

REFLECTIONS OF SOCIAL INEQUALITY: AN ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL ISSUES IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*

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Abstract

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) intricately examines the multifaceted social inequalities embedded within Indian society. Through its narrative, the novel addresses issues such as caste discrimination, gender oppression, and the lingering effects of colonialism. This paper delves into these themes, highlighting how Roy's storytelling exposes the systemic injustices that pervade the lives of her characters.

Keywords: arundhati roy, social inequality, caste system, gender oppression, post colonialism

Introduction

Arundhati Roy's debut novel, *The God of Small Things*, offers a profound exploration of the entrenched social hierarchies and injustices in Indian society. Set in Kerala during the 1960s, the narrative unfolds through the lives of fraternal twins Estha and Rahel, whose experiences reflect the pervasive impact of caste discrimination, gender roles, and colonial legacies. Roy's intricate storytelling not only portrays personal tragedies but also critiques the societal structures that perpetuate inequality.

Caste Discrimination and Social Stratification

One of the central themes in Roy's novel is the rigid caste system that dictates social interactions and personal relationships. The character of Velutha, an untouchable or Dalit, embodies the systemic oppression faced by those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. His forbidden relationship with Ammu, a woman from a higher caste, culminates in tragic consequences, highlighting the brutal enforcement of caste boundaries.

Roy illustrates this through the societal reaction to their liaison: "It was a violation of the Love Laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much" (Roy 33). This statement underscores the societal constraints

that dictate personal relationships, reinforcing caste-based discrimination. The critic S. Kandasamy, in his analysis, emphasizes the novel's portrayal of caste dynamics, stating that Roy "exposes the deep-seated prejudices and the violent repercussions of transgressing caste boundaries" (Kandasamy 45). His critique aligns with Roy's narrative, which presents the caste system as a pervasive force influencing every aspect of life.

Further scholarly perspectives reinforce this view. Dr. Parneet Jaggi discusses the deep-rooted nature of caste discrimination in Indian society, noting that "the stigma of untouchability is so deeply ingrained in the minds of Indian people that it may become a dangerous judgement" (Jaggi 24). This observation aligns with Roy's depiction of Velutha's experiences and the societal backlash he faces.

Gender Oppression and Patriarchal Structures

Gender inequality is another critical issue addressed in *The God of Small Things*. Female characters such as Ammu and Baby Kochamma navigate a patriarchal society that restricts their autonomy and subjects them to societal judgment. Ammu's defiance of traditional gender roles, particularly through her relationship with Velutha, results in her ostracization and eventual demise.

Roy portrays Ammu's struggle against societal norms: "Ammu had no choice. She had to pack her bags and leave. She was exiled from Ayemenem" (Roy 161). This exile symbolizes the punitive measures imposed on women who challenge patriarchal expectations. B. Pradeepa's scholarly work delves into the gender dynamics in Roy's novel, asserting that "the female characters' experiences reflect the broader societal mechanisms that enforce gender roles and punish deviations" (Pradeepa 58). Her analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of the systemic nature of gender oppression depicted in the novel.

Romeena Roy and Antony Jose further explore the intersection of gender and caste in their study, highlighting how "gender stereotypes are deeply ingrained in cultural and societal expectations, frequently harming people who don't fit the strict binary gender norms imposed by these institutions" (Roy and Jose 186). This intersectionality is evident in Ammu's experiences, as she faces discrimination not only for her gender but also for her relationship with a lower-caste man.

Colonial Legacy and Postcolonial Identity

The remnants of colonial rule are evident in the cultural and societal structures portrayed in *The God of Small Things*. The characters grapple with a postcolonial identity, navigating the influences of British colonialism and traditional Indian values. The History House serves as a metaphor for colonial legacy, representing both the allure and the decay of colonial influence.

Roy describes the History House as "haunted by history, by the ghosts of imperialism" (Roy 292), indicating the lingering impact of colonialism on contemporary society. This setting becomes a site of confrontation between past and present, tradition and change. The critic S. Kandasamy discusses the symbolism of the History House, noting that it "embodies the complexities of postcolonial identity, where the remnants of colonial structures continue to shape societal norms and individual consciousness" (Kandasamy 50). His perspective enriches the understanding of how colonial history permeates the characters' lives.

Fahimeh Nazari and Hossein Pirnajmuddin, in their article, analyze Roy's treatment of postcolonial themes,

arguing that "Roy finds the house of history still too clamorously haunted with the colonial legacy in India to house hybridity" (Nazari and Pirnajmuddin 199). This observation underscores the challenges faced by postcolonial societies in reconciling their colonial past with their present identities.

Language and Narrative Structure

Roy's use of language in the novel is notable for its hybridity and innovation. She blends English with Malayalam, employs non-linear storytelling, and utilizes poetic prose to convey the characters' inner worlds and the societal constraints they face. This narrative style reflects the fragmented realities of the characters and the complexities of their social environment. The incorporation of local dialects and cultural references adds authenticity to the narrative. For instance, Roy writes, "Naaley," meaning "tomorrow" in Malayalam, as the novel's closing word, symbolizing a glimmer of hope amidst despair (Roy 340).

The Critic B. Pradeepa analyses Roy's linguistic choices, stating that "the fusion of languages and the non-linear narrative structure mirror the disjointed experiences of the characters, emphasizing the dissonance between individual desires and societal expectations" (Pradeepa 62). Her critique highlights the deliberate stylistic choices that reinforce the novel's themes.

Conclusion

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* presents a compelling critique of social inequalities in Indian society, addressing issues of caste discrimination, gender oppression, and the enduring effects of colonialism. Through her nuanced characters and innovative narrative style, Roy exposes the systemic structures that perpetuate injustice. The scholarly analyses of S. Kandasamy and B. Pradeepa further illuminate the novel's exploration of these themes, offering critical insights into the societal dynamics at play. Roy's work remains a significant contribution to literature, prompting ongoing discussions about social inequality and the human condition.

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