

Class, Caste and Patriarchy in Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things

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Abstract:

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) offers a powerful literary examination of the structures through which class, caste and patriarchy regulate intimate life in postcolonial India. Set largely in Ayemenem, Kerala, the novel places private desire, family conflict and childhood trauma within wider histories of caste exclusion, gender inequality, property, labour and social respectability. This article employs qualitative close reading and an intersectional socio-literary framework to examine how these structures operate not as separate forms of oppression but as mutually reinforcing systems. Particular attention is given to Ammu and Velutha, whose relationship violates the novel's "Love Laws" and exposes the unequal consequences of crossing caste and gender boundaries. The analysis also considers Chacko's male privilege, Mammachi's contradictory participation in patriarchal authority, Baby Kochamma's policing of respectability, and the institutional violence directed at Velutha. It argues that Roy connects domestic hierarchy with broader social and political power, showing how caste status, gender and economic location determine whose desire, labour and speech acquire legitimacy. The novel's fragmented narrative and recurring images of smallness further foreground lives marginalized by dominant histories. Ultimately, *The God of Small Things* represents resistance as both necessary and perilous, revealing the persistence of inherited hierarchies within modern social institutions.

Keywords: *The God of Small Things*; Arundhati Roy; caste; class; patriarchy; intersectionality; social hierarchy

1. Introduction

Arundhati Roy's debut novel *The God of Small Things*, first published in 1997, is simultaneously a family narrative, a story of forbidden love, a critique of social hierarchy, and an experiment in literary

form. Its central events unfold in Ayemenem in Kerala, but the novel repeatedly moves between the intimate world of the Ipe family and larger structures of history. The twins Estha and Rahel remember a childhood shaped by Sophie Mol's death, Ammu's social vulnerability, Velutha's brutalization, and the silences that follow. These events cannot be adequately understood as isolated personal tragedies. Roy persistently links them to rules governing caste, gender, sexuality, inheritance, labour, family honour and social status.

The novel's well-known idea of the "Love Laws" provides a useful conceptual centre for such a reading. These laws are not presented merely as rules concerning romance. They symbolize the social mechanisms that decide which relationships are legitimate, whose bodies can meet, whose desires can be expressed, and what punishment follows when boundaries are crossed. Ammu, a Syrian Christian woman separated from her husband, and Velutha, a gifted Paravan carpenter, become especially important because their relationship challenges both patriarchal control over female sexuality and caste restrictions on intimacy. Their transgression therefore brings caste and patriarchy into the same field of power.

Recent scholarship has explicitly emphasized the interdependence of caste and gender hierarchy in Roy's novel. Mandal (2023), for example, reads the Ammu-Velutha relationship through a female-Dalit alliance and stresses the importance of purity, marriage, inheritance and social law in sustaining caste and gender domination. Other criticism has examined Velutha as a labouring subaltern figure and has shown how Roy's domestic narrative is connected to class relations and institutional violence (Erwin, 2012). Such approaches suggest that class, caste and patriarchy should not be treated as three unrelated themes. They overlap in the distribution of authority, property, mobility, respectability and vulnerability.

The present article develops this intersectional approach through a close reading of the novel. It argues that Roy exposes hierarchy most forcefully when apparently private matters—marriage, sexuality, household authority, employment and family reputation—become mechanisms for reproducing wider structures of domination. At the same time, the novel complicates any simple division between oppressors and victims by showing how marginalized subjects may participate in enforcing other hierarchies. This complexity makes *The God of Small Things* particularly valuable for examining the everyday reproduction of social power.

2. Objectives of the Study

The study has four principal objectives: to examine the representation of class and economic privilege in *The God of Small Things*; to analyse the operation of caste hierarchy through the characterization of Velutha and the social response to his relationship with Ammu; to investigate patriarchal control over women's sexuality, property, mobility and respectability; and to interpret the interaction of class, caste and patriarchy as an interconnected structure of power rather than as isolated social problems.

3. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This research is qualitative and interpretative. The primary text is Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Close textual reading is combined with contextual literary analysis, with particular attention

to characterization, family relations, labour, social status, sexuality, institutional authority and narrative form. Secondary scholarship on caste, gender, class and postcolonial representation is used to situate the interpretation within established critical debates.

The article uses intersectionality as a methodological orientation rather than reducing characters to a single identity. Intersectional analysis asks how forms of power operate simultaneously and produce different consequences according to a subject's location within multiple hierarchies. In the Indian context, this requires particular attention to the historical interaction of caste and patriarchy. Chakravarti's formulation of Brahmanical patriarchy is important because it highlights the connection between caste reproduction and the regulation of women's sexuality. Dalit feminist scholarship has likewise challenged analyses that treat gender as separable from caste and social location (Guru, 1995). These perspectives help illuminate Roy's representation of Ammu and Velutha without assuming that their vulnerabilities are identical.

Class is used here in a broad socio-economic sense involving property, labour, education, occupational power and access to institutional resources. The novel's class relations cannot be detached from caste because Velutha's labour is valued while his social equality is denied. Nor can class be detached from patriarchy, because men and women within the same family do not possess equal authority over property, sexuality or life choices. The framework therefore examines the novel's hierarchies relationally.

4. Class and the Unequal Distribution of Social Power

Class difference in *The God of Small Things* is embedded in the everyday organization of Ayemenem. The Ipe family possesses property, education, cultural capital and the Paradise Pickles and Preserves business. Their social standing gives them a degree of authority over workers and over the interpretation of events. Yet Roy refuses to portray class as a purely economic division. Economic privilege works through family name, education, language, caste location and access to institutions. The factory becomes an especially significant space because it brings together ownership and labour while preserving the social distance between them.

Chacko's position illustrates the gendered and class-based nature of privilege. Educated at Oxford and treated as the legitimate male heir, he enjoys a degree of freedom unavailable to Ammu. His sexual relationships with women workers are tolerated within the family in a way that Ammu's sexuality is not. The contrast is crucial: patriarchal privilege enables the propertied man to cross certain boundaries without losing his place in the family, whereas the divorced woman's relationship becomes a threat to family honour and social order. Thus class privilege is not distributed evenly even among members of the same household.

Velutha's position exposes another contradiction. He is technically skilled and indispensable to the functioning of the factory and household, yet his ability does not erase the stigma attached to his caste location. His labour can enter privileged spaces more easily than his person can enter relationships of equality. Erwin (2012) observes that Velutha enters the novel as a labouring figure and becomes central to the domestic narrative; this movement makes visible the tension between

the economic need for marginalized labour and the social refusal of equality. Roy thereby reveals that economic modernization does not automatically dismantle inherited social hierarchy.

The novel also scrutinizes left politics and class rhetoric. Comrade Pillai's relationship to Velutha demonstrates the limits of a political language that foregrounds workers while failing to confront caste consistently. Roy's representation is satirical and critical: solidarity can be subordinated to organizational interest and social prejudice. The novel therefore asks whether class politics can be emancipatory when caste remains embedded in everyday relations. Critical scholarship has noted that the novel generated controversy partly because of its representation of communist politics and caste oppression. The point within the narrative is not that economic class is irrelevant, but that class analysis becomes incomplete when caste and gender are ignored.

5. Caste: Velutha and the Persistence of Untouchability

Caste is one of the novel's most powerful organizing structures. Velutha's identity as a Paravan places him within a history of untouchability whose force persists despite formal social change. Roy repeatedly contrasts his intelligence, craftsmanship and emotional sensitivity with the degrading status imposed upon him. This contrast undermines any attempt to naturalize caste hierarchy: the inequality surrounding Velutha is produced socially, not justified by individual capacity.

The history of Velutha's family also demonstrates the endurance of caste memory. Conversion, education and occupational skill do not simply dissolve inherited stigma. The older generation carries memories of restrictions imposed upon Paravans, while the present retains subtler but still violent forms of boundary enforcement. The novel therefore presents caste as adaptive: its practices may change, but its logic continues to regulate proximity, touch, labour and sexuality.

