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The multiple feminist voices in The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy

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Abstract

This paper examines the multiple feminist voices in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. It argues that Roy exposes patriarchy, gender double standards, female sexuality, and how caste, class, and family power intensify women's oppression. Ammu, the central feminist figure, challenges patriarchal norms through divorce and her forbidden relationship with Velutha, an Untouchable. Roy presents women not only as victims but also as resisters, while showing that women like Baby Kochamma and Mammachi can uphold patriarchal control. The paper emphasizes intersectionality—Ammu's gendered suffering is inseparable from Velutha's caste oppression—and concludes that women's liberation cannot be separated from the liberation of other marginalized groups, as the "Love Laws" violently reinforce both caste and gender hierarchies.

Key word:- Feminism, Patriarchy, Caste, Intersectionality, Female Resistance/Agency, Love Laws

Arundhati Roy is one of India's most critical essayists in English. Her fiction and nonfiction have both made a permanent stamp on the Anglophone literary scene. Her solitary novel, The God of Small Things is multifaceted and can't be restricted to any one literary group. It has been generally acclaimed for its phenomenal depiction of the minimized, verbal richness, exceptional design example and its collection of human feelings. The God of Small Things appears through Roy's exposure of patriarchy, gender double standards, female sexuality, and the ways caste, class, and family power intensify women's oppression. The novel presents women not merely as victims but also as figures who resist, even when resistance brings severe punishment.

It is an endeavor of Roy to depict the multiple feminist voices in the novel. The feminists we run over in the novel have a place with various indicates in time and a culture that is in steady transition. It's anything but a solitary story of the oppressed lady and her challenge but instead we hear a few voices responding to the repeating theme of man centric society and giving bits of knowledge into various impression of this deep rooted wonder. It isn't sufficient to have only one view point to comprehend an issue or a circumstance. The imaginative arrangement of the feminist polyphony in the novel is inspired in the thesis to have a superior comprehension of the enduring fight between the genders. In spite of the fact that in the wake of perusing the novel one is constantly under the feeling that it is dependably the ladies who are in a bad way, the various

voices plainly run with the announcement that each activity has an equivalent and inverse response. The quieted voice of the regular habitat likewise shows solidarity with the feminist development. Besides, it manages the changing periods of woman's rights after some time and the subversive power intrinsic in a female content.

Feminism in The God of Small Things appears through Roy's exposure of patriarchy, gender double standards, female sexuality, and the ways caste, class, and family power intensify women's oppression. The novel presents women not merely as victims but also as figures who resist, even when resistance brings severe punishment.

The novel is set in Kerala, within a Syrian Christian family and a wider society governed by patriarchal customs. Women are expected to obey family decisions, preserve sexual respectability, remain within marriage, and accept male authority.Roy shows that patriarchy operates not only through men but also through women who have internalized its values. Baby Kochamma, for example, becomes an agent of patriarchal control, especially against Ammu and her children.The family home at Ayemenem is therefore not a safe feminine space. It becomes a site of surveillance, humiliation, and exclusion, particularly for Ammu, a divorced woman with two children.Ammu is the novel's most important feminist character. She challenges patriarchal expectations by marrying against her family's wishes, leaving an abusive husband, and later entering a forbidden relationship with Velutha, an Untouchable carpenter.Her divorce places her in an impossible position. As a divorced woman, she is treated as a burden in her parental home and is denied the social respect granted to married women. Her children, Estha and Rahel, also suffer because society views their mother's marital status as shameful.Ammu's relationship with Velutha is politically and socially radical. It crosses the boundaries of caste, class, religion, and gender; it asserts that a woman has the right to desire, love, and choose outside the rules made by family and society.Yet Roy does not romanticize rebellion. Ammu's transgression leads to social condemnation, separation from her children, and eventual death. Her fate reveals how brutally patriarchy punishes women who claim sexual and emotional autonomy.

Roy repeatedly shows that men and women are judged by different standards. Men may pursue desire, leave marriages, or exercise authority with relative social tolerance, while women are punished for similar actions.Ammu's husband, Baba, is violent and irresponsible, yet his failures do not bring the same social disgrace that Ammu faces after divorce. Chacko, too, enjoys sexual freedom and social privilege, while Ammu is denied even basic independence.This double standard is central to the novel's feminism. Roy exposes how "respectability" is used to control women's bodies, sexuality, and mobility, while men's behaviour is often excused or normalized.

One of Roy's boldest feminist interventions is her treatment of female desire. Ammu's love for Velutha is presented as mutual, tender, and deeply human, not as immoral simply because it violates social rules.The novel challenges the idea that women should be passive objects of male desire. Ammu actively chooses Velutha; her desire is portrayed as an assertion of selfhood in a society that expects women to be sexually silent.However, the consequences show the violence of social control. Their relationship is treated as a crime against caste and family honour, and

Velutha is brutally killed. Ammu's punishment is social isolation and emotional destruction.

