



Women's Voices of Resistance in The God of Small Things

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Abstract

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* presents a powerful exploration of women's resistance within a rigid patriarchal and caste-bound society in Kerala. The novel portrays how female characters negotiate oppressive social structures, cultural expectations, and gender discrimination. This paper examines the voices of resistance articulated by women in the narrative, particularly through the characters of Ammu, Rahel, and Baby Kochamma. Ammu's defiance of patriarchal authority and her transgression of social and caste boundaries symbolize a bold challenge to dominant norms, while Rahel's quiet and internal resistance reflects the psychological impact of social restrictions on women. Baby Kochamma, on the other hand, represents the internalization of patriarchal values and the complexities of female complicity within oppressive systems. By analyzing these characters, the study highlights how Roy exposes the intersection of gender, caste, and power in shaping women's lives. Ultimately, the novel demonstrates that women's resistance—whether overt or subtle—plays a crucial role in questioning and destabilizing entrenched patriarchal structures.

Keywords: Feminism, Women's Resistance, Patriarchy, Caste System, Gender Oppression.

Introduction

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) is widely recognized as a significant contribution to contemporary Indian English literature for its profound exploration of social inequalities, gender oppression, and the rigid hierarchies embedded in Indian society. Set in the state of Kerala, the novel examines the complex intersections of caste, class, gender, and colonial legacy through the experiences of the Ipe family. Among the many thematic concerns of the novel, the issue of women's resistance against patriarchal and social constraints occupies a central place. Roy presents a narrative in which female characters struggle to negotiate their identities and assert their voices within a deeply patriarchal social order that seeks to control their bodies, choices, and social roles. The novel vividly portrays how societal norms, cultural traditions, and family expectations restrict women's autonomy and reinforce gender inequality. In this context, Roy constructs her female characters not merely as victims of oppression but also as agents of resistance who challenge dominant structures in different ways. The character of Ammu represents an overt form of resistance as she defies patriarchal authority by rejecting an abusive marriage and later transgressing rigid caste and social boundaries through her relationship with Velutha. Her actions symbolize a courageous yet tragic challenge to the oppressive "Love Laws" that dictate who should be loved and how. Rahel, Ammu's daughter, embodies a quieter yet equally significant form of resistance through her psychological detachment from social norms and her refusal to fully



conform to the expectations imposed upon her. Meanwhile, Baby Kochamma reflects another dimension of women's experiences under patriarchy, demonstrating how internalized social norms can lead women to reinforce the very systems that oppress them. Through these characters, Roy exposes the layered and multifaceted nature of women's resistance, revealing how acts of defiance can emerge in both explicit and subtle forms. By highlighting these voices of resistance, *The God of Small Things* critiques entrenched patriarchal values and illustrates the struggle of women to assert agency within a society governed by rigid social and cultural codes. Consequently, the novel offers a powerful commentary on gender injustice and the enduring quest for female autonomy and self-expression.

Background of the Study

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) is a critically acclaimed novel that explores the complex realities of Indian society, particularly the rigid structures of caste, class, and patriarchy. Set in Kerala, the narrative reveals how social norms and cultural traditions shape individual lives, especially those of women who often face systemic discrimination and limited autonomy. The novel highlights how patriarchal authority operates within family, community, and institutional frameworks, restricting women's choices and reinforcing gender inequality. Characters such as Ammu, Mammachi, and Rahel illustrate the varied experiences of women navigating oppressive social expectations and cultural boundaries. Their struggles reflect broader issues of gender injustice, including domestic violence, social exclusion, and the denial of personal freedom. Against this backdrop, Roy portrays acts of resistance—both explicit and subtle—through which women attempt to assert their identity and agency. This context provides the foundation for examining women's voices of resistance within the novel.

Feminist Perspective and Scope of the Study

This study adopts a feminist perspective to examine women's resistance in *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, focusing on how gender oppression is shaped by interconnected structures such as patriarchy, caste hierarchy, family authority, and institutional power. Feminism is viewed as a critical framework that analyzes how social systems regulate women's identities, bodies, and desires. Using feminist literary criticism and an intersectional approach, the study explores how Roy portrays women not only as victims of oppression but also as agents of resistance. It analyzes major female characters—Mammachi, Ammu, and Rahel—each representing different responses to patriarchal control across generations. Through textual analysis, the research examines themes such as sexual politics, domestic violence, restrictions on female autonomy, and the denial of rights within family and society. Particular emphasis is placed on the "Love Laws," which symbolize social mechanisms that punish female transgression. The study aims to highlight how women's resistance challenges patriarchal authority and exposes deep-rooted gender injustice.

