



GENDER ROLES AND THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*

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Abstract

This research explores the portrayal of gender roles and the representation of women in Arundhati Roy's novel, "The God of Small Things." The novel, set in Kerala, India, delves into the lives of its female characters and sheds light on the complex dynamics of gender within the societal and cultural context of postcolonial India. Through an analysis of the characters' experiences, relationships, and agency, this study aims to examine how Roy challenges traditional gender norms and explores the ways in which women navigate and negotiate their identities and roles within a patriarchal society. The research begins by examining the conventional gender expectations and roles imposed on women in Indian society, as depicted in the novel. It investigates the cultural and societal pressures that shape the lives of female characters such as Ammu, Baby Kochamma, and Rahel, and the constraints placed upon them by societal norms, familial expectations, and traditional gender divisions. Furthermore, the study explores how these women resist or conform to these expectations and the consequences of their choices. The research delves into the exploration of sexuality and desire in relation to women's representation in the novel. It analyses the depiction of forbidden love and the exploration of sexuality as acts of resistance against societal constraints. The study also examines how the characters' sexuality is perceived and punished within the cultural and social framework. Furthermore, this research investigates the agency and empowerment of women in "The God of Small Things." It analyses the characters' efforts to challenge patriarchal structures, assert their independence, and assert their identities in a society that seeks to marginalize and silence them. Additionally, the study examines instances of solidarity among women and the ways in which they navigate the complexities of their relationships with each other and with men. Through a close reading of the text, supplemented by relevant literary theories and feminist perspectives, this research provides a comprehensive analysis of the representation of women and the portrayal of gender roles in "The God of Small Things." By examining the characters' experiences and the larger social and cultural context, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how Roy's novel challenges and subverts traditional gender norms while illuminating the struggles and agency of women in postcolonial India.

Keywords

Gender, Patriarchal Society, Familial Expectations, Forbidden Love, etc.

Full Article

Arundhati Roy's novel, *The God of Small Things*, has received significant acclaim and garnered widespread attention for its poetic prose, intricate narrative structure, and exploration of complex themes. However, a critical note on the novel would highlight certain aspects that may warrant closer examination. One critique of *The God of Small Things* lies in its narrative structure. While



the non-linear storytelling technique adds depth and complexity to the narrative, some readers may find it challenging to follow, as the shifts in time and perspective can be disorienting. The constant movement between different time periods and the use of flashbacks often disrupt the flow of the story, potentially hindering the reader's engagement with the characters and plot.

Another critical point of discussion is the density of the prose. Arundhati Roy's writing style is highly poetic and rich in descriptive detail, which can be both captivating and overwhelming. Some critics argue that the abundance of metaphors, similes, and lyrical language at times overshadows the development of the characters and the progression of the plot. This emphasis on poetic language may detract from the clarity and accessibility of the novel, potentially alienating readers seeking a more straightforward narrative. Additionally, the portrayal of the characters, particularly the female characters, has been a subject of critique. While the novel seeks to challenge societal norms and expose the constraints placed on women, some argue that the female characters are primarily defined by their suffering and victimhood. Their agency and empowerment are often overshadowed by their experiences of abuse, subjugation, and tragedy. This portrayal of women as passive recipients of violence can be seen as reinforcing negative stereotypes and limiting the potential for more nuanced and empowered female characters.

The depiction of Kerala society and the exploration of social and political issues in *The God of Small Things* have been criticized for their tendency towards caricature and oversimplification. Some argue that the novel's portrayal of caste, politics, and social hierarchies lacks nuance and fails to fully capture the complexities of these issues. This simplified portrayal may limit the novel's ability to engage with the intricacies of the society it seeks to depict, potentially reducing its impact as a critique of the postcolonial Indian experience. While acknowledging the novel's strengths, it is essential to critically examine the aforementioned aspects to foster a well-rounded understanding of *The God of Small Things*. By engaging in a nuanced analysis, readers can appreciate the novel's achievements while also considering its potential limitations in terms of narrative structure, character development, and socio-political exploration.