Velutha's relationship with Ammu becomes intolerable to the dominant order because it converts proximity into intimacy and labouring presence into reciprocal desire. The relationship challenges the assumption that a lower-caste man may serve an upper-status household but cannot claim emotional or sexual equality with a woman associated with that household. Mandal (2023) interprets this relationship as a challenge to linked caste and gender hierarchies, emphasizing the role of purity and social law in both systems. The scandal is consequently not simply that Ammu has a lover; it is that caste hierarchy and patriarchal control are violated simultaneously.

The punishment directed at Velutha reveals the institutional dimension of caste power. Family accusation becomes connected to police authority, and prejudice acquires the force of official violence. Roy's representation shows how a socially vulnerable person can be made disposable when dominant narratives define him as dangerous. The police station and the violent treatment of Velutha transform social prejudice into bodily coercion. In this sense, caste is not merely an attitude held by individuals; it is reproduced through networks of family authority, public respectability and institutional power.

6. Patriarchy and the Regulation of Women

Patriarchy in the novel operates through differential expectations imposed upon women and men. Ammu's life demonstrates the vulnerability of a woman whose social identity is shaped by daughterhood, marriage, divorce and motherhood. Her decision to leave an abusive marriage does

not result in independent social standing. Instead, she returns to her natal family without the authority enjoyed by Chacko. Her position reveals a structural contradiction: the family may provide shelter, yet it also polices her sexuality and limits her claim to autonomy.

The contrast between Ammu and Chacko is among Roy's clearest critiques of gendered double standards. Chacko's sexual conduct is accommodated, rationalized or overlooked, whereas Ammu's desire is treated as a violation demanding severe control. Patriarchy therefore does not merely prohibit sexuality; it distributes sexual freedom unequally. Male desire can coexist with social respectability, while female desire—especially when it crosses caste boundaries—can be interpreted as a threat to the entire family order.

Mammachi's position complicates the picture. She experiences violence and humiliation within marriage, yet she also participates in the policing of Ammu and Velutha. Roy thereby shows that patriarchy is not sustained only by individual men. Women may internalize, administer or defend patriarchal norms when their own status is tied to family hierarchy, caste respectability and inherited notions of propriety. This does not erase Mammachi's victimization; rather, it illustrates how systems of power reproduce themselves through subjects occupying contradictory positions.

Baby Kochamma similarly acts as an agent of social discipline. Her manipulation of events is personal, but its effectiveness depends upon existing structures of authority. She can mobilize fear of scandal, caste prejudice and institutional power because these already possess social legitimacy. Through her, the novel demonstrates that patriarchal respectability functions as a collective regulatory mechanism rather than merely a private male command.

7. Ammu and Velutha: Intersection of Caste, Class and Patriarchy

The relationship between Ammu and Velutha is the point at which the article's three categories most visibly converge. Ammu is disadvantaged by gender and marital status but retains caste and familial privilege relative to Velutha. Velutha is a man, yet caste and class place him in a radically vulnerable position. Their relationship does not erase these differences; instead, it reveals how social hierarchies assign different risks to the same act of intimacy.

The lovers' meetings constitute a temporary space in which socially prescribed identities are suspended. Literary criticism has observed that their union crosses boundaries of caste and class and can be read as a challenge to preset social divisions (Kunhi & Kunhi, 2017). Yet the novel does not romanticize transgression as automatically liberating. The surrounding structures remain powerful, and the consequences are devastating. Resistance is possible at the level of desire, but desire alone cannot neutralize institutionalized hierarchy.

This asymmetry is central to an intersectional reading. Ammu suffers confinement, social rejection and eventual isolation; Velutha is subjected to fatal state violence. Their punishments differ because their locations within caste, class and gender hierarchies differ. The novel therefore warns against treating oppression as a single, uniform condition. Social systems interact, producing distinct forms and intensities of vulnerability.

At the same time, the relationship has symbolic force because it rejects the idea that caste and gender boundaries possess moral legitimacy. Roy places reciprocal human intimacy against inherited

social prohibition. The ethical contrast is striking: the private relationship is represented through tenderness and recognition, while the social institutions defending “order” produce deception, humiliation and violence. The novel thereby reverses conventional notions of purity and transgression.

