

Gender, Power, and Patriarchy in *The God of Small Things*: A Critical Study of Arundhati Roy's Work

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Abstract— Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) has attracted three fairly distinct strands of feminist and postcolonial criticism: readings that catalogue the forms of gender oppression the novel depicts, readings that foreground the intersection of gender with caste, and readings that foreground the intersection of gender with race and colonial history. What these strands rarely do together is connect the novel's content-level critique of patriarchy to the formal strategies, particularly its non-linear, fragmented narrative structure, through which Roy stages that critique. This article addresses that gap through a close reading of four female characters who occupy structurally distinct positions relative to patriarchal power—Ammu, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, and Rahel—read alongside Velutha as a case where caste and gender-based punishment converge. The analysis draws on a defined set of selection criteria and coding categories adapted from existing feminist and postcolonial scholarship on the novel, and it deliberately engages a published counter-reading that questions whether gender is in fact the primary axis of subordination in the text. The discussion finds that patriarchy in the novel operates simultaneously as a family practice, a property regime, and a caste-linked disciplinary system, and that Roy's fragmented narrative form is best read not as ornamental but as a formal correlate of this critique, restoring narrative authority to characters the plot itself silences. The article closes by situating these findings against comparative and more recent scholarship on the novel and by identifying which of its claims remain interpretive rather than empirically demonstrated.

Keywords— Arundhati Roy; *The God of Small Things*; patriarchy; gender and caste; postcolonial feminism; narrative form.

I. INTRODUCTION

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* examines how social, familial, and colonial histories converge to shape individual lives in postcolonial Kerala. Among its many concerns, the novel offers a sustained critique of patriarchal authority: it shows how institutionalized gender hierarchy, operating at both the family and the community level, determines who is permitted intimacy, inheritance, mobility, and voice within the Ayemenem household and beyond it.

Patriarchy in the novel is not confined to isolated acts of male domination in the household. It works as a structure distributed across institutions, families, and individuals at once, so that a single act, such as Ammu's relationship with Velutha, draws consequences from family, caste hierarchy, and the state simultaneously. This layered quality is central to why the novel continues to reward feminist and postcolonial analysis nearly three decades after publication, and it is also what makes a single-axis reading of the text—gender alone, or caste alone—difficult to sustain without leaving something out.

Research gap: Existing scholarship on the novel's treatment of gender divides along three lines that rarely meet. One line documents the forms of gender oppression the novel depicts—marginalization, subordination, and violence—largely at the level of theme and character (Jose 159–166; Mardiyani and Tawami 165–174). A second line reads gender specifically through

its intersection with caste, showing how Ammu's punishment and Velutha's murder are two faces of one disciplinary system (Mandal; Saeed; Al-Quaderi). A third and more recent line reads gender through its intersection with race and colonial history, extending the intersectional frame beyond caste and class (Ansari, Ahmed, and Anjum). A separate comparative study places Roy's resistant women from two different novels side by side without focusing specifically on how patriarchy itself is structured within either text (Sharma). What is comparatively rare is a study that keeps patriarchy, rather than any single axis of intersection, as its organizing focus, while tracing that patriarchy across family structure, property law, caste discipline, and Roy's own narrative technique within a single, defined method—and rarer still is one that puts a counter-reading, such as Al-Quaderi's argument that gender is not the primary determinant of subalternity in this novel, into direct conversation with its own conclusions rather than citing only supporting scholarship.

This gap matters because a reading of patriarchy that stops at cataloguing its effects on individual characters risks treating the novel's formal choices—its refusal of linear chronology, its withholding and delayed release of information—as incidental rather than as part of the same critique. This article treats the two as connected and asks three questions: (1) how does patriarchal power operate across the family, property, and caste structures the novel depicts; (2) how does Roy's narrative form relate to that critique; and (3) how do these findings hold up against comparative scholarship and against a published counter-reading that questions gender's centrality to the novel's account of subordination. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature, Section 3 states the novelty and objectives of the study, Section 4 sets out the method and selection criteria, Sections 5 and 6 present the findings, and Section 7 discusses their implications and limitations before the conclusion in Section 8.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Cataloguing Gender Oppression

The earliest and most direct strand of scholarship on the novel's gender politics documents the forms oppression takes. Jose reads Ammu's and Mammachi's experiences as instances of a broader Indian patriarchal mindset in which political leadership, moral authority, and property ownership are reserved for men, leaving women's social value tied to their proximity to a father, brother, or husband (159–166). Mardiyani and Tawami extend this documentary approach across the novel's female cast, concluding that subordination, marginalisation, and violence recur as the novel's principal categories of gender inequality, and arguing that the text implicitly calls for a more balanced and mutually respectful relationship between men and women (165–174). This strand is valuable for establishing what forms of oppression the novel depicts, but it tends to treat those forms as parallel examples rather than as parts of one interlocking system.