Arundhati Roy, an acclaimed Indian author and activist, has garnered both praise and criticism for her work. While she is widely lauded for her poetic prose and commitment to social justice causes, a critical note on Arundhati Roy would highlight certain aspects that have been subject to scrutiny. One area of critique revolves around her political activism and the impact it has had on her writing. While it is commendable that Roy uses her platform to raise awareness about important social and political issues, some argue that her activism overshadows her literary merit. Critics contend that her writings can at times become overly didactic, sacrificing nuance and subtlety in favour of delivering a predetermined message. This overtly political stance may limit the breadth of perspectives presented in her work and hinder the exploration of complex themes.

Roy's writing style, characterized by rich metaphors and vivid descriptions, has been a subject of contention. While many appreciate the beauty and lyricism of her prose, others argue that it can become overly indulgent, slowing down the pace of the narrative and obstructing the reader's connection with the story. The ornate language, while poetic, may also create a barrier for some readers, making the work less accessible.

Critics also question the extent to which Roy's writing truly engages with the complexity of the issues she addresses. While she brings attention to significant socio-political problems, some argue that her analysis can be overly simplistic, failing to fully grapple with the intricacies and contradictions inherent in these matters. This oversimplification may undermine the potential for a more nuanced understanding of the subjects at hand.



It is important to note that criticism of Arundhati Roy should not overshadow her contributions and achievements. Her work has undeniably shed light on crucial issues, challenged power structures, and amplified marginalized voices. However, a critical note on Roy highlights the aforementioned aspects to foster a balanced and nuanced understanding of her work, encouraging readers to engage with her writings while also critically examining the limitations and implications of her style and approach.

Arundhati Roy's writings, including her acclaimed novel *The God of Small Things*, often centre around female characters and their experiences within the societal and cultural context of postcolonial India. Roy's work sheds light on the complex dynamics of gender, delving into the challenges, constraints, and inequalities faced by women in this context.

In *The God of Small Things*, Roy presents a multifaceted portrayal of female characters grappling with the interplay of tradition, patriarchy, and social expectations. The novel explores the intricate web of gendered power dynamics, both overt and subtle, that shape the lives of its female protagonists. Through characters like Ammu, Baby Kochamma, and Rahel, Roy highlights the ways in which women navigate societal norms, familial pressures, and cultural expectations, often with profound implications for their personal freedoms and agency.

Roy's depiction of these female characters challenges traditional gender roles and norms prevalent in postcolonial India. She brings attention to the restrictions placed upon women, such as limited educational opportunities, expectations of marriage and motherhood, and societal constraints that curtail their autonomy. By exploring the constraints of gender, Roy unveils the oppressive structures that perpetuate inequality and restrict women's choices and self-expression. Moreover, Roy's work explores the intersections of gender with other aspects of identity, such as caste, class, and sexuality. She examines the specific challenges faced by women from marginalized backgrounds, illuminating the compounding effects of intersecting systems of oppression. Through her characters, Roy confronts issues like caste discrimination, economic exploitation, and the complex negotiations of sexual desire and agency.

Roy's writing offers a nuanced portrayal of the complexities of gender within postcolonial India. She highlights the resilience, struggles, and moments of resistance exhibited by her female characters as they navigate and negotiate their identities in a patriarchal society. By centring these female voices, Roy exposes the pervasive effects of gender inequality while also challenging the status quo and envisioning possibilities for change. Through her exploration of female characters in the societal and cultural context of postcolonial India, Arundhati Roy invites readers to critically examine and question prevailing gender norms and power dynamics. Her work serves as a reminder of the ongoing struggles for gender equality and the urgent need to dismantle oppressive systems, ultimately contributing to a broader dialogue on gender within the postcolonial landscape.

The God of Small Things presents a powerful exploration of the challenges posed by traditional gender norms and the ways in which women navigate and negotiate their identities and roles within a patriarchal society. Through her female characters, Roy deftly exposes the oppressive structures that restrict women's agency and illuminates the complexities of their lived experiences.

