

CASTE, POWER AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

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Abstract

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* presents an intricate portrait of a society in which caste, class, gender and political power intersect to determine the value assigned to individual lives. This paper examines the novel as a critique of social exclusion and inherited hierarchy, with particular attention to the experiences of Vellya Pappen and Velutha. Roy exposes the mechanisms through which caste ideology becomes embedded in everyday relationships, employment, domestic space and institutional authority. The novel also reveals how patriarchal structures and political opportunism reinforce social inequality. Vellya Pappen represents the internalization of hierarchy by an oppressed community member, whereas Velutha embodies resistance to inherited restrictions through his skill, dignity, political awareness and human relationships. His relationship with Ammu exposes the unequal moral standards applied to members of different social groups. The response of the family, political agents and the police demonstrates how private prejudice can become institutional violence. At the same time, the affection shared by Estha, Rahel and Velutha suggests the possibility of human connection beyond socially constructed boundaries. The paper argues that Roy's novel remains a powerful literary examination of caste consciousness, social privilege, gendered authority and the continuing struggle for dignity and equality.

Keywords: caste hierarchy, social exclusion, Velutha, Vellya Pappen, patriarchy, political power, marginalization, social justice

Introduction

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* offers a complex representation of social life in Kerala through the history of the Ipe family and the people connected with Ayemenem. Rather than presenting caste as an abstract social institution, Roy demonstrates how hierarchy operates through ordinary practices, family relationships, employment, language, political activity and access to social spaces. The novel therefore becomes an important literary site for examining the relationship between personal experience and wider structures of power.

At the centre of this social landscape is the conflict between those who possess social authority and those who are compelled to live within its restrictions. The experiences of the

Paravan family, particularly Vellya Pappen and Velutha, reveal how inherited status can determine a person's opportunities, dignity and security. Roy simultaneously examines the position of women within a patriarchal family, showing that gender and caste can combine to produce different forms of exclusion. Ammu's life demonstrates that women who challenge accepted expectations may also face severe social consequences.

The novel is especially significant because its critique does not remain limited to individual prejudice. Family authority, political calculation and institutional power work together to preserve an unequal social order. The treatment of Velutha illustrates how a social system can transform prejudice into punishment when an individual crosses boundaries regarded as inviolable.

Caste As A Structure Of Social Power

Caste in *The God of Small Things* functions as a deeply rooted system of social classification. The novel portrays the Paravans as a community historically positioned at the margins of social life. Their exclusion affects not only occupation and wages but also movement, domestic interaction and access to public and religious spaces. Such restrictions create a social environment in which inequality becomes normalized and reproduced across generations.

Roy's presentation of caste is significant because discrimination is shown through both visible and subtle practices. The oppressed are expected to remain within prescribed boundaries, while members of privileged communities are permitted a greater range of social and personal freedom. The result is a hierarchy in which human worth is measured through inherited identity rather than individual ability or character.

The Ipe family's relationship with Velutha exposes this contradiction. His craftsmanship is valued when his skills are useful, yet his social identity prevents him from being treated as an equal member of the household. He is welcomed for his labour but excluded from intimacy and domestic equality. This selective acceptance demonstrates how privilege can appropriate the labour of marginalized people without challenging the hierarchy that disadvantages them.

Vellya Pappen And The Internalization Of Hierarchy

Vellya Pappen represents a generation that has learned to survive by accepting the social order imposed upon it. His loyalty to the Ipe family is shaped by a history of dependence, gratitude and unequal social relations. The assistance received by his family is interpreted as generosity, while the larger structure that keeps them economically and socially subordinate remains largely unquestioned.

His characterization can be understood through the idea of ideological hegemony: domination becomes particularly powerful when the values of the dominant group are accepted by subordinate groups as natural or unavoidable. Vellya Pappen's attitude illustrates how long-term oppression can influence self-perception. Instead of imagining equality as a right, he views service and obedience as legitimate obligations.

The tragedy surrounding Vellya Pappen becomes more painful because his loyalty ultimately conflicts with his affection for his son. When Velutha crosses the boundaries imposed by caste, Vellya is placed in an impossible position between paternal attachment and obedience to the social order. His suffering illustrates the psychological consequences of a hierarchy that forces oppressed people to participate in the preservation of their own subordination.

