



# STRUCTURES OF SILENCE: INTERSECTIONAL CASTE AND GENDER POLITICS IN “THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

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## ABSTRACT:

*This paper examines the intersectional dynamics of caste and gender politics in *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, foregrounding how structures of silence sustain systemic oppression in postcolonial Indian society. Set in Kerala, the novel exposes the deeply entrenched hierarchies that regulate love, sexuality, and social mobility through what Roy terms the “Love Laws” the codes determining “who should be loved, and how.” By situating the forbidden relationship between Ammu and Velutha within the framework of caste transgression and patriarchal control, the novel reveals how women and Dalit bodies become sites of surveillance, punishment and erasure.*

*Using the lens of intersectionality, this paper argues that caste and gender in the novel do not function as isolated categories of discrimination but operate together to produce layered marginalization. Silence, both imposed and internalized, emerges as a crucial mechanism of social control, shaping the destinies of characters such as Ammu, Velutha, and the twins. The study further contends that Roy’s narrative technique disrupts these silences by reclaiming subaltern histories and exposing structural violence. Ultimately, the paper positions the novel as a powerful critique of institutionalized inequality and a significant text for discussions of inclusion, social justice, and ethical pedagogy.*

**Keywords:** Intersectionality, Caste Hierarchy, Gender Politics, Structural Violence, Marginalization

## INTRODUCTION

*The God of Small Things* was written by Arundhati Roy and published in 1997. The novel won the prestigious Booker Prize the same year, bringing international recognition to Indian English fiction. Set in Ayemenem in Kerala during the late 1960s, the narrative unfolds against the socio-political backdrop of a rigid caste hierarchy and the rise of Leftist politics in the region. Through the tragic story of a fractured Syrian Christian family, Roy explores how deeply entrenched social codes regulate love, identity, and social mobility. Indian English literature has increasingly become a space for interrogating systemic inequalities embedded within caste and gender hierarchies. In *The God of Small Things*, Roy presents a layered narrative that critiques the socio-cultural codes governing identity and belonging in postcolonial India. The novel exposes the so-called “Love Laws” that dictate “who should be loved, and how,” thereby revealing the intersection of caste oppression and patriarchal authority. The concept of “structures of silence” refers to the invisible yet powerful systems that suppress marginalized voices. In the novel, silence is not merely the absence of speech but a socially enforced condition imposed upon those who challenge caste and gender norms. Through fragmented narration and memory, Roy exposes the violence embedded in everyday life and demonstrates how intersectional oppression operates simultaneously within intimate relationships and broader social institutions.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To analyze the intersection of caste and gender in *The God of Small Things*.
2. To examine how structural silence functions as a mechanism of oppression.
3. To explore the representation of forbidden love as caste and gender transgression.
4. To interpret the novel through the theoretical lens of intersectionality.
5. To situate the novel within contemporary discussions of social justice and inclusive discourse in English Studies.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly interpretations of *The God of Small Things* have extensively examined its critique of caste oppression, gender discrimination, and postcolonial identity. Critics have highlighted Roy's portrayal of the "Love Laws" as symbolic of institutionalized social control. Feminist readings focus on Ammu's struggle against patriarchal constraints, while Dalit-centered analyses foreground Velutha's tragic fate as an embodiment of caste violence.

Intersectional approaches, inspired by theorists such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, argue that caste and gender must be studied as interlocking systems rather than separate axes of oppression. Postcolonial critics also interpret the novel as a narrative that resists dominant historical discourses by privileging fragmented memory and marginalized perspectives. This paper builds upon these readings by synthesizing caste and gender politics under the broader concept of structural silence.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

1. Intersectionality – Based on Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept, the study examines how caste and patriarchy intersect in *The God of Small Things*, shaping gender identity and intensifying marginalization.
2. Subaltern Theory – Drawing from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the paper explores how silence and suppressed voices (Ammu and Velutha) reveal structural exclusion within dominant social systems.
3. Anti-Caste & Feminist Thought Inspired by B. R. Ambedkar and Simone de Beauvoir, the framework interprets caste and patriarchy as interlocking systems regulating love, agency, and belonging.

This paper argues that *The God of Small Things* dramatizes how caste and gender intersect to produce structural injustice sustained through silence. Ammu's transgressive relationship with Velutha challenges both patriarchal and caste boundaries, resulting in severe social punishment. Velutha's identity as a Dalit man renders him vulnerable to institutional violence, while Ammu's status as a divorced woman intensifies her marginalization.

The "Love Laws" serve as ideological tools that naturalize inequality. These laws determine permissible relationships and reinforce social segregation. The twins, Estha and Rahel, inherit trauma shaped by these oppressive systems, illustrating how structural silence extends across generations.

Roy's nonlinear narrative technique disrupts official histories by reconstructing suppressed experiences. The novel's stylistic fragmentation mirrors the fractured identities of its marginalized characters, thereby transforming silence into narrative resistance. Through this approach, Roy not only critiques systemic injustice but also reclaims the agency of silenced subjects. In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy constructs caste and gender not as parallel systems but as deeply intertwined structures that regulate intimacy, mobility, and subjectivity. The novel demonstrates how social hierarchies operate through every day practices, internalized prejudices, and institutional violence. Through the tragic fates of Velutha and Ammu, Roy reveals how intersectional oppression functions within the private and public spheres of postcolonial Kerala.

