

Md Rakin Alim

Professor Dickison

ENGL 102

6 December 2020

Arundhati Roy: Caste determines everything in Indian Life

Arundhati Roy -- novelist, screenwriter, essayist, and activist-- took the world by storm through her debut novel *The God of Small Things* (1997). Roy's work experience includes the field of architecture, acting, drama, activism, and aerobics. The versatility in her professions has largely influenced her outlook towards life and society. Roy's exposure to various cultures and political movements has influenced her writing style. In *The God of Small Things*, Roy has exposed the problems of the insidious caste system that dehumanizes people in India. Roy's literature is a mirror image of the society in which she lives. Roy is truly a wordsmith with the ability to stir the emotion of her characters in her readers. Petty human emotions like jealousy, envy, hatred, and resentment receive new meaning in *The God of Small Things*.

Roy's experience was largely influenced by living in India, a country in southeast Asia, previously a colony of the British Empire. After 200 years of British subjugation, suppression, and oppression, India earned its independence in August 15, 1947. Its geography and climate are diverse. People of various ethnicities inhabit this region. The ethnic and social differences are one of the major reasons for tensions and resentment in the Indian society. Ethnic persecution untangles the fabric of society, which can only be held together through mutual respect and cooperation for each other as human beings. The caste system is the name of that instrument of persecution in Indian society. The Caste system is a colonial legacy bequeathed by the British to the modern Indian society. Its legacy still resonates, reverberates, and haunts millions of Indian people in their daily life. India's caste-based society is divisive in nature which looks down upon

people who are from the so-called lower caste and deprives them of basic human rights and sees them as untouchables. This dark age practice of sequestering human beings based on their identities is anathema to modern society. Dalit (lower caste) people have to live under the yoke of state sanctioned injustice and cruelty even though lower caste people's rights are enshrined in India's constitution. The founders of the country tried to redress the discrimination caused by caste system, but all their efforts went in vain. The novel is the testament of the caste bias and prejudice prevalent in the Indian society.

The God of Small Things portrays a mesmerizing account of India's caste-based society and its tragic consequences. In the novel, Roy weaves the story of two identical twins Rahel and Estha, and their divorced mother Ammu who left their alcoholic, abusive father. The twins seek joy in everyday things and enjoy each other's company as if they are siamese souls. The twins' cousin Sophie Mol pays them a visit from London. During this visit, the tragedy of the story unfolds. Sophie drowns in the river and dies. The family's story is a story of tragedy, a story of general amnesia, a story of Anglophilia. The story also presents the death of an untouchable, lower cast man name Velutha. Velutha was killed because he engaged himself with Ammu, an upper cast woman. The story has other elements such as communism, Marxism in Indian society. The story ends with the twins coming back together and trying to heal themselves in the company of each other. The story has a convoluted plot that goes back and forth. It entralls the readers through its vivid description. Time seems like a fluid concept in the storyline to the readers. This fluidity of time suggests that characters try to bend the fabric of reality and time to suit their emotional needs. Roy tries to point out the general collective amnesia shared by all the characters in the novel. In the novel, selective amnesia seems like a defensive mechanism to cope with an unbearable grief. Grief and sorrow are like an albatross in the novel that hangs

around the twins' neck and slowly brings them down. The flow of narrative in the story is slow and spontaneous at the same time. The characters seem like they are living in a self-imposed exile within their minds. They seek comfort in numbness and apathy.

The novel illustrates India's rigid hierarchical caste system. The caste system stratifies society into groups and subgroups which create rifts that contain the seeds of hatred and supremacy. The novel also depicts patriarchy and police's abuse of power. A police officer in the novel says the following:

"It's a little too late for all of this, don't you think?" he said. He spoke the coarse Kottayam dialect of Malayalam. He stared at Ammu's breasts as he spoke. He said the police knew all they needed to know and that the Kottayam Police did not take statements from *veshyas* [prostitutes] or their illegitimate children. Ammu said she'd see about that. Inspector Thomas Mathew came around his desk and approached Ammu with his baton. "If I were you," he said, "I'd go home quietly." Then he tapped her breasts with his baton. Gently. Tap. As though he was choosing mangoes from a basket.... Inspector Thomas Mathew seemed to know whom he could pick on and whom he couldn't. Policemen have that instinct."