8. The “Love Laws” as a Social Grammar of Hierarchy

The “Love Laws” condense the novel’s critique into a memorable metaphor. They represent rules that determine not only who may love whom but also whose relationships are socially intelligible and whose are punished. Read broadly, these laws regulate caste endogamy, gender behaviour, family honour and the distribution of social legitimacy. They transform private affection into a political issue because intimate choices can reproduce or challenge social boundaries.

The power of the metaphor lies in its apparent simplicity. Social hierarchy survives not only through formal legislation but also through habits, expectations, shame, family pressure and institutional assumptions. The “Love Laws” therefore describe a social grammar: people learn what relationships are permissible long before explicit punishment becomes necessary. When Ammu and Velutha reject that grammar, the violence that follows exposes the coercion concealed within apparently ordinary norms.

A broader body of scholarship on romantic resistance in South Asian fiction has noted that intimate relationships may challenge endogamous codes maintaining caste and class distance. Roy’s novel gives this challenge a tragic form. Love becomes politically disruptive because it refuses to recognize the social distance upon which hierarchy depends. The personal is thus inseparable from the structural.

9. Family, Property and Respectability

The Ayemenem household functions as a miniature social order. Property, inheritance, gender roles, caste distinctions and reputation intersect within the family. The household is not simply a refuge from public politics; it is one of the principal places where hierarchy is learned and enforced. Roy’s depiction of family life therefore destabilizes the conventional separation between private and public power.

Ammu’s precarious position in the household is tied to both gender and property. Her lack of secure authority makes her dependent on a family that simultaneously judges her. Chacko’s status, by contrast, is reinforced by male entitlement and his identification with ownership. Such distinctions demonstrate that economic resources acquire social meaning through gendered rules of belonging. Patriarchy determines not merely interpersonal authority but also who can imagine the family property as legitimately theirs.

Respectability provides the ideological language through which these inequalities are defended. The family’s anxiety about Ammu and Velutha is inseparable from fear of social disgrace. Yet Roy exposes respectability as selective: behaviour tolerated in privileged men becomes scandalous in women or lower-caste subjects. Respectability thus functions less as a universal moral code than as a mechanism for protecting hierarchy.

10. Childhood, Silence and the Transmission of Hierarchy

Estha and Rahel provide another perspective on social power. As children, they experience adult institutions through fragments, commands, fear and misunderstood language. Their memories show how hierarchy enters the psychological world of children. They are not merely witnesses to the events surrounding Ammu and Velutha; they become entangled in the production of a false narrative under pressure from adults.

Roy's nonlinear narrative mirrors the persistence of trauma. The past is not finished; it repeatedly returns through words, images, sensory details and silences. The fragmented structure resists a neat chronological account and makes the reader reconstruct connections between private suffering and social power. In this way, form supports theme: the consequences of caste and patriarchy are shown not as isolated events but as enduring disturbances in memory and identity.

The treatment of Sophie Mol also introduces questions of colonial residue, race and cultural prestige. Hopkins (2011) argues that the novel's representation of Sophie Mol as a white child helps expose the inferior positioning of the Indian twins within discourses of whiteness and childhood. Although race is not the central focus of the present study, this dimension reinforces Roy's broader concern with hierarchies of value and the ways families internalize external standards of prestige.

11. Political Institutions and the Limits of Formal Modernity

The world of the novel contains factories, party politics, police institutions, education and modern consumer culture, yet these do not automatically eliminate caste or patriarchy. This is one of Roy's most significant interventions. Modernity can coexist with inherited hierarchy. A person may be educated, politically active or economically productive while still participating in caste prejudice or gender inequality.

The police violence against Velutha is particularly important because it reveals the gap between formal equality and lived vulnerability. Institutional authority does not appear as neutral when it accepts a socially powerful version of events and directs coercion against a marginalized subject. Likewise, political rhetoric concerning labour cannot substitute for serious engagement with caste. Roy's critique is therefore structural rather than merely moral: prejudice becomes especially dangerous when institutions translate it into legitimate action.