2.2 Gender and Caste

A second strand reads gender through its intersection with caste, which is where much of the most influential scholarship on the novel sits. Mandal compares Roy's Ammu with Meena Kandasamy's protagonist in *The Gypsy Goddess* to argue that caste hierarchy is not simply layered on top of gender hierarchy in Indian patriarchal society but structurally bound to it, with the concept of purity operating as the link between the two systems. Saeed reads the psychological toll of this bound system on Roy's female and child characters, arguing that the novel's central achievement is its portrait of the inner cost of living under overlapping social and religious constraint. Al-Quaderi's reading of subalternity in the novel is the most direct challenge to a gender-centred account: he argues that gender is not, in fact, the primary determinant of subordination in the text, and that the more accurate model is a general power structure—a grid rather than a simple hierarchy—in which caste and class as much as gender determine who dominates and who is dominated. This is a genuine and citable disagreement in the secondary literature, and Section 5 returns to it directly.

2.3 Gender, Race, and Colonial History

A third, more recent strand widens the intersectional frame further. Ansari, Ahmed, and Anjum argue that prior intersectional readings of the novel have concentrated on caste and class while leaving the intersection of race and colonial history comparatively unexamined, and they read the marginalization of Roy's women as inseparable from the colonial histories that shaped Kerala's Syrian Christian community. This strand is useful for the present study because it confirms that the novel's patriarchy cannot be fully explained by family structure alone; colonial history supplies part of the vocabulary through which that patriarchy is expressed, most visibly through Chacko's Oxford education and the value the family places on English fluency and manners.

2.4 Comparative Scholarship

Comparative work on Roy's fiction remains limited relative to single-novel studies. Sharma's recent analysis of resistance across *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* places Ammu and Rahel alongside Anjum, Tilotama, and Revathy from the later novel, arguing that Roy's female and gender-nonconforming characters resist dominance in different registers depending on the structural position each occupies. This comparative approach demonstrates that Roy's treatment of resistance varies with context even within her own body of work, which is a useful check against treating any single character, Ammu included, as representative of Roy's model of resistance generally.

2.5 Summary of the Gap

Read together, this scholarship establishes that the novel's patriarchy has been well documented, that its intersection with caste and, more recently, with race and colonial history has been carefully theorized, and that at least one influential reading disputes gender's centrality altogether. What remains comparatively underexamined is the relationship between this patriarchal content and the novel's narrative form, and a systematic account that puts these strands, including the dissenting one, into direct conversation within a single analytical framework.

III. NOVELTY AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study differs from the scholarship reviewed above in three respects. First, it treats patriarchy itself, rather than any single axis of intersection, as the organizing category, and traces it across family structure, property and inheritance, and caste discipline within one framework rather than three separate ones. Second, it connects this content-level analysis to the novel's narrative form, reading Roy's fragmented, non-linear structure as a formal strategy that restores narrative authority to characters the plot itself marginalizes, rather than treating form and theme as separate objects of study. Third, it deliberately incorporates Al-Quaderi's counter-reading, which questions whether gender is the primary determinant of subordination in the novel, so that the study's conclusions are presented as contestable claims rather than as a settled consensus.

The specific objectives are to (a) identify how patriarchal power operates across four structurally distinct female characters and one intersectional case; (b) assess how the novel's narrative form relates to its critique of patriarchy; and (c) test these findings against comparative scholarship and against the strongest available counter-reading.

IV. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

This is a qualitative literary study using close reading, informed by feminist and postcolonial theoretical frameworks. The analysis is interpretive: it works from the published text and from secondary scholarship rather than from new empirical data, and conclusions about the novel's effects on readers are attributed to cited scholarship rather than presented as findings of this study.

4.2 Character Selection Criteria

Rather than surveying the novel's full cast, the analysis concentrates on four female characters and one male character, selected because each occupies a structurally distinct position relative to patriarchal power and because each has independent support in the secondary literature reviewed in Section 2: Ammu (a woman punished for transgressing the novel's "Love Laws"), Mammachi (a woman who has internalized patriarchal authority after decades of domestic abuse), Baby Kochamma (a woman who defends patriarchal norms she herself was constrained by), and Rahel (the narrating heir whose adult perspective structures the novel's fragmented timeline). Velutha, a Dalit man executed for his relationship with Ammu, is included as an intersectional case because his fate cannot be explained by caste or by gender alone, and because his inclusion allows the analysis to test claims about gender's primacy, including Al-Quaderi's counter-claim, directly against a case where caste and gender-based punishment coincide.