The book also shows how the environment has been polluted in the name of development and progress. Roy points this by stating "some days he [Estha] walked along the banks of the river that smelled of shit and pesticides bought with World Bank loans." Roy further states that the "most of the fish had died."

In the article "Arundhati Roy's fascinating mess: being an activist and an artist is trickier than it sounds," published in *The Atlantic*, Parul Sehgal portrays the mindset of Roy and her

struggles as an artist and an activist. According to Sehgal, Roy has paid a heavy price by publishing *God*. Sehgal claims the following:

It is almost impossible to see Roy clearly through the haze of adulation, condescension, outrage, and celebrity that has enveloped her since the publication of *The God of Small Things* ... Much was made of the author's looks--she was named one of People magazine's most beautiful people--and lack of literary background; there was titillated interest in her days living in a slum and working as an aerobics instructor. Praise for her novel was extravagant--she was compared to Faulkner and Garcia Marquez--but it was also frequently patronizing.

Sehgal illustrates the dichotomy of Roy's character that was far away from people's preconceived notion. Sehgal points that "she chopped off her hair after the Booker win." Sehgal claims she is a social activist who cares about the environment and people of her country. Sehgal reviews *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* with a grain of salt and claims it to be a "hulking, sprawling story." Sehgal claims that "the world she conjures is often brutal, but never confusing or even very complex." Sehgal then veers towards Roy's political life and how it impacts her literature and novels. Sehgal finds her second novel lacking coherency. Sehgal agrees that her political and literature life is different and distinct. Furthermore, Sehgal explores the literary tradition Arundhati Roy belongs to and her formative period. Roy has a very unorthodox life than most writers in India. Her mysticism has added to her aura and has created a mythical, exotic stature of her.

The caste system is a colonial legacy. Roy perfectly portrays it by pointing that "looking back now, to Rahel it seemed as though this difficulty that their family had with classification ran much deeper than the jam-jelly question." The novel also shows Anglophilia and how deep it

is engrained in India's middle-class people's psyche. It is evident when Roy writes that "there would be two flasks of water." Anglophilia is also another testament of Indian society's obsession over race, color. People from upper caste got preferential treatment and more opportunities than lower caste people during colonial times since they helped the British in India. It was a symbiotic relationship between the upper caste Hindus and their British colonial masters. One helped secure other's interest through the caste system.

The novel also shows the Indian society's preference for male child over female child. It is part of the patriarchal mindset of the society. The same thing is reflected when Ammu is denied from education and his father's property. Even, Ammu's mother looks down upon her and treats her like a stepdaughter. On the other hand, Ammu treats her both children equally. The novel shows how divorced woman are seen as a nuisance by their own family. Eventually, Ammu's son was taken away from her by her husband. In the end, even Ammu gives up and says, "Maybe a boy does need a Baba[father]."

Roy tries to illustrate religion in a new mold. In his article "Religious Myth and Subversion in *The God of Small Things*," Chelva Kanaganayakam argues that "the novel is a reworking of myth in ways that suggest a radical critique of religious practice; even the naturalistic episodes possess a ritualistic quality." Moreover, Kaganyakam points that "The secular myth of progress, of colonialism, of contact with the West and the religious myth of Eden converge in the History House, which becomes a multivalent symbol in the novel: of the depravity of Kari Saipu, of the commercialisation of tourism, and the passionate union of Velutha and Ammu." The various facets of religion are portrayed without any sort of mincing of words. Roy narrates the following:

They were not allowed to touch anything that Touchables touched. Caste Hindus and Caste Christians. Mammachi told Estha and Rahel that she could remember a time, in her girlhood, when Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan's footprint. In Mammachi's time, Paravans, like other Untouchables, were not allowed to walk on public roads, not allowed to cover their upper bodies, not allowed to carry umbrellas. They had to put their hands over their mouths when they spoke, to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed.

In the novel, Ammu is a Christian woman and she marries a Hindu man. As a result, her children were always shunned by the society as half breeds. In this manner, Roy tries to delineate religion and caste as two sides of the same coin of abject bigotry and racism.

