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Cultural Hegemony and Systemic Intolerance: Mapping the Politics of Exclusion in *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract

Aim: This paper examines Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* through the lens of cultural hegemony and systemic intolerance, analyzing how the novel portrays various forms of social exclusion within Kerala's socio-cultural landscape. The research aims to map the intersecting hierarchies of caste, gender, and class that perpetuate systems of oppression and marginalization in postcolonial India.

Methodology and Approach: The study employs a critical analysis framework combining postcolonial theory and cultural studies. Through close textual analysis of the novel, supported by secondary scholarly sources, this research examines key scenes and character relationships that illuminate patterns of social exclusion.

Outcome: The analysis reveals how Roy masterfully depicts the intricate web of social oppression through multiple narrative threads. The study particularly highlights how the novel's non-linear narrative structure mirrors the fragmented experiences of characters struggling against systemic intolerance.

Conclusion and recommendation: Future research should explore comparative analyses of Roy's work with other postcolonial texts addressing similar themes of cultural hegemony. Additionally, scholars should investigate how Roy's portrayal of systemic intolerance in Kerala can inform broader discussions of social justice in contemporary India. The study recommends examining the novel's relevance to current debates on gender equality and caste discrimination in Indian society.

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Published in 1997, Arundhati Roy's debut novel *The God of Small Things* stands as a landmark in contemporary Indian English literature. Received international acclaim, the novel earned the prestigious Booker Prize in the same year, establishing Roy as a significant literary voice. The narrative is deeply rooted in the socio-cultural milieu of Kerala, India. The present study investigates themes that resonate with postcolonial realities, particularly those concerning systemic intolerance, social hierarchies, and the stifling effects of cultural orthodoxy. Roy's upbringing in Kerala profoundly influences the thematic depth of the novel. Roy does not shy away from exposing the multifaceted dimensions of intolerance. The novel examines misogyny through Ammu's struggles as a divorced woman, ostracized by her community and constrained by patriarchal diktats. Similarly, it delves into postcolonial racism, revealing the residual effects of colonial rule on identity and societal attitudes.

Raised by her mother after her parents' separation, Roy navigated the challenges of single parenthood in a conservative society, experiences that seep into her work. Her lived reality informs the novel's critique of societal intolerance and oppressive frameworks governing interpersonal relationships and norms. As Chaudhary argues, *The God of Small Things* subverts societal norms, exposing the oppressive hierarchies that stifle individual agency and resist transformative change (Chaudhary 255). Central to the novel's critique of intolerance is its poignant exploration of forbidden love across societal boundaries. Through the illicit relationship between Ammu, a Syrian Christian woman, and Velutha, an "Untouchable" Paravan man, Roy unveils the entrenched casteism and social bigotry that persist in postcolonial India. The title itself underscores the fragility of human emotions and relationships, often crushed under the weight of "Big Things" like societal expectations, political ideologies, and historical prejudices. As Patel et al. emphasize, such narratives resonate universally, highlighting the interplay of systemic oppression and individual resilience (Patel et al. 1045).

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of colonial rule on identity and societal attitudes. The marginalization of "small people" — women, lower castes, and children — serves as a powerful metaphor for the systemic inequities that endure in the shadow of colonialism. Sinha's feminist analysis further underscores Roy's focus on amplifying the silenced voices of women, exploring their agency within oppressive structures (Sinha 167–92). Controversy surrounds the novel for its bold portrayal of issues deemed taboo. The explicit depiction of a sexual relationship between people from different castes challenged conservative sensibilities, leading to the novel's ban in certain circles and its labelling as "obscene." This reaction underscores the societal intolerance Roy critiques, as her work disrupts deeply ingrained prejudices that govern the collective psyche. By weaving together personal narratives and societal critique,

The God of Small Things becomes a profound commentary on postcolonial India's inability to reconcile its democratic ideals with its hierarchical social realities. This critical study of Roy's work situates the novel within the broader discourse of postcolonial concerns, emphasizing its enduring relevance in examining how intolerance and systemic oppression perpetuate cycles of injustice. Through its layered narrative and evocative prose, the novel invites readers to confront the uncomfortable truths of a society grappling with its historical, cultural, and ideological legacies.