Roy's feminism is complex because she shows that women can also uphold patriarchal power. Baby Kochamma, Mammachi, and even parts of the family structure participate in controlling Ammu and Rahel. Baby Kochamma resents Ammu and treats her and the twins as unwanted dependants. Her cruelty shows how a woman who has herself suffered under patriarchy may reproduce oppression against other women.Mammachi, though herself affected by her husband Pappachi's violence, accepts many patriarchal values and supports the family hierarchy. Roy thus refuses a simple division between male oppressors and female victims.
Roy's feminism is intersectional: it connects gender oppression with caste, class, religion, and politics. Ammu's suffering cannot be understood only as a woman's suffering; it is also shaped by her status as a divorced mother in a conservative Syrian Christian family.
Velutha's position is equally important. As an Untouchable man, he is oppressed by caste; as Ammu's lover, he becomes the target of patriarchal and caste-based anger. Their relationship shows how gender oppression and caste oppression reinforce one another. Velutha's position reveals the other side of the intersection. He is skilled, intelligent, and politically aware, but his Paravan identity marks him as "untouchable" and denies him equal social dignity.His relationship with Ammu is dangerous because caste society treats the upper-caste woman's body as a symbol of family and community purity. Velutha is therefore seen not as a lover but as a violator of caste order.His brutal killing demonstrates that caste violence is also gendered: male upper-caste authority polices both women's sexuality and Dalit men's access to upper-caste women. Velutha's body becomes the site on which caste power asserts itself.

The novel therefore argues that women's liberation cannot be separated from the liberation of other marginalized groups. A feminist reading must consider how caste, class, and gender together create structures of domination.
Despite oppression, Roy gives her women moments of agency. Ammu works, raises her children, refuses to remain with an abusive husband, and claims the right to love Velutha. Rahel's nonconformity, her unconventional behaviour, her refusal to fit feminine expectations, and her eventual reunion with Estha suggests a fractured but persistent form of resistance.
Roy also presents women as intellectuals and decision-makers, even within a society that limits them. The novel's narrative structure itself, moving between memories, voices, and perspectives, gives space to female experience that official family history tries to silence.
Roy's feminism is not a simple demand for legal equality alone. It questions the deeper structures that control women's bodies, desires, labour, speech, and relationships.
The novel exposes how family, religion, caste, and state power combine to discipline women. It also shows that women's oppression is often sustained through emotional manipulation, shame, and the policing of respectability.

Above all, The God of Small Things insists on the humanity of women like Ammu and Rahel. Their pain is not presented as natural or deserved; it is shown as the result of social systems that make love, freedom, and dignity dangerous for women.

In Arundhati Roy's novel, caste and feminism intersect because Ammu's oppression as a woman cannot be separated from Velutha's oppression as an Untouchable. Their forbidden relationship challenges the "Love Laws" of caste, gender, class, and family honour, and the violent response to it exposes how these systems reinforce one another.Roy presents caste and gender not as separate problems but as interconnected structures of power. Ammu is restricted because she is a divorced woman, while Velutha is restricted because he is a Paravan, placed at the lowest level of the caste hierarchy.Their relationship therefore violates two major social boundaries at once: a woman's sexual autonomy and an upper-caste woman's supposed purity in relation to an Untouchable man. This double transgression makes their love socially unbearable to the Ayemenem family and community.The novel shows that women's freedom is limited not only by patriarchy but also by caste-consciousness. Ammu's choice of Velutha is punished more severely because he is not merely another man; he is a man whose caste identity makes the relationship appear as pollution and disgrace.

Ammu belongs to a privileged Syrian Christian family, but her gender and marital status place her in a vulnerable position. As a divorced mother, she has little economic independence, limited social respectability, and no secure place in her parental home.Her relationship with Velutha is an assertion of female desire and choice. She refuses to accept that a woman's sexuality must be controlled by marriage, family approval, or caste boundaries. In this sense, Ammu's love is a feminist act of self-assertion.Yet the novel also shows the limits of her privilege. Although Ammu is upper-caste by family background, patriarchal control reduces her to a dependent daughter and disgraced divorcée. Her upper-caste identity does not protect her from gendered punishment.

Roy's famous idea of the "Love Laws" explains how caste and feminism meet in the novel. These laws decide "who should be loved, and how, and how much," and they are shaped by caste hierarchy, gender expectations, class interest, and family reputation.Ammu and Velutha break these laws by loving across caste and outside marriage. Their relationship exposes the artificiality of social rules that claim to protect purity but actually preserve hierarchy. The punishment is unequal but interconnected. Ammu is emotionally and socially destroyed, while Velutha is physically tortured and killed. This difference shows how caste and gender produce different but related forms of violence.

Roy complicates feminism by showing that women can participate in caste-patriarchal control. Baby Kochamma and Mammachi help preserve the family's honour by condemning Ammu and protecting the social order. Baby Kochamma's hostility toward Ammu is intensified by caste prejudice. She helps transform Ammu's private relationship into a public scandal, showing how patriarchal women may police other women's sexuality in the name of respectability.

Thus, Roy does not present women as naturally innocent or men as naturally oppressive. Caste patriarchy can be maintained by both men and women when they accept its values.

The novel links personal love with public politics. Velutha's association with Marxist politics and his relationship with Ammu threaten the existing order because both challenge the traditional authority of landlords, family, and caste.Caste functions through silence, denial, and "small things": who may touch whom, who may be loved, who may enter which space, and whose suffering may be acknowledged. Roy shows that these everyday rules sustain large structures of domination.The tragedy of Estha and Rahel also emerges from this intersection. Their childhood is damaged not only by their mother's forbidden love but by the family's attempt to hide caste violence and preserve its own respectability

Conclusion:

Feminism in The God of Small Things lies in Roy's powerful portrayal of women living under multiple forms of oppression and their limited but meaningful acts of resistance. Through Ammu, Rahel, Mammachi, and Baby Kochamma, Roy reveals that patriarchy damages not only women but entire families and communities. Caste intersects with feminism in the novel by showing that women's oppression and Dalit oppression are mutually reinforcing. Ammu's feminist rebellion against patriarchal control becomes inseparable from Velutha's caste rebellion, and their love exposes the violence hidden beneath family honour, purity, and social respectability.

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