The novel also portrays the plight of divorced women in Indian society. Roy herself is an independent woman. Her mother raised her. The influence of men and their control was minimal which was one of her sources of inspiration while writing the novel. Roy recounts the following:

"Ammu," Chacko said, his voice steady and deliberately casual, "is it at all possible for you to prevent your washed-up cynicism from completely coloring everything?" Silence filled the car like a saturated sponge. "Washed up" cut like a knife through a soft thing. The sun shone with a shuddering sigh. This was the trouble with families. Like invidious doctors, they knew just where it hurt.

In her article "Postcolonial Performance: The Representation of India In Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*," Purna Chowdhury claims the following:

The grand reception of *The God of Small Things* in the international arena marks a further stage in the history of postcolonial narrative. The novel demonstrates not only a desire to narrate nation, but also a conscious decision to counter the orientaling tendencies in present nation writing in Indo-English fiction. Yet, ironically, Roy deploys a form of representation that achieves the opposite of what is desired and ends up narrating “the vast, violent, circling, driving, ridiculous, insane, unfeasible public turmoil of a nation”.

Roy tries to portray a version of India that is unfamiliar to the outside world. Her political activism and prior experience in living in slums have prompted her to depict this crude truth of caste repression that is tearing apart the Indian society.

Roy veers into politics in the novel. In his article “Commodity Fetishism, Patriarchal Repression, and Psychic Deprivation in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*,” John Lutz claims that the novel is a “critique of capitalist materialism and mass consumption.” In the article “Velutha: The Downtrodden in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*,” Twinkle B. Manavar claims that through lower cast Velutha, Roy tried to portray “The God.” Caste suppression and subjugation is the main thing in Roy’s novel. Caste is one thing that Roy keeps coming back to. Roy herself spend a significant amount of her time in India. Unlike other postcolonial anglophone authors, Roy has never left her country. Roy has spent a significant amount of her time in slums and communist movement in southern Indian jungles. These exposures have increased her sympathy and made her empathize with the plight of the lower caste Indians.

In the article “Worth the Wait,” Renee H. Shea discusses about Roy’s second novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. In Roy’s second novel, she highlights the plight of Kashmiri people, transgender people. According to Shea, “the novel is teeming with indelible characters:

politicians-some murderously demented-accountants, teachers, militants, and mothers in a multigenerational story.” Roy’s second novel tries to create the same magic that she created with her first novel. Roy wants to tell the story of people who are rendered voiceless by the administration and state. Roy is a fearless author who stands up against Hindu fascism and riots. For her strong stance, she has also suffered enormously. Many politically motivated cases have been filed against her throughout the India to harass her. She has been threatened by Hindu nationalist and dubbed “anti-national.”

One distinctive feature in Roy’s novels are trauma. Estha loses his desire to speak after being separated from his mother and sister. The characters in the novel go through some sort of cataclysmic event in their personal life. The shock renders them numb and they seek closure throughout the story. In the article “Trauma and Temporal Hybridity in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*,” Elizabeth Outka claims that the “the novel’s temporal mix remaps one of the most frequently noted characteristics of individual cases of post-traumatic stress: the experience of temporal paradox.”

The character of Velutha is the quintessential lower caste person. Velutha is killed because his sin was, he associated himself with an upper caste woman. The brutality of his death is reminiscent of caste suppression and subjugation. Caste system is like segregation or apartheid. In the article “Subalternity and Scale in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*,” Jane Poyner claims that “Velutha is both oppressed subaltern and prototypical eco-warrior of a new planetary order. Velutha’s caste haunts him through the story. The kids Eshta and Rahel never see the caste as a barrier. By illustrating this, Roy points to the fact that caste is a human construct. Caste vilifies the people and segregates and stratifies them. This practice brings

resentment and denies human beings their basic rights. Caste is a scar that needs to be healed through love.