Post-colonial literature emerges from the historical and cultural contexts of nations once colonized by imperial powers, particularly Britain. Writers from regions such as the Caribbean, Africa, and India have significantly contributed to this body of work, often using English as their medium of expression. Their narratives engage with themes like the struggle for independence, the complexities of emigration, the quest for national identity, and the dynamics of allegiance and childhood. These literary works serve as powerful tools for articulating the cultural identities of formerly colonized peoples, reclaiming histories, and resisting the colonial narratives imposed upon them. As Mambrol highlights, postcolonial literature critically examines how colonialism perpetuated notions of inferiority about colonized peoples and celebrates the efforts of colonized writers to reclaim their identities and histories ("Rupturing the

Episteme"). Postcolonial theory provides a framework for critically engaging with literature produced in colonized countries or by those from colonizing nations exploring the impact of colonization. Rooted in the concepts of otherness and resistance, the theory critiques how colonial literature has historically reinforced stereotypes of the "inferior" other while celebrating the efforts of colonized writers to reclaim and celebrate their identities. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is foundational to postcolonial theory, providing key insights into how the West constructed a skewed view of the East, thus justifying colonial rule. However, the theory remains complex and contentious, with scholars debating its scope and applications. These concerns are vividly reflected in the sociopolitical fabric of post-colonial India, where deep-seated religious and communal tensions continue to shape societal dynamics.

Roy's novels powerfully critique intolerance, highlighting the enduring legacies of colonialism. Her works expose the consolidation of power by dominant groups and the marginalisation of minorities in post-colonial India. As Sushma argues, Roy's exploration of interconnectedness between man and nature in *The God of Small Things* mirrors the complexities of cultural hegemony and the marginalisation of the "other" (Sushma). Through her critique of the systemic oppression in post-colonial India, Roy offers a critical lens to understand the intersection of religion, politics, and identity in contemporary society. In post-colonial contexts, these challenges of intolerance and communalism reflect broader struggles articulated in postcolonial theory, where the imposition of a singular cultural identity over a diverse population mirrors colonial strategies of control and subjugation. Roy's exploration of these issues underscores the importance of resistance and reclamation in the face of systemic inequality. Her work aligns with the broader aims of postcolonial literature, which advocates for critical engagement with the legacies of colonialism and a commitment to justice and equity in post-colonial societies. The ongoing conflicts in India, framed against historical oppression and modern political expediency, continue to demand critical attention to ensure a more inclusive and just society.

Caste discrimination in India is a deeply ingrained social issue, one that has persisted for centuries despite numerous attempts to eradicate it. The caste

system is a hierarchical structure that divides individuals into different social categories based on their inherited roles, occupations, and status. This system, historically conceived by a segment of Hindu society that saw itself as superior, has had profound effects on India's social fabric. The system has institutionalized inequality, leading to the oppression and marginalization of certain communities, particularly those labeled as "untouchables" or Dalits. The novel *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy addresses the persistence of caste discrimination in post-independence India. Despite the country celebrating its independence in 1947, the caste system remains a powerful social force, determining the social status, opportunities, and freedoms available to individuals. This is highlighted through the tragic lives of characters like Velutha and Ammu. Velutha, an untouchable, is a gifted and skilled craftsman, but his caste identity relegates him to a life of subjugation and exploitation. He defies the traditional caste boundaries by engaging in a forbidden relationship with Ammu, a high-caste woman, and this leads to his tragic end (Chanthiramathi). His death exemplifies the harsh consequences faced by individuals who challenge the deeply entrenched social hierarchy. One of the critical discussions in the passage is the concept of *Chaturvarnya*, or the four-fold caste division (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras), which not only organizes society but enforces inequality. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, a key figure in the fight against caste discrimination, argued that while class divisions are common in many societies, the Indian caste system went beyond mere classification. It institutionalized graded inequality, making it a legal and penal matter, reinforcing social segregation, and preventing the lower castes from accessing resources, power, and respect. Velutha's character represents the potential of individuals who are oppressed due to their caste, yet still possess immense talent and intelligence. He is portrayed as someone who, if not bound by the constraints of the caste system, could have risen to prominence as a professional, perhaps even an engineer.