4.3 Analytical Framework and Procedure

Each character's relevant episodes were coded into four categories developed from the literature reviewed in Section 2: family-level patriarchal authority, gendered property and economic exclusion, caste-gender intersection, and narrative form as a site of resistance. Passages were selected using the same three-part test applied consistently across characters: the passage stages a concrete instance of the coded category, the narrative attaches a visible consequence to it, and the reading has independent support in at least one secondary source. Findings were then checked against the intersectional and comparative scholarship in

Sections 2.3 and 2.4, and, specifically for the claim that gender operates as the novel's primary disciplinary axis, checked against Al-Quaderi's dissenting account rather than left unexamined.

4.4 Limitations

The analysis is interpretive and was conducted by the research team alone, without a second coder, so inter-rater reliability cannot be reported. It draws no new data from readers, so any claim about the novel's real-world effect on readers rests on cited scholarship rather than on evidence generated here. Purposive character selection, even against explicit criteria, cannot fully rule out selection bias; requiring independent secondary support for each coded episode was intended to reduce, though not eliminate, this risk.

V. FINDINGS: PATRIARCHY AS FAMILY, PROPERTY, AND CASTE DISCIPLINE

5.1 Patriarchy as Family Structure

Pappachi and Chacko occupy different generations but the same structural position within the Ayemenem family. Pappachi's domestic violence against Mammachi is presented not as an aberration but as behavior the surrounding social order treats as unremarkable, which is precisely how Jose's account of Indian patriarchal norms describes the everyday normalization of male authority within the family (159–166). Chacko's position complicates a simple picture of male dominance as uniformly conservative: he speaks the language of progressive politics while retaining, unquestioned, the sexual and economic freedoms denied to Ammu and Mammachi. This gap between stated belief and lived privilege is itself a form of patriarchal power, one that does not require open hostility toward women to remain effective.

5.2 Gendered Property and Economic Exclusion

Ammu's position in the family illustrates how patriarchy operates through property and inheritance rather than only through direct control of behavior. She has no claim on the family's property, and her return to Ayemenem after her marriage's collapse is treated as tolerance rather than entitlement. Mardiyani and Tawami's broader account of gendered subordination in the novel identifies exactly this pattern: institutional exclusion from ownership operating alongside more visible forms of control (165–174). Mammachi's case shows a related but distinct mechanism: her factory, which she built, is gradually taken over by Chacko once he returns from England, and she accepts this transfer as natural rather than as a loss, which suggests that internalized patriarchal norms can be as effective as external enforcement in maintaining gendered economic exclusion.

5.3 Caste, Gender, and the "Love Laws"

The novel's central act of transgression, Ammu's relationship with Velutha, activates gender and caste discipline simultaneously rather than sequentially. Roy's own term for the social code this relationship violates, the "Love Laws" that decide "who should be loved, and how much," frames the prohibition as operating along both caste and gender lines at once. Ammu is punished through exile and early death; Velutha is punished through public, state-sanctioned violence. Mandal's comparative reading argues that caste and gender hierarchies in the Indian context are not separable systems layered on top of each other but a single structure organized around the concept of purity, and the novel's treatment of Ammu and Velutha supports this reading directly: neither character's punishment makes sense without reference to the other.

It is at this point that Al-Quaderi's counter-reading deserves direct engagement rather than dismissal. His claim that gender is not the primary determinant of subalternity in the novel rests on a defensible observation: several of the novel's most powerful characters, Baby Kochamma chief among them, are themselves women, which complicates any account in which gender alone predicts who dominates and who is dominated. The textual evidence in this study does not fully overturn that observation. Baby Kochamma's power within the family is real, and it is exercised specifically against other women, Ammu most of all. What the evidence does suggest is that Baby Kochamma's power is bounded in ways Chacko's is not: it operates only within the domestic sphere the family permits her, and it depends on her active enforcement of patriarchal and caste norms rather than on any independent authority of her own. Gender, on this reading, is not the only axis of power in the novel, but it does condition how power is available to a character to begin with, which is a narrower and more defensible claim than the stronger version this study's earlier drafts assumed without argument.