Women's Resistance through Love and Transgression in *The God of Small Things*

In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy portrays women's resistance through acts of love that challenge rigid social and cultural boundaries. Ammu's relationship with Velutha becomes a powerful form of defiance against caste hierarchy, patriarchal morality, and strict



social control. The novel introduces the concept of the “Love Laws,” which dictate “who should be loved, and how, and how much,” functioning as mechanisms that regulate women’s emotions and personal choices. By forming a relationship with a man from a lower caste, Ammu openly challenges these social restrictions and asserts her right to love and personal freedom. However, this transgression results in severe punishment from her family, society, and institutional authority. Roy highlights how female desire and autonomy are treated as moral violations, while similar actions by men often remain unchallenged. Ammu’s resistance is quiet yet powerful, revealing how patriarchal systems perceive independent women as a threat to established social order.

Resistance as a Central Narrative Concern

In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy places resistance at the core of the narrative, shaping the novel’s themes, character development, and moral perspective. Resistance in the text does not appear only in the form of open rebellion or political struggle; instead, it is expressed through the everyday experiences, emotions, and decisions of characters who live within restrictive social structures. Roy portrays resistance as a subtle yet persistent force that questions patriarchal authority, caste hierarchy, and institutional control. Through this approach, the novel demonstrates how power operates by regulating relationships, personal freedom, and social belonging. Female characters, particularly Ammu and Rahel, represent significant voices of resistance. Ammu challenges social expectations by refusing to remain in an abusive marriage and by pursuing a forbidden relationship with Velutha, a man from a lower caste. Her actions directly violate the rigid social codes that govern love and social interaction. Rahel, on the other hand, expresses resistance in a quieter manner. Her emotional distance, fragmented memories, and refusal to fully conform to societal expectations reflect a psychological form of defiance against oppressive norms. Although these acts may seem passive, they expose the cruelty and hypocrisy of the moral codes that dominate the society depicted in the novel, especially the rigid “Love Laws” that determine who can love whom.

Roy also illustrates that resistance often carries severe consequences. Characters who challenge established norms frequently face social exclusion, punishment, and personal suffering. Ammu’s tragic fate demonstrates how patriarchal and caste-based systems react harshly to those who defy their authority. Through this portrayal, the novel reveals the unequal power relations that suppress dissent and maintain social control. The narrative structure itself reinforces the theme of resistance. Roy employs a non-linear timeline, fragmented storytelling, and shifting perspectives, allowing suppressed memories and marginalized voices to emerge. This narrative technique challenges conventional storytelling and resists dominant historical and social narratives. Ultimately, *The God of Small Things* presents resistance not as a dramatic revolution but as a persistent moral stance. By highlighting acts of defiance in personal relationships, memories, and emotions, Roy emphasizes the importance of resisting injustice and questioning the legitimacy of oppressive social systems.

Patriarchy and Social Control in Ayemenem

1. Family Hierarchy and Male Authority



In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy portrays Ayemenem as a tightly controlled social environment where patriarchal values dominate family life and community structures. Patriarchy is reinforced through family hierarchy, social traditions, and moral authority, granting men greater privilege while restricting women's independence and decision-making power. Within the Ipe family, male authority shapes everyday interactions and determines the distribution of power and property. Chacko, for instance, asserts his dominance by claiming ownership of family property and authority over household matters. His statement, "What's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine," reflects the entitlement associated with male privilege and highlights the normalized imbalance between men and women within the household. Women are expected to remain obedient and dependent, with little space to express autonomy. Patriarchal control is further reinforced by older family members who internalize these values and enforce them in the name of cultural tradition and moral respectability. As a result, the household becomes a space where social hierarchy is reproduced and sustained through everyday practices and expectations.