This critique also prevents an overly simple reading in which tradition alone is oppressive and modernity automatically liberates. Roy instead depicts social power as capable of inhabiting both old customs and modern organizations. The question is not whether institutions appear modern, but whether they transform the unequal relations embedded within everyday life.

12. Resistance and Its Limits

Resistance in *The God of Small Things* occurs through desire, refusal, memory, language and small acts of boundary crossing. Ammu's rejection of an abusive marriage, her insistence upon desire, Velutha's refusal to remain psychologically confined to a servile identity, and the twins' unconventional perception of the adult world all disturb established categories. Roy's attention to "small things" suggests that domination and resistance are both experienced through everyday gestures as well as major political events.

Yet the novel is deeply aware of the costs of resistance. Social structures possess unequal capacities for punishment. The tragic outcome of Ammu and Velutha's relationship demonstrates that transgression does not guarantee liberation. The novel's politics therefore lies partly in making visible the violence required to maintain supposedly natural boundaries. If hierarchy were truly natural, such extensive policing would not be necessary.

Mandal's (2023) reading of the female-Dalit alliance emphasizes refusal as a challenge to caste and patriarchal structures. Roy's novel supports the significance of refusal while also dramatizing its danger. The lovers' relationship briefly imagines a social relation based on mutual recognition rather than inherited rank, but the response to it reveals the enormous institutional weight behind hierarchy.

13. Major Findings and Discussion

The analysis yields several interconnected findings. First, class in the novel is not reducible to income; it includes ownership, education, occupational control, family status and institutional access. Second, caste persists within modern social and political environments and remains capable of defining labour, intimacy and bodily vulnerability. Third, patriarchy operates through unequal standards of sexuality, inheritance, mobility and respectability, producing a sharp contrast between the freedoms available to Chacko and Ammu. Fourth, caste, class and patriarchy reinforce one another most dramatically in the punishment of Ammu and Velutha.

A further finding concerns complicity. Roy does not present social systems as sustained by a single group of villains. Mammachi and Baby Kochamma demonstrate different ways in which women can participate in patriarchal and caste-based regulation, while political actors may reproduce caste hierarchy despite egalitarian rhetoric. This makes the novel's social criticism more complex: power survives because it is embedded in institutions, habits, family structures and notions of respectability.

Finally, the novel's form is integral to its politics. Fragmented chronology, child-centred perception, repetition and the focus on apparently minor details challenge official or authoritative versions of events. The narrative repeatedly returns attention to those whose experiences are minimized by dominant social narratives. Roy's literary technique therefore complements the novel's ethical concern with marginalized lives.

14. Conclusion

The God of Small Things presents class, caste and patriarchy as interdependent structures shaping the most intimate areas of human life. Through the Ipe family and, above all, through Ammu and Velutha, Roy demonstrates that hierarchy is reproduced through property, labour, marriage, sexuality, family honour, political calculation and institutional authority. The novel's critique is powerful precisely because these structures are not confined to abstract social categories; they determine who may belong, desire, speak, work, inherit and survive.

Velutha's skill cannot protect him from caste power, while Ammu's family background cannot free her from patriarchal control. Their relationship brings these inequalities together and exposes the coercive logic behind the "Love Laws." Chacko's comparative freedom, Mammachi's contradictory

position and Baby Kochamma's manipulation further demonstrate that privilege and vulnerability are distributed unevenly and may coexist within the same family.

An intersectional reading therefore offers a more adequate understanding of Roy's social vision than an analysis of caste, class or gender in isolation. The novel reveals how one hierarchy can reinforce another and how formal modernity may coexist with deeply rooted inequality. At the same time, Roy preserves the ethical significance of resistance. The intimacy between Ammu and Velutha, though violently punished, refuses the assumption that inherited social boundaries determine human worth. By centring such forbidden connections and their consequences, *The God of Small Things* remains an important literary meditation on the structures that regulate love, dignity and belonging.

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