However, caste prejudice forces him to remain in the lower echelons of society, despite his exceptional skills. His tragic fate highlights the hypocrisy of the caste system, where individuals are judged by their birth rather than their abilities or character. This echoes Chetan Bhagat's argument about the

undervaluation of talent in India due to the rigid caste structures. The novel also critiques the internalized casteism within Indian society. Even though the Ipe family is Christian, they still practice caste discrimination, demonstrating the pervasive influence of Hinduism and the caste system across various religions in India. Velutha's exclusion from the household, despite his indispensable role in the family business, is a poignant example of how caste bias transcends religious boundaries. Moreover, Velutha's relationship with Ammu serves as a symbol of defiance against the caste system. Ammu, a woman who is also marginalized within her own family due to her failed marriage and her status as a woman, finds solace and love in Velutha. Their relationship, however, becomes a catalyst for tragedy, as it challenges the established order and exposes the deep-rooted caste prejudices within society. The reaction of the upper-caste characters, particularly Baby Kochamma, who manipulates the police into falsely accusing Velutha of a crime, reveals how the powerful elite use their authority to maintain the status quo. In this context, Roy presents a critique of post-colonial India, where the remnants of colonial structures and ideologies continue to shape the social landscape. The bourgeoisie class, which emerged during British rule, continues to hold power in the post-independence era, maintaining their dominance through caste, class, and patriarchal structures. The tragic death of Velutha symbolizes the crushing of any challenge to these hegemonic forces. Finally, the novel's portrayal of Velutha's death reflects the broader struggle of the subaltern in post-colonial societies. The subaltern, in this case, Velutha, attempts to transcend his predetermined social role, but is met with brutal resistance from the dominant forces. His fate mirrors the struggles of many marginalized individuals and communities who challenge established norms, only to be crushed by the forces that seek to maintain their power. This also resonates with the ideas of theorists like Frantz Fanon, who described the violent repression of the oppressed in colonial and post-colonial societies. the caste system in India remains a significant obstacle to social justice, equality, and freedom, despite the country's political independence. Through the tragic story of Velutha, Roy critiques the continuing impact of caste discrimination, showing how it shapes individual destinies, stifles potential, and perpetuates inequality (Fogarty 326-53). The novel calls for a

deeper reflection on the promises of independence, freedom, and equality, urging a reckoning with the unresolved issues of caste and social justice in post-colonial India.

The theme of religious conflict in *The God of Small Things* is deeply embedded in the characters' lives, reflecting both societal and personal struggles. The novel addresses how religion, caste, and social norms intersect and cause divisions, particularly in the context of Ammu's marriage, her divorce, and her relationships with others in the community. Ammu's marriage to a Hindu Bengali man is considered a violation of the "Love Laws" that govern acceptable relationships within her Syrian Christian community. In Christianity, particularly in conservative settings, marriage is viewed as a sacred covenant that should not be dissolved. Ammu's divorce, therefore, marks her as a social outcast, especially within a religious framework that condemns her actions. Her choice to marry outside her faith, followed by the divorce, leaves her ostracized not only by her family but by society at large.

Religion also plays a significant role in the marginalization of Velutha, a Dalit (untouchable) man. In the story, Velutha's love for Ammu, an upper-caste woman, and their clandestine affair, is viewed as a severe transgression. His caste, identified through religion, marks him as inferior and unworthy of love from someone considered of a higher status. This caste-based discrimination is justified through religious and cultural beliefs, where untouchability is linked to divine punishment and reincarnation.

Arundhati Roy critiques how religious institutions and their leaders use religion to maintain social hierarchies. For example, Baby Kochamma's actions against Velutha, driven by her belief in caste superiority, are rooted in her rigid adherence to religious and cultural norms. She reports Velutha to the police, fabricating false accusations, because of his lower-caste status and his perceived violation of these norms (Chanthiramathi). The children, Estha and Rahel, are forced to lie about Velutha's supposed crime in order to protect the family's reputation. Baby Kochamma manipulates them, forcing them to betray Velutha by claiming that he kidnapped them. This moment exposes how religious and caste-based divisions corrupt the innocence of children, forcing them into situations

where they must adhere to oppressive societal codes. Velutha's brutal death at the hands of the police, and the community's refusal to acknowledge his humanity, reflects the dehumanizing power of religious and caste systems. His death is framed as a consequence of his defiance of the "Love Laws," which in turn are tied to religious ideologies and social structures. Velutha's sacrifice mirrors religious martyrdom, symbolizing the ultimate price paid for defying deeply entrenched societal and religious norms.