Roy's novel has a certain distinctive flair in it. She never seems to shy when it comes to experimenting with her story telling. Roy crafts new words by merging them together. This boldness adds creativity and new sort of phonetic appeal in her novel. In the article "The Difficulty of Being: Reading and Speaking In Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*," Sandhya Patel "contends that the contrast between Roy's highly stylized narration and her characters' spoken dialect reflects an ambivalence regarding India's postcolonial status." Moreover, Patel also points that "there are also flippant non-linguistic examples of this familiarity with Western art that could be considered cases of appropriation and are perceptible in the prevalence of books." Roy takes certain artistic liberty when it came to expressing herself through her characters. Roy's sneering towards Anglophilia is obvious in this event. Roy presents the uncle Chacko as an anglophile who is obsessed with India's colonial master and their culture. Chacko marries a British woman Margaret. Roy tries to seek a negotiated balance between Anglophilia and Anglophobia. Ammu is a detractor of British culture. Ammu's influence over her children is obvious. She tries to make them strong and independent for the world that is cruel and unjust to the weak. Roy depicts the female characters as strong and independent in her novel. Roy herself was brought up by her mother. Roy's mother was denied of her inheritance because she was a woman. Roy's mother had filed a case and won her inheritance through a landmark supreme court rule. So, it is natural that Roy was impressed by women's strength and determination to stand up to injustice even if it means standing up alone. The young female characters in the novel are imbued with the penchant for standing up against injustice.

Roy weaves her story around caste. She adds other elements to expand her novel and show the readers the true story of caste violence. Roy is bold in her thought. Roy is influenced by her work experience. Roy's other novel similarly fights back against societal injustices. Roy has spent her entire Booker prize money to save the Narmada Water Dam in India. Roy portrays the same love for environment in her novel. Roy states that the environment was corrupted by political and corporate greed. Lack of public awareness has also contributed to the fact. Governmental attention was needed to redress this situation.

The legacy of caste system is still alive even though the new generation is making strides to break it apart and uproot it from its toxic roots of bigotry, hatred, and racial supremacy. Caste system is antithetical with the concept of modern civilization. It is nothing but an instrument of repression and subjugation. Caste preordains people's lives and livelihood in India. Caste system's main purpose is to deny the lower caste people the agency over their life and livelihood. Roy illustrates caste as the ghost that haunts everyone and snatches their happiness and fills their life with nothing but despair. Roy sneers at the society's so called love laws that denies people the power to choose their life partners. Roy's characters finally find closure in each other's arms. Roy's novel tells a circular narrative that enthralls and transfixes her readers.

Annotated Bibliography

Chowdhury, Purna. "Postcolonial Performance: The Representation of India in Arundhati

Roy's *The God of Small Things*." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, edited by Lawrence J. Trudeau, vol. 364, Gale, 2014. *Gale Literature Resource*

Center, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/H1100118261/LitRC?u=rock77357&sid=LitRC&xid=0ea30a86>. Accessed 15 Nov. 2020. Originally published in *Between Two Worlds*, Mellen, 2007, pp. 237-316.

This article discusses the novel's postcolonial characteristics. It also mentions India's representation by the writer. I have used this source to introduce India from the writer's point of view. The source reveals information about Indian landscape and people. Thus, it is much easier to envision India from Roy's perspective and other people's perspective.

Kanaganayakam, Chelva. "Religious Myth and Subversion in *The God of Small*

Things." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, edited by Lawrence J. Trudeau, vol. 364, Gale, 2014. *Gale Literature Resource*

Center, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/H1100118258/LitRC?u=rock77357&sid=LitRC&xid=a6267226>. Accessed 22 Nov. 2020. Originally published in *Literary Canons and Religious Identity*, edited by Erik Borgman, et al., Ashgate, 2004, pp. 141-149.

This article illustrates the role of religion in the novel. The source tries to draw parallels between various myths and the characters. I have used this source to expound a powerful argument about the novel's religious dimension. It reviews the novel and talks about the impact of colonialism and secularism. Religious myth is a big part of the novel. It is implicit in the entire storyline from the beginning to the end.

Lutz, John. "Commodity Fetishism, Patriarchal Repression, and Psychic Deprivation in

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, edited by Lawrence J. Trudeau, vol. 364, Gale, 2014. *Gale Literature Resource Center*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/H1100118264/LitRC?u=rock77357&sid=LitRC&xid=2c143efb>. Accessed 15 Nov. 2020. Originally published in *Mosaic*, vol. 42, no. 3, 2009, pp. 57-74.

This article talks about the writer's and characters' psychology. It points to an overlooked dimension of human nature. I have used this source to illustrate the novel's portrayal of patriarchy. This article shows that apathy is a generic trait in most characters of the novel. I have used this source to explore the psychological dimensions of the novel.

