundhati Roy's work, including "The God of Small Things," has been analyzed and appreciated from various feminist perspectives. Her writings often explore and challenge gender roles, patriarchy, and the societal treatment of women, making her a prominent figure within feminist discourse. Feminist perspectives on Arundhati Roy highlight her contributions to the literary and social discourse on women's issues. Her writing serves as a lens through which to view and critique the complexities of gender dynamics and societal structures. Through her works and activism, Roy continues to inspire feminist discussions and contribute to the ongoing fight for gender equality and women's empowerment. Feminist perspectives on Arundhati Roy and her work:

1. **Portrayal of Women Characters:** Feminist critics have praised Roy's portrayal of female characters in her novels. She creates multidimensional and complex women who defy stereotypes and societal expectations. For example, Ammu in "The God of Small Things" is a strong-willed woman who seeks love and independence despite facing significant challenges.
2. **Intersectionality:** Roy's works often intersect with other aspects of identity, such as caste, class, and race. Feminist scholars appreciate how she addresses the intersections of oppression and discrimination faced by women who belong to marginalized communities.
3. **Critique of Patriarchy:** Through her writing, Roy offers a sharp critique of patriarchy and its harmful effects on both men and women. She challenges traditional gender roles and the power dynamics that perpetuate inequality.
4. **Sexual Liberation:** Roy's novels explore themes of sexual liberation and women's agency in their relationships and desires. The exploration of forbidden love and unconventional relationships in her work challenges the prevailing conservative attitudes towards women's sexuality.
5. **Breaking Social Norms:** Feminist perspectives on Roy's work often highlight her characters' defiance of social norms and the consequences they face for their actions. This portrayal reflects the struggles faced by women who resist oppressive societal expectations.
6. **Empowerment and Resistance:** Roy's narratives often feature women who engage in acts of empowerment and resistance against oppressive systems. These depictions inspire feminist readers and contribute to discussions on agency and autonomy.
7. **Women's Voices:** Roy amplifies women's voices in her writing, giving prominence to their stories and experiences. This focus on women's perspectives and narratives adds depth and authenticity to her work.

8. Solidarity and Activism: Beyond her literary contributions, Arundhati Roy is also known for her activism and advocacy for various social causes, including women's rights. Feminists appreciate her efforts to use her platform to speak out against injustices and inequality.

OPPRESSION OF WOMEN IN "THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS"

In "The God of Small Things" by Arundhati Roy, the theme of the oppression of women is a central and pervasive element of the narrative. The novel portrays the experiences of several female characters who grapple with societal norms, gender discrimination, and the consequences of challenging the established order. Some Notable Key ways in which the oppression of women is depicted in the novel:

- **Societal Expectations:** The novel highlights the restrictive societal expectations placed on women in Kerala, India, during the 1960s. Women are expected to adhere to traditional roles and behaviors, which often limit their agency and personal freedoms. Ammu, the mother of the twins Estha and Rahel, faces significant pressure to conform to societal norms, and her actions outside of these expectations lead to severe consequences.
- **Love and Relationships:** The novel explores how women's choices in love and relationships are heavily scrutinized and restricted. Ammu's relationship with Velutha, a lower-caste man, challenges the rigid caste system and societal norms. Her love for him is deemed unacceptable, leading to ostracization and condemnation from her family and community.
- **Caste Discrimination:** The novel shows how women from lower castes face multiple layers of oppression. Women like Velutha's sister, Ammu's daughter-in-law, and other laborers are subjected to discrimination not only based on their gender but also their caste, which further marginalizes them.
- **Marital Struggles:** The novel depicts the oppressive nature of marriage for women in the society it portrays. Mammachi, the twins' grandmother, experiences emotional abuse from her husband, Pappachi. Margaret Kochamma, the twins' grandaunt, is trapped in a loveless marriage with Chacko, Ammu's ex-husband.
- **Loss of Autonomy:** Female characters in the novel often struggle to assert their autonomy and make independent decisions. They are expected to follow the wishes and commands of male family members, leading to a lack of agency and control over their own lives.
- **Double Standards:** The novel exposes the double standards prevalent in the treatment of men and women. Men are given more freedom and leeway in their actions, while women are judged more harshly for the same behavior.
- **Repression and Silencing:** The female characters in the novel are often silenced and repressed, both socially and emotionally. They suffer in silence, unable to express their true desires and emotions openly due to fear of societal backlash.

COMPLEX SOCIAL ISSUES IN "THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS"

In "The God of Small Things" by Arundhati Roy, the novel addresses several complex social issues prevalent in Indian society, and among them are the themes of women and child abuse. Arundhati Roy's novel addresses these critical issues with great sensitivity and a poignant narrative. Through the story of Estha and Rahel, Roy highlights the broader societal problems that persist in India and many other parts of the world. The novel serves as a powerful commentary on the impact of abuse, discrimination, and societal norms on the lives of women and children. These themes are explored through the lens of the female characters in the book, shedding light on the harsh realities they face.

1. **Caste Discrimination:** One of the central themes in the novel is the deeply ingrained caste system in India. The story highlights the discrimination faced by lower-caste individuals like Velutha, who works for the Ipe family but is considered "untouchable" by the society. The novel exposes the harsh realities of the caste system and the dehumanizing treatment of lower-caste members.
2. **Gender Inequality:** The novel delves into the unequal treatment of women and the oppressive gender roles prevailing in the society. Female characters like Ammu and Margaret Kochamma face societal

pressure and restrictions, and their choices in love and relationships lead to severe consequences due to the double standards imposed on women.

3. Social Hierarchies: "The God of Small Things" portrays the stark differences in social standing between the upper-caste Syrian Christian Ipe family and the lower-caste Paravan community. These social hierarchies shape the characters' lives and interactions, leading to conflicts and tensions.
4. Post-Colonial Legacy: The novel explores the lingering effects of colonialism on Indian society and culture. The characters' identities and behaviors are influenced by the colonial past, as seen in their attitudes towards caste and race.
5. Political Activism and Communism: The novel touches upon the political activism and communist movement that was prevalent in Kerala during the time. The characters' involvement in political activities and their ideological beliefs contribute to the complexities of the story.
6. Family and Social Expectations: The novel examines the weight of family and societal expectations on individuals, especially women. Characters like Ammu and Rahel struggle to reconcile their desires with the expectations imposed upon them by their families and society.
7. Forbidden Love and Social Taboos: "The God of Small Things" explores the consequences of breaking social taboos and engaging in forbidden love. Ammu's relationship with Velutha challenges the societal norms and results in tragic outcomes.
8. Loss and Betrayal: The novel explores themes of loss, betrayal, and the lasting impact of traumatic events on individuals and families. The tragic events that unfold in the story reverberate through the characters' lives, shaping their relationships and emotional well-being.
9. Identity and Belonging: The characters in the novel grapple with questions of identity and belonging, particularly with regards to their mixed heritage and marginalized social status.

CONCLUSION

Arundhati Roy's novel weaves these themes together in a poignant narrative that exposes the various ways in which women and children are oppressed and mistreated in Indian society. Through her powerful storytelling, she sheds light on the urgent need for social change and the importance of challenging oppressive systems to create a more just and equitable society. Through its intricate narrative and nuanced character portrayals, "The God of Small Things" serves as a powerful exploration of these complex social issues. Arundhati Roy's masterful storytelling brings these themes to life, shedding light on the deep-rooted problems that have shaped Indian society and continue to resonate globally.

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