The religious conflict extends to the very end of Ammu's life when her death is met with further rejection. Despite being a Christian, Ammu is not allowed to be buried in the cemetery due to her divorce and social status. This exclusion reveals the cruelty embedded in religious doctrines when used to enforce conformity and punishment for those who stray from prescribed norms. *The God of Small Things* uses religious conflict to illustrate how societal norms, shaped by religious beliefs, lead to oppression and suffering. The characters' struggles with religion reflect larger social issues, including caste discrimination, patriarchy, and the rigid enforcement of tradition. In Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, religious conflict plays a significant role in shaping the lives of the characters and the narrative. The story takes place in Ayemenem, a small village in Kerala, where the religious divide between the higher caste Hindu community (represented by characters like Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, and Chacko) and the marginalized groups (including Velutha, Vellya Paapen, and Kuttapen, who are lower-caste and oppressed) is starkly highlighted. Religious conflict in the novel is often portrayed as a barrier that reinforces existing social hierarchies and perpetuates the marginalization of certain groups. The Laltains, who represent the upper-caste Hindus in the village, maintain a strong sense of traditionalism and view the powerless Mombattis, who are often associated with the lower-caste, as a threat to their established way of life. This fear manifests as an almost pathological obsession with preserving their power, and they react with excessive force and intolerance to any perceived challenge from the marginalized. The tension becomes evident in the tragic story of Velutha, a lower-caste man who falls in love with Ammu, a woman from an upper-caste family. Their relationship violates the social code dictated by both religion and caste, and it becomes the

cause of Velutha's brutal death. The religious conflict here is not just between Hinduism and other religions, but within the very fabric of the Hindu caste system, where untouchability, purity, and religious hierarchy intersect to crush the marginalized. Velutha's desire for recognition and respect as a human being is a direct challenge to the oppressive structures created by both religious and social norms. His death at the hands of the police is a result of the intolerance fostered by religious and caste-based segregation. The corruptibility of religious institutions, such as the church and the communist party, further deepens the conflict, as they also participate in sustaining these hierarchies under the guise of social or religious justice (Kunhi). Through the portrayal of these religious and caste conflicts, Roy critiques the ways in which religious identity is used as a tool of exclusion and domination. The novel exposes how religion, when intertwined with social power, often serves to legitimize inequality and violence, leading to the destruction of those who challenge these oppressive structures. The tragic lives of Velutha, Ammu, and others symbolize the devastating impact of religious intolerance in a society rigidly bound by caste and tradition.

The God of Small Things serves as a profound examination of patriarchy and gender oppression within postcolonial India. Through its complex narrative structure and vivid characterizations, Roy critiques the entrenched systems of social inequality, especially as they pertain to women in a postcolonial society. The novel explores the intersection of gender and caste, illustrating how women are not only subjugated by the patriarchal framework but also constrained by historical and societal structures rooted in colonial legacies. Roy uses her characters, particularly Ammu and Velutha, to shed light on the layered and often contradictory forces at play in postcolonial India. Ammu, the female protagonist, struggles against the patriarchal norms that confine her choices, while Velutha, a lower-caste man, is both a victim of caste-based oppression and an object of desire for Ammu (Paul 118). Their tragic love story exposes how gender oppression is compounded by the remnants of colonialism, which continues to dictate social hierarchies. By focusing on the marginalized voices of women and lower-caste individuals, Roy challenges the postcolonial narrative that often centres on national identity and independence. In doing so, she critiques the

failure of the postcolonial state to address the persistent inequalities that exist within society. Through the lens of gender and patriarchy, *The God of Small Things* illuminates the deep-seated structures of oppression that continue to define the lives of women, even in the aftermath of colonial rule, offering a critical perspective on the postcolonial condition in India.