Manavar, Twinkle B. "Velutha: The Downtrodden in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small*

Things." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter, vol. 210, Gale, 2006. *Gale Literature Resource Center*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/H1100067253/LitRC?u=rock77357&sid=LitRC&xid=9bba0fe2>. Accessed 15 Nov. 2020. Originally published in *The Critical Studies of Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things*, edited by Jaydipsinh Dodiya and Joya Chakravarty, Atlantic Publishers, and Distributors, 1999, pp. 124-129.

This source portrays the demise of one of the main characters of the novel. It also discusses about caste violence. I have used this source to portray caste violence in the novel. It also allows me to explore caste oppression from the lower caste people's point of view and their untold struggles. Caste is one thing that the writer keeps coming back to. Caste violence is the main theme of the novel. I have used this source to emphasize on caste violence and its consequences on the society.

Outka, Elizabeth. "Trauma and Temporal Hybridity in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, edited by Lawrence J. Trudeau, vol. 364, Gale, 2014. *Gale Literature Resource Center*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/H1100118267/LitRC?u=rock77357&sid=LitRC&xid=6dd2e866>. Accessed 22 Nov. 2020. Originally published in *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 52, no. 1, 2011, pp. 21-53.

This article discusses about one of the main themes of Roy's novel which is trauma. Trauma plays a center role in her storytelling. I have used this source to give readers a glimpse of the psyche of the characters. Roy's novel is slow and spontaneous at the same time due to her characters' complex behaviors. I have used this source to explore the psychological dimensions of the novel.

Patel, Sandhya. "The Difficulty of Being: Reading and Speaking in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, edited by Lawrence J. Trudeau, vol. 364, Gale, 2014. *Gale Literature Resource Center*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/H1100118263/LitRC?u=rock77357&sid=LitRC&xid=a30223b3>. Accessed 15 Nov. 2020. Originally published in *Embracing the Other*, edited by Dunja M. Mohr, Rodopi, 2008, pp. 227-243.

This source has provided me with the analysis and appreciation for the language that Roy has used in her novel. The source points to Roy's novels distinctive flavor. It has helped me by giving me a source from someone who acknowledges Roy's effective use of language to get her point across. This source is unique since it presents a literary criticism of the novel.

Poyner, Jane. "Subalternity and Scale in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*." *Mosaic: An interdisciplinary critical journal*, vol. 51, no. 3, 2018, p. 53. *Gale Literature Resource Center*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A556694951/LitRC?u=rock77357&sid=LitRC&xid=ace53704>. Accessed 15 Nov. 2020.

This article discusses about caste subjugation. One of the methods of caste suppression is economic discrimination. I have used this source to talk about economic subjugation in the novel. It also talks about the absurdity of caste in Indian society. Economic suppression is one of the most nefarious methods of caste discrimination. This source discusses the novel from an economic viewpoint. The writer is an authoritative source when it comes to economic analysis. The writer uses various factors to point out the economic subjugation illustrated in the novel.

Roy, Arundhati. *The God of Small Things*. India: IndiaInk, 1997.

This is my postcolonial primary source for the research essay, in which Roy shows aspects of the caste discrimination in India. The novel demonstrates culture, religion, and caste in Indian society. I have used this source to show writer's perspective about caste violence. I have also quoted the novel to portray its various themes and aspects.

Sehgal, Parul. "Arundhati Roy's fascinating mess: being an activist and an artist is trickier than it sounds." *The Atlantic*, vol. 320, no. 1, July-Aug. 2017, p. 36+. *Gale In Context:*

Opposing

Viewpoints, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A499406618/OVIC?u=rock77357&sid=OVIC&xid=0c78bd09>. Accessed 1 Nov. 2020.

The article gives readers the Roy's point of view and her political life. The article sheds light on Roy's other novels too. I have used this article to emphasize on Roy's life

outside literary world. I have used this source to give a sneak peek of the writer as a person.

Shea, Renee H. "Worth the wait." *Poets & Writers Magazine*, vol. 45, no. 4, 2017, p. 30+. *Gale*

Literature Resource

Center, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A494442898/LitRC?u=rock77357&sid=LitRC&xid=15f13f2f>. Accessed 22 Nov. 2020.

This article discusses about Roy's second novel. Roy's second novel tries to follow the same pattern of storytelling. I have used this source to give a glimpse of Roy's second novel and Roy's desire to speak for the voiceless. It provided me with insight from someone else who has read the novel. I tried to find common themes and threads in Roy's two novels.