## CASTE AS STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE

Caste in the novel functions as an invisible yet omnipresent force that determines one's spatial, social, and bodily boundaries. Velutha, an "Untouchable" *Paravan*, is portrayed as intellectually gifted and technically skilled. His craftsmanship in the pickle factory and his affectionate bond with the twins destabilize stereotypical representations of lower-caste inferiority. However, his competence does not translate into social equality.

Roy historicizes caste discrimination by recalling the humiliating practices imposed upon Paravans restrictions on touch, movement, and physical presence. These details are not merely historical references; they signal how caste persists as a psychological and cultural residue. Velutha's existence is tolerated only within prescribed limits. The moment he transgresses these boundaries by entering into a relationship with Ammu, caste order reasserts itself violently.

The Communist Party's failure to protect Velutha further exposes the inadequacy of class-based politics in dismantling caste oppression. Comrade Pillai's strategic withdrawal reveals that ideological commitment collapses when confronted with entrenched caste interests. Thus, Velutha's custodial death is not an isolated act of brutality but a manifestation of systemic caste violence. The police function as agents of social restoration, punishing a man who dared to violate what Roy famously terms the "Love Laws" laws that dictate "who should be loved, and how, and how much."

## PATRIARCHY AND THE REGULATION OF FEMALE SEXUALITY

Parallel to caste hierarchy, patriarchy structures Ammu's life through economic dependence, social stigma, and moral surveillance. As a divorced woman who returns to her parental home, Ammu occupies a marginal position within the family. She contributes labor to the pickle factory but possesses no legal or financial claim to property. Chacko's assertion "What's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine" encapsulates her dispossession and highlights gendered economic inequality.

The double standards of patriarchal morality become evident in the family's response to sexuality. Chacko's extramarital relationships with factory workers are tolerated as expressions of masculine privilege, whereas Ammu's desire is framed as deviant and dangerous. Her sexuality becomes a site of anxiety because it threatens both familial authority and caste purity.

When her relationship with Velutha is discovered, Ammu is physically confined and verbally degraded. Her body becomes a terrain upon which patriarchal honor is defended. Roy thereby exposes how female agency is curtailed not only through overt violence but through spatial restriction, shaming, and economic exclusion.

## INTERSECTIONALITY: THE CONVERGENCE OF CASTE AND GENDER

The relationship between Ammu and Velutha represents the intersectional convergence of caste and gender oppression. Ammu's transgression is twofold: she asserts sexual autonomy and crosses caste boundaries. However, the consequences are asymmetrical. While Ammu is ostracized and condemned, Velutha suffers immediate and fatal violence.

This disproportionate punishment underscores how caste intensifies gender transgression. Baby Kochamma's fabricated accusation of attempted rape draws upon deeply ingrained caste stereotypes that depict lower-caste men as threats to upper-caste female purity. The narrative thus reveals how caste ideology weaponizes gendered fears to justify brutality.

Velutha's death symbolizes the state's complicity in upholding caste hierarchy. His battered body becomes a site where social order is violently reinstated. The intersection of caste and gender therefore produces layered vulnerability: Ammu is punished socially and emotionally, while Velutha is annihilated physically.

## SILENCE AS A MECHANISM OF POWER

Silence in the novel operates as both consequence and instrument of oppression. Estha's traumatic muteness following Velutha's death signifies the psychological cost of systemic violence. His silence is not mere withdrawal but enforced complicity; he is coerced into sustaining a false narrative that protects caste respectability.

Mammachi's silent endurance of domestic abuse illustrates how patriarchy normalizes violence within the private sphere. Her acceptance reflects generational internalization of subordination. Conversely, Baby Kochamma's silence functions strategically. By manipulating truth and suppressing facts, she ensures the preservation of social status.

Roy's fragmented narrative structure mirrors this thematic concern with silence. The delayed revelation of events suggests the difficulty of articulating trauma within oppressive systems. Silence, therefore, is structural: it organizes memory, shapes testimony, and determines whose voice is legitimized.

### CONCLUSION:

The *God of Small Things* presents caste and patriarchy as interlocking regimes that regulate love, agency, identity, and belonging within a rigidly stratified society. Through the tragic relationship between Ammu and Velutha, Arundhati Roy demonstrates how intimate rebellion transforms into political resistance when it confronts entrenched social hierarchies. The novel reveals that oppression is sustained not only through overt physical violence but also through silence, complicity, and institutional endorsement, exposing the subtle yet pervasive mechanisms that police desire and marginalize dissenting identities. By foregrounding suppressed voices and depicting the lived realities of those at the intersections of caste and gender, Roy dismantles dominant power structures and contributes significantly to intersectional feminist discourse and caste critique within Indian English literature. Ultimately, the text urges readers to interrogate inherited inequalities and reconsider the structural silences that continue to shape contemporary social realities.

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