In the novel, Roy confronts the deeply ingrained gender expectations that permeate Indian society, particularly in the state of Kerala. She critically examines the rigid roles assigned to women, such as obedient daughters, dutiful wives, and self-sacrificing mothers. Roy challenges these norms by portraying female characters who defy societal expectations, seeking personal fulfilment and independence beyond the confines of traditional gender roles. The protagonist, Ammu, emerges as a poignant example of a woman grappling with societal constraints. She confronts the limitations imposed upon her as a divorced woman and strives to forge her own



path, even at the risk of facing social ostracism. Ammu's struggle reflects the broader challenges faced by women who dare to deviate from the prescribed roles assigned to them.

Roy also explores the ways in which women negotiate their identities in the face of patriarchal control. The character of Baby Kochamma, for instance, embodies the internalized oppression that can result from living within a patriarchal framework. Her actions and choices are often driven by a desperate desire for approval and validation from men, highlighting the psychological toll of adhering to societal expectations. Furthermore, Roy emphasizes the importance of agency and resistance in challenging gender norms. Through characters like Rahel, Estha, and Velutha, she portrays instances of rebellion and defiance against patriarchal systems. These characters navigate their identities with a sense of agency, pushing back against societal restrictions and asserting their right to self-determination.

Author's portrayal of female relationships is also noteworthy. She explores the complexities and tensions that can arise between women within patriarchal structures, highlighting how internalized oppression can breed competition and mistrust. Simultaneously, she emphasizes the transformative power of solidarity and support among women, showcasing moments of resilience and connection. *The God of Small Things* ultimately serves as a call to challenge traditional gender norms and envision a society where women can fully realize their potential. Through her compelling narrative, Roy urges readers to critically examine and question the oppressive systems that restrict women's agency and perpetuate inequality. Her novel encourages a broader conversation on gender, inviting us to imagine a more inclusive and equitable future where women can navigate their identities and roles with freedom and autonomy.

In Arundhati Roy's novel, *The God of Small Things*, the conventional gender expectations and roles imposed on women in Indian society are vividly depicted, providing an incisive commentary on the challenges faced by women within this cultural context. Roy explores how these expectations shape the lives of female characters, emphasizing the restrictive nature of gender norms and the limitations placed on women's agency and self-expression.

One of the central themes in the novel is the pressure on women to conform to societal expectations of marriage and motherhood. Roy portrays the societal mandate that women should prioritize their roles as wives and mothers above all else. This is exemplified through characters like Ammu, who experiences the consequences of defying these expectations by divorcing her abusive husband. Her decision brings about social ostracism and the loss of familial support, highlighting the severe consequences of challenging traditional gender roles. The novel also exposes the inherent power imbalances within the patriarchal structure. Men are often portrayed as the dominant figures, exerting control over women's lives and decisions. For instance, Baby Kochamma's devotion to her deceased lover perpetuates her longing for male validation, leading to a life filled with bitterness and regret. This illustrates the psychological impact of conforming to societal norms and the toll it takes on women's self-worth and personal fulfilment.

Writer explores the double standards surrounding sexuality and the restrictive notions of purity imposed on women. The character of Ammu faces immense societal scrutiny and judgment due to her relationships and experiences outside of marriage. The novel showcases how women are held to different standards and face harsher consequences for defying sexual norms compared to men, underscoring the deeply ingrained gender inequalities present in Indian society. The novel also highlights the intersectionality of gender expectations with other social factors, such as caste and class. Roy delves into the complexities faced by women from lower castes or marginalized backgrounds, for whom the burden of gender expectations is compounded by socioeconomic disparities and discrimination. The character of Velutha, a lower-caste Dalit man, and his relationship with Ammu's family further exposes the intersecting power dynamics and the violence perpetuated by caste and gender hierarchies. Through her portrayal of these gender



expectations and roles, Roy critiques the ways in which women are boxed into predetermined roles, stifling their aspirations, autonomy, and personal growth. She challenges the notion that women's primary purpose is to serve and sacrifice for others, urging readers to question and dismantle the oppressive structures that perpetuate gender inequalities.