2. Moral Codes, Tradition, and Gender Regulation

Roy also demonstrates how moral codes and traditional beliefs are used to regulate women's behavior, particularly their sexuality and personal freedom. The concept of the "Love Laws," which dictate "who should be loved, and how, and how much," serves as a symbolic mechanism of social control. These unwritten rules punish women who challenge social boundaries while allowing men greater freedom and moral flexibility. Chacko's relationships with female factory workers are casually justified as natural male behavior, often described as "Men's Needs." In contrast, Ammu's relationship with Velutha, a man from a lower caste, is condemned as a serious violation of social and moral order. Mammachi's reaction to this relationship reveals the deep-rooted intersection of caste prejudice and patriarchal values that shape family attitudes. Tradition thus becomes a tool for controlling women's bodies and desires, presenting social repression as cultural morality. When Ammu challenges these norms, she faces humiliation, isolation, and punishment, demonstrating how patriarchal authority operates collectively through family, society, and institutions. Through this portrayal, Roy critiques the social system of Ayemenem, exposing how patriarchal power disguises oppression as tradition and highlighting the difficult struggle for women seeking autonomy and dignity.

Representation of Women in *The God of Small Things*

1. Social and Cultural Context

In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy situates the experiences of women within the social and cultural landscape of Kerala, a society structured by rigid hierarchies of caste, class, and patriarchy. Women's lives are shaped by deeply rooted traditions and moral expectations that regulate their roles within the family and community. Social status, marriage, and family honor become central factors determining a woman's identity and value. The novel presents female characters such as Mammachi, Ammu, and Rahel as individuals navigating these restrictive social conditions. Mammachi reflects the older generation of women who internalize patriarchal norms despite suffering under them, particularly through



her experience of domestic abuse. Ammu represents a woman who attempts to resist these social restrictions but is ultimately marginalized because of her divorce and lack of economic independence. The social environment depicted in the novel emphasizes obedience, respectability, and conformity, leaving little space for women to assert personal freedom. Through this portrayal, Roy reveals how social traditions and community expectations play a crucial role in maintaining gender inequality and limiting women's autonomy.

2. Gender Roles and Expectations

Gender roles in the novel are strictly defined and reinforced through family structures, cultural traditions, and social attitudes. Women are expected to embody qualities such as modesty, obedience, and devotion to family responsibilities. Their behavior, particularly in matters of sexuality and relationships, is closely monitored and judged according to rigid moral standards. In contrast, men enjoy greater freedom and authority within both domestic and social spheres. This imbalance highlights the patriarchal nature of the society portrayed in the novel. Ammu's life demonstrates how women who challenge these expectations face social condemnation and exclusion. Her decision to leave an abusive marriage and later pursue a relationship with Velutha violates established norms, leading to severe consequences. Rahel's character reflects the emotional impact of growing up within such a restrictive environment, as she experiences alienation and struggles to form a stable identity. Through these characters, Roy exposes the limitations imposed on women by traditional gender roles while emphasizing the broader social systems that sustain these inequalities.

Women's Voices of Resistance in the Novel

1. Ammu's Resistance to Patriarchal Norms

In *The God of Small Things*, Ammu emerges as one of the most significant voices of resistance against patriarchal authority and restrictive social norms. Living in a society that limits women's independence and decision-making power, Ammu challenges these expectations through her personal choices and refusal to remain submissive. Her decision to leave an abusive marriage demonstrates an early act of defiance against a system that expects women to endure suffering for the sake of family honor. However, as a divorced woman, Ammu faces social stigma and limited economic independence, revealing the structural barriers imposed on women within patriarchal society. Her relationship with Velutha further intensifies this resistance, as it openly challenges the rigid caste hierarchy and moral codes governing social relationships. By pursuing love and emotional fulfillment outside these boundaries, Ammu questions the authority of social traditions that control women's bodies and desires. Although her actions lead to severe punishment and isolation, they expose the injustice of a system that condemns female autonomy while tolerating male privilege.

2. Rahel's Silent and Psychological Resistance

Rahel represents a quieter yet equally meaningful form of resistance in the novel. Unlike Ammu's open defiance, Rahel's resistance is expressed through silence, emotional distance, and psychological withdrawal from the social norms that attempt to define her life. Growing up in an environment shaped by trauma, social judgment, and family conflict, Rahel develops a detached perspective toward the values imposed by society. Her fragmented memories and



novel also highlights how institutions such as family, religion, law, and social tradition collaborate to maintain gender inequality and suppress dissent. Yet, Roy's narrative reveals that acts of resistance—whether personal, emotional, or social—continue to challenge these structures. *The God of Small Things* presents resistance not simply as a struggle for personal freedom but as a broader critique of social injustice and moral hypocrisy. By foregrounding women's voices and experiences, Roy exposes the limitations of patriarchal authority and underscores the enduring human desire for dignity, love, and autonomy within restrictive social systems.

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