Velutha: Skill, Dignity and Resistance

Velutha is one of the most significant figures through whom Roy challenges caste prejudice. He is intelligent, technically skilled and capable of repairing and creating a wide range of objects. His abilities demonstrate that social status does not correspond to intellectual or creative capacity. Yet the recognition he receives is always limited by caste consciousness.

Velutha's labour is economically useful to the Ipe family, but his social presence is carefully controlled. He can enter certain spaces when his expertise is required, but he cannot cross the invisible boundaries that separate a servant from a socially privileged family. This contradiction exposes the hypocrisy of a system that depends upon the labour of marginalized people while denying their equality.

His relationship with Estha and Rahel provides an alternative to the rigid social world of the adults. The children respond to him through affection and friendship rather than inherited prejudice. Their relationship suggests that caste consciousness is learned rather than natural. The children's ability to recognize Velutha as a friend offers a brief vision of social interaction based on emotional connection rather than hierarchy.

Velutha also represents resistance. His involvement with workers and his willingness to question established boundaries make him threatening to those who benefit from the existing order. His resistance is not merely political; his personal relationships themselves challenge the rules governing caste and social distance. For this reason, his character becomes central to Roy's critique of inherited privilege.

The Contradiction between Labour And Social Status

One of the novel's recurring ironies is the difference between a person's usefulness and the respect accorded to that person. Velutha possesses exceptional practical knowledge and craftsmanship, yet his caste prevents him from receiving the social recognition that his abilities might otherwise command. The family depends upon his work while simultaneously maintaining distance from him.

This contradiction illustrates a wider pattern of social exploitation. Marginalized communities may be economically necessary but socially excluded. Their labour sustains privileged households and institutions, but their rights and dignity are not treated as equally important. Roy therefore connects caste discrimination with economic inequality and the unequal distribution of respect.

The novel also suggests that material advancement does not automatically remove prejudice. A household may possess education, economic resources and exposure to modern ideas while continuing to reproduce traditional social divisions. Modernity and hierarchy can therefore coexist, producing a particularly complex form of discrimination.

Patriarchy, Gender and Social Control

Caste oppression in the novel is closely connected with patriarchal authority. Women are expected to conform to family expectations, and their choices are judged more severely when they challenge accepted norms. Ammu's experience reveals the vulnerability of women who do not fit the prescribed model of respectable femininity.

The unequal treatment of Ammu and other characters demonstrates that social morality is not applied uniformly. Male privilege permits certain forms of behaviour to be excused or normalized, whereas women are subjected to greater scrutiny. The novel therefore questions the

moral standards used by a society that claims to defend family honour while tolerating unequal treatment.

Ammu's relationship with Velutha becomes especially significant because it crosses both gender and caste boundaries. The relationship threatens a social structure in which caste purity, family reputation and patriarchal authority are closely connected. The response to their relationship reveals that the real issue is not simply personal morality but the preservation of social power.

Political Opportunism and The Politics Of Caste

The novel also questions the gap between political ideology and political practice. Comrade K. N. M. Pillai is presented as a figure whose political calculations are shaped by personal ambition. Although the political discourse surrounding workers promises equality, caste prejudice continues to influence decisions at the local level.

Pillai's treatment of Velutha demonstrates the danger of political opportunism. Rather than defending the dignity of a marginalized worker, he treats Velutha as a potential threat to his own influence. The contradiction between public slogans and private conduct reveals how political language can be separated from ethical commitment.

Roy's treatment of politics therefore extends the novel's critique beyond the family. Social inequality survives when political institutions fail to challenge it. A political movement may speak in the language of equality while individuals within that movement continue to reproduce existing prejudices. The novel consequently calls attention to the difference between ideological claims and lived social realities.

Institutional Power and The Tragedy of Velutha

Velutha's final crisis demonstrates how social prejudice becomes most dangerous when supported by institutional authority. The accusations made against him are shaped by family interests, social prejudice and political circumstances. Once the machinery of authority accepts the dominant version of events, Velutha is deprived of the opportunity to be treated fairly.