The God of Small Things serves as a powerful exploration of the conventional gender expectations and roles imposed on women in Indian society. By shedding light on these expectations and their consequences, Roy prompts readers to critically examine and challenge the regressive norms that restrict women's agency and perpetuate gender disparities. Arundhati Roy's novel, *The God of Small Things*, delves deep into the cultural and societal pressures that shape the lives of its female characters, namely Ammu, Baby Kochamma, and Rahel. Through their stories, Roy presents a searing critique of the oppressive forces that influence and restrict women's lives within the novel's Indian setting.

Ammu, as a central character, represents the struggles faced by women who dare to challenge societal expectations. Roy highlights the weight of cultural norms and the consequences of deviating from them. Ammu's rebellion against her abusive marriage leads to social ostracism, familial rejection, and the loss of economic stability. Her character embodies the clash between personal desires and the confines of traditional gender roles, vividly illustrating the immense cultural pressures that shape and limit women's lives.

Baby Kochamma, Ammu's aunt, embodies the consequences of internalized patriarchy. Despite her intelligence and potential, Baby Kochamma is trapped by her obsession with male validation and societal acceptance. Her actions and decisions are driven by the desire to fit into the patriarchal framework, resulting in a life marred by bitterness and regret. Through Baby Kochamma's character, Roy exposes the destructive impact of societal pressures and the sacrifices women make to conform to societal norms.

Rahel, the young protagonist, navigates the complexities of gender expectations and societal pressures as she grows into womanhood. Roy showcases the challenges faced by girls as they come of age, grappling with societal demands regarding behaviour, appearance, and marriage. Rahel's story highlights the delicate balancing act between self-expression and conformity, as she strives to assert her identity while negotiating the societal expectations placed upon her.

Throughout the novel, Roy unveils the intricate layers of cultural and societal pressures that shape the female characters' lives. She exposes the pervasive influence of patriarchy, the weight of familial expectations, and the constraining grip of traditional gender roles. These pressures act as barriers to women's autonomy, personal growth, and self-fulfilment. Moreover, Roy's exploration of the intersections of gender with other aspects of identity, such as caste and class, further emphasizes the complexity of the characters' experiences. The characters' struggles are shaped not only by gender expectations but also by the additional burdens imposed by social hierarchies and discrimination.

Through her depiction of Ammu, Baby Kochamma, Rahel, and other female characters, Roy invites readers to critically examine the cultural and societal pressures that shape women's lives. She confronts the stifling nature of gender norms and the immense sacrifices women are often forced to make in order to conform. By exposing these pressures, Roy challenges readers to question and dismantle the oppressive structures that perpetuate inequality and restrict women's agency.

The God of Small Things serves as a powerful exploration of the cultural and societal pressures that shape the lives of its female characters. By highlighting these pressures and their consequences, Roy compels readers to reflect on the immense challenges faced by women within



the novel's cultural context, encouraging a broader conversation about gender, autonomy, and liberation.

Arundhati Roy's novel, *The God of Small Things*, offers an exploration of sexuality and desire in relation to women's representation. Through her female characters, Roy challenges societal taboos and conventions, delving into the complex and often repressed aspects of women's sexual experiences within the cultural and social context of the novel. The novel presents a candid portrayal of female sexuality, confronting the restrictive norms that dictate women's desires and their expression. Roy challenges the notion that women's sexuality should be controlled and suppressed, and instead highlights the inherent human need for connection, intimacy, and pleasure. Through characters like Ammu and Rahel, she explores the natural and instinctual desires that women possess, often in the face of societal judgment and condemnation.