The theme of constrained female sexuality is a significant aspect of the social critique presented in Roy's work. The novel underscores how female sexuality is not only suppressed but also meticulously regulated in patriarchal societies, where women's autonomy over their bodies and desires is deeply constrained. Ammu, the protagonist's mother, serves as a poignant example of this oppression. Her inter-caste marriage is initially viewed as a transgression against the rigid social structures that govern caste and family honour. Later, her relationship with Velutha, a man of a lower caste, further complicates her position in society. This relationship, which defies both caste boundaries and the gendered expectations of the time, becomes the focal point of societal backlash. Ammu's love affair with Velutha is emblematic of the ways in which female sexuality, particularly when it steps outside prescribed norms, is subjected to intense moral and social scrutiny. The severe consequences Ammu faces as a result of her relationships—ostracization, violence, and ultimate tragedy—reflect the colonial and postcolonial legacies of social stratification and patriarchy (Ranjith 100). These legacies continue to haunt individuals, particularly women, who challenge the power dynamics embedded in caste, gender, and colonial history. In *Postcolonial Concerns in the Select Novels of Arundhati Roy: A Critical Study*, this exploration of Ammu's tragic fate reveals how female sexuality becomes a site of control, a way of reasserting colonial-era power structures that continue to govern social life in postcolonial India. By portraying Ammu's plight, Roy critiques how women's bodies and desires are policed in a society still grappling with the legacies of colonialism and caste-based discrimination.

Domestic violence and abuse emerge as critical issues that resonate with broader themes of power, oppression, and gender inequality in a postcolonial society. In *The God of Small Things*, the character of Ammu is a poignant example of how domestic violence profoundly affects women, particularly within

the historical and cultural framework of postcolonial India. Her abusive marriage not only symbolizes the personal trauma and suffering faced by women but also reflects the societal structures that perpetuate such violence. The abuse Ammu experiences is not just a private matter; it is deeply intertwined with the legacy of colonialism, caste hierarchies, and patriarchal oppression that continues to affect women's autonomy and freedom. Through Ammu's plight, Roy highlights the destructive nature of domestic violence, illustrating how it erodes the physical and emotional well-being of women while also demonstrating how women's voices are silenced and their agency denied. Roy writes, "It wasn't hard for her to portray Ammu as the person actually responsible for Sophie Mol's death" (322). The trauma Ammu endures, and the lack of societal support for victims, underscores the failure of postcolonial societies to address gendered violence, further entrenching the inequalities that women face. The novel also critiques how colonial legacies of power dynamics continue to shape contemporary relationships, particularly in the context of gender, where women like Ammu remain trapped in cycles of abuse due to social, economic, and cultural constraints. Thus, domestic violence in Roy's work serves as both a personal tragedy and a larger commentary on the pervasive effects of postcolonial structures of power that continue to oppress marginalized groups, particularly women.

In Arundhati Roy's novels, particularly in *The God of Small Things*, the female characters exemplify the postcolonial struggle against systemic oppression and restricted agency. These women are often portrayed as victims of patriarchal control, their autonomy undermined by rigid societal norms and expectations deeply entrenched in colonial and postcolonial structures. Rahel, the central character, is emblematic of this struggle. Her life unfolds within a framework that prioritizes conformity to traditional gender roles, often at the expense of her individuality and self-expression. This forced conformity highlights the intersection of gender and societal control, reflecting the broader postcolonial concerns of silencing marginalized voices. Roy masterfully critiques how colonial legacies perpetuate such injustices, drawing attention to the enduring cultural practices that continue to subjugate women in postcolonial societies. Through

Rahel and other female characters, the narrative poignantly explores the complex dynamics of resistance, survival, and identity in a postcolonial context.

The examination of cultural hegemony and systemic intolerance in *The God of Small Things* reveals how deeply entrenched social hierarchies continue to shape post-colonial Indian society. Through her masterful narrative, Roy exposes the intersecting forces of caste discrimination, religious conflict, and patriarchal oppression that constrain individual agency and perpetuate cycles of injustice. The novel's portrayal of characters like Ammu, Velutha, and the twins demonstrates how societal intolerance operates at multiple levels, crushing those who dare to challenge established norms.

The tragic love story between Ammu and Velutha serves as a powerful metaphor for the broader systemic inequities that persist in post-colonial India. Their relationship, transgressing both caste and gender boundaries, illuminates how cultural hegemony maintains its grip through violence, social ostracism, and the internalisation of oppressive norms. Roy's narrative suggests that true liberation requires dismantling these interconnected systems of power. This study concludes that *The God of Small Things* stands not merely as a critique of social intolerance but as a testament to the human cost of maintaining rigid hierarchies in post-colonial societies. Through its unflinching examination of systemic oppression, the novel challenges readers to confront these persistent inequities and imagine possibilities for transformation.

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