Roy uses this episode to reveal the vulnerability of marginalized individuals when institutions fail to act impartially. The police do not function simply as neutral protectors of justice; in the novel, institutional authority becomes entangled with the assumptions of the dominant social group. Velutha's death consequently represents more than an individual tragedy. It symbolizes the destructive consequences of a social order that values caste conformity over human dignity.

The novel's treatment of institutional violence is deliberately disturbing, but the deeper significance lies in the social conditions that make such violence possible. The tragedy is prepared long before the final confrontation through years of discrimination, exclusion, political manipulation and moral double standards. Roy therefore presents violence as the culmination of a system rather than as an isolated event.

The Children and The Possibility of Human Equality

Estha and Rahel occupy an important position in Roy's critique because their relationship with Velutha is comparatively free from the rigid classifications imposed by adults. They experience friendship through affection, play and trust. Their response to Velutha suggests that social divisions are learned through family and society rather than naturally present in children.

The children's perspective also exposes the absurdity of adult prejudices. Rules that appear unquestionable to adults seem strange and unnecessary to them. Through their experiences, Roy creates a contrast between spontaneous human connection and socially manufactured exclusion. The tragedy of the novel lies partly in the fact that the children's world of affection cannot protect Velutha from the institutions controlled by adults.

Their experience also demonstrates how social violence affects younger generations. The consequences of caste discrimination and family conflict are not confined to the people directly involved. Trauma, silence and emotional isolation continue to shape the lives of the children long after the immediate events have ended.

History, Memory and The Repetition Of Injustice

History operates in the novel not simply as a record of the past but as a force that shapes the present. Social expectations are inherited from earlier generations, and individuals are repeatedly reminded of the boundaries that history has established. The phrase 'laws of history' in the novel suggests the pressure exerted by inherited structures of caste and social convention.

Velutha's tragedy demonstrates the cost of challenging these inherited boundaries. His attempt to live beyond the limitations assigned to his caste is treated as a violation requiring punishment. The novel consequently asks whether history should determine the future of individuals or whether human beings can create new forms of social relationship.

Roy's narrative technique reinforces this theme by moving between different periods and revealing consequences before causes are fully understood. Memory, repetition and fragmented chronology show how past events remain active in the consciousness of the characters. The structure itself reflects the persistence of unresolved social and emotional wounds.

SOCIAL CRITIQUE AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE NOVEL

The God of Small Things can be read as a sustained critique of caste hierarchy, class privilege, patriarchal authority and political opportunism. Roy does not reduce social injustice to a single cause. Instead, she shows how several structures of power overlap. Caste influences employment and social interaction; patriarchy controls women's choices; class determines access to resources; and political power can protect existing privilege.

The novel is particularly effective because it connects large social questions with intimate personal experiences. The suffering of Velutha, the restrictions placed upon Ammu, the loyalty of Vellya Pappen and the innocence of Estha and Rahel are not isolated stories. Together they reveal the consequences of a society that gives different values to different human lives.

Roy's criticism also depends upon irony. Those who claim authority over morality are themselves frequently compromised by prejudice, self-interest or hypocrisy. Conversely, characters placed at the margins may demonstrate greater capacity for affection, skill and humanity. The contrast challenges conventional assumptions about respectability and social worth.

Conclusion

The God of Small Things presents caste not merely as a social label but as a system that influences identity, labour, relationships, political decisions and institutional responses. Through Vellya Pappen, Roy illustrates the psychological effects of internalized hierarchy; through Velutha, she presents the courage and vulnerability of an individual who challenges inherited

boundaries; and through Ammu, she exposes the intersection of gender, family authority and social convention.

The tragedy of Velutha ultimately demonstrates the devastating consequences of a society that protects social boundaries at the expense of individual dignity. His abilities, affection and humanity cannot save him because the institutions surrounding him are structured by prejudice and unequal power. At the same time, the bond between Velutha and the children offers an alternative vision in which human relationships are not determined by caste.

The novel therefore remains significant as a literary examination of exclusion and social power. Its central concern is not only the suffering produced by caste but also the persistence of attitudes that allow inequality to survive. By bringing the experiences of marginalized people into the centre of the narrative, Roy challenges readers to question inherited assumptions about purity, status, morality and respectability. The novel ultimately suggests that meaningful social change requires more than formal equality; it requires a transformation in the attitudes and institutions through which inequality is reproduced.

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