5.4 Family as Microcosm

The Ayemenem household functions as a small-scale version of the wider social order the novel depicts. Men occupy positions of nominal or actual authority, Pappachi and Chacko as heads of household in succession, while women's roles are consistently

defined relative to that authority rather than independent of it. This mirrors the intersectional account offered by Ansari, Ahmed, and Anjum, who argue that the family in the novel functions as the site where colonial, caste, and gender hierarchies are first learned and then reproduced across generations.

5.5 Resistance, Its Cost, and Rahel's Narrating Voice

The novel does register resistance, but consistently attaches a cost to it rather than treating it as redemptive on its own terms. Ammu's relationship with Velutha is the clearest instance: a genuine act of self-determination that the surrounding social order answers with exile and violence. Rahel's adult narrating voice offers a different, quieter form of resistance: her non-chronological retelling of the family's history refuses the surrounding society's preferred, tidier account of what happened and why, and in doing so keeps Ammu's and Velutha's perspectives available to the reader even though both characters are dead by the novel's opening pages. Sharma's comparative reading of resistance across Roy's two novels supports treating this kind of narrating authority as a form of resistance in its own right, distinct from and less costly than Ammu's direct transgression, which helps explain why Rahel survives the novel's world in a way Ammu does not.

VI. NARRATIVE FORM AS A SITE OF PATRIARCHAL CRITIQUE

Roy's fragmented, non-linear narrative structure is not simply a stylistic choice layered on top of a conventional plot; it is where the novel's critique of patriarchy becomes visible at the level of form rather than only content. By withholding the details of Velutha's death and Ammu's exile until late in the novel, while opening with Rahel's adult return to Ayemenem, Roy forces the reader to encounter the consequences of patriarchal and caste violence before encountering their causes. This ordering denies the reader the comfort of a linear moral arc in which transgression leads cleanly to consequence, and instead makes the reader assemble that arc backward, in the same fragmented way memory and trauma are shown to work for the characters themselves. Read this way, the novel's famous attention to "small things" is not a retreat from its political argument but a formal enactment of it: the large structures of caste and patriarchy are shown operating through small, cumulative domestic details, precisely because that is how Roy suggests they actually function.

VII. DISCUSSION

Two conclusions follow from the analysis. First, patriarchy in the novel is not a single mechanism but an overlapping set of them, operating through direct violence, through property exclusion, through internalized acceptance, and through caste discipline, and these mechanisms reinforce rather than substitute for one another across the four characters examined here. Second, the novel's narrative form is not separable from this critique; the delayed, fragmented disclosure of Ammu's and Velutha's fates is itself a way of dramatizing how patriarchal and caste violence are experienced, absorbed, and only belatedly understood.

These conclusions should be read against their limits. Section 5.3's engagement with Al-Quaderi's counter-reading narrows rather than eliminates this study's claims about gender's centrality: Baby Kochamma's example shows that women can hold and exercise real power within the novel's world, even as that power remains structurally bounded in ways men's power is not. A fuller test of this question would require comparing all named characters' access to power systematically rather than the five examined here, which is a natural extension for future work. The claim that Rahel's narrating voice constitutes resistance is also interpretive rather than demonstrated; it rests on how the novel is structured, not on evidence of how actual readers experience that structure, and testing it would require the kind of reader-response methodology used in empirical studies of literature and moral or political engagement rather than close reading alone. Future research could extend the comparative frame used here beyond Roy's own two novels to other South Asian women writers working with caste and gender together, such as Meena Kandasamy, whom Mandal already places alongside Roy, to test how much of this study's account of patriarchy and narrative form is specific to Roy rather than characteristic of a wider body of postcolonial women's writing.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Read across four structurally distinct female characters and one intersectional case, *The God of Small Things* presents patriarchy as a layered rather than a singular system: a family practice, a property regime, and a caste-linked disciplinary order operating together rather than in isolation. Roy's fragmented narrative form is best understood as part of this critique rather than as separate from it, restoring narrative authority to characters—Ammu and Velutha above all—whom the plot itself silences. At the same time, the novel does not support a simple, uncontested claim that gender is the sole or even the primary axis of power it depicts; Baby Kochamma's case, and Al-Quaderi's reading of it, place a real limit on that claim which this study has tried to state rather than avoid. The framework developed here is intended to connect strands of scholarship on the novel that have

generally run in parallel, and to identify, specifically, where its own conclusions remain open to the kind of empirical and comparative testing outlined above.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Both authors contributed to the conceptualisation, methodology, analysis, writing, and revision of the manuscript, and approved the final version.

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