Ammu's relationship with Velutha serves as a powerful example of sexuality and desire transcending boundaries of caste and societal norms. Their passionate love affair defies social expectations, highlighting the resistance against traditional constraints placed upon women's sexual agency. Roy delves into the complexities and consequences of their relationship, illuminating the transformative power of sexual desire while also exposing the violence and punishment that can result from challenging societal norms. Besides, Roy explores the ways in which women's desires are often policed and controlled by societal forces, particularly when it comes to marriage and the negotiation of sexual relationships. The characters of Baby Kochamma and Margaret Kochamma embody the societal pressure for women to conform to traditional expectations of marriage and the limited roles that it entails. Their experiences illustrate the stifling effect of societal expectations on women's sexual autonomy and the internal conflicts that arise when desire clashes with cultural norms.

Roy also addresses the intersection of desire with issues of power and control within relationships. She examines the imbalances of power that can arise, particularly in relationships between men and women, and the resulting consequences for women's agency and self-worth. Through the character of Sophie Mol, Roy explores the exploitation and objectification of women's bodies, shedding light on the ways in which desire can be used as a tool for dominance and manipulation.

The God of Small Things challenges the silence and repression surrounding women's sexuality and desire in the cultural and societal context of the novel. Roy breaks the barriers of social taboos and confronts the consequences and complexities of women's sexual agency. By giving voice to the unspoken and exploring the multifaceted nature of desire, she disrupts traditional narratives that seek to confine and control women's sexual expression. In doing so, Roy's novel not only challenges societal expectations but also invites readers to critically reflect on the importance of sexual autonomy and agency in women's lives. Through her representation of women's sexuality and desire, Roy advocates for a more inclusive and empowering understanding of women's experiences, dismantling the barriers that hinder their full self-expression and fulfilment.

To conclude, Arundhati Roy's novel, *The God of Small Things*, offers a profound exploration of gender roles and the representation of women within the cultural and societal context of postcolonial India. Through her richly drawn female characters, Roy challenges traditional gender norms, exposing the complexities and constraints imposed upon women and illuminating their struggles for agency, autonomy, and self-expression.

The novel critiques the patriarchal structures that perpetuate oppressive gender roles, showcasing the societal expectations that confine women to predefined roles as obedient daughters, dutiful wives, and self-sacrificing mothers. Roy's portrayal of characters like Ammu, Baby Kochamma, and Rahel showcases the pervasive impact of these expectations on women's



lives, illustrating the sacrifices they make and the personal freedoms they forfeit in order to conform to societal norms. Roy highlights the intersections of gender with other aspects of identity, such as caste, class, and sexuality. She brings attention to the unique challenges faced by women from marginalized backgrounds, demonstrating the compounding effects of multiple systems of oppression. The novel reveals the complex negotiations of desire, power, and social expectations, shedding light on the ways in which women navigate and negotiate their identities within a patriarchal society. Throughout the narrative, Roy challenges the silencing and marginalization of women's voices, giving prominence to their stories and experiences. She exposes the consequences of internalized oppression, the societal pressures that limit women's agency, and the ways in which women are often judged and policed based on their sexuality and desires. By foregrounding these issues, Roy invites readers to critically examine and question the inequities and injustices that pervade gender relations in postcolonial India and beyond.

The God of Small Things serves as a powerful call for change, urging society to dismantle the rigid gender roles that restrict women's potential and perpetuate inequality. Roy's portrayal of the complexities, contradictions, and resilience of her female characters challenges readers to challenge traditional gender norms and envision a more inclusive, equitable future. The novel serves as a reminder of the ongoing struggles for gender equality, inviting us to reimagine a society where women can navigate their roles and identities with freedom, authenticity, and self-determination. In this way, *The God of Small Things* not only exposes the limitations and injustices inherent in gender roles but also sparks a broader conversation about gender representation, societal expectations, and the transformative power of women's voices. Roy's work continues to resonate as a poignant exploration of gender, inviting readers to reflect on the ways in which societal structures shape and define women's lives while urging us to envision a world where gender roles are fluid, empowering, and liberating for all.

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