



ज्ञानविविधा

कला, मानविकी और सामाजिक विज्ञान विषयों की अंतर्राष्ट्रीय सहकर्मी समीक्षित, मूल्यांकित, त्रैमासिक शोध-पत्रिका

ISSN : 3048-4537(Online)

3049-2327(Print)

IIFS Impact Factor-6.125

Vol.-3; Issue-3 (July-Sept.) 2026

Page No.- 132-138

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<https://journal.gyanvividha.com>

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THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION : Race, Gender and Power in the Modern Novel : *A Critical Reading of Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things*

Abstract : Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) is a powerful exploration of the ways in which social identities are produced, disciplined and contested by systems of power. Set in Kerala and moving between the 1960s and the later consequences of a traumatic childhood, the novel examines caste, gender, class, religion, colonial inheritance, political ideology and family authority. Its representation of race is less direct than its representation of caste, but the novel's attention to colonial habits of seeing, Englishness, cultural hierarchy and the construction of the "other" makes race and racialisation relevant to its politics of representation. This paper argues that Roy's novel turns representation itself into a political practice. The narrative gives visibility to people and experiences traditionally pushed to the margins—especially Ammu, Velutha and the twins Rahel and Estha—while exposing the institutions and discourses that decide whose life is considered valuable, respectable or speakable. The paper places *The God of Small Things* in conversation with feminist, postcolonial and intersectional approaches to representation. It examines the politics of the body, the family, caste, gendered respectability, language, childhood, memory and narrative form. Particular attention is paid to the novel's challenge to patriarchal authority, its portrayal of caste violence through the character of Velutha, its critique of colonial cultural residues and its treatment of Sophie Mol as a symbol of social privilege. Ultimately, Roy demonstrates that power does not operate only through spectacular acts of violence; it also operates through everyday rules, names, silences, gazes, institutions and "Love Laws" that determine who may love whom and who may belong. The novel's fragmented narrative becomes a counter-politics of representation, allowing suppressed histories to return and making the "small things" of ordinary life politically significant.

Keywords : Arundhati Roy; The God of Small Things; representation; caste; race; gender; patriarchy; power; postcolonialism; feminism; intersectionality; narrative.

1. Introduction : Who Has the Right to Be Seen? : Representation is never merely a matter of putting characters into a story. It is a question of power. To represent someone is to decide how that person will appear, what aspects of their identity will become visible, whose perspective will shape the reader's understanding, and which experiences will remain outside the frame. Literature therefore participates in the politics through which societies classify people as central or marginal, respectable or deviant, powerful or powerless. The modern novel has been particularly important in questioning these classifications because its long form allows writers to enter private consciousness, reconstruct suppressed histories and place apparently ordinary lives against larger structures of social power.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is an especially rich text for studying this politics. Published in 1997 and awarded the Booker Prize, the novel tells the story of twins Rahel and Estha and their family in Ayemenem, Kerala. Yet its narrative is not simply a family story. The death of Sophie Mol, the relationship between Ammu and Velutha, the twins' childhood, Baby Kochamma's resentment, Chacko's privilege and the family's interactions with caste and religion are all shaped by social structures that extend far beyond the individual household. Roy's central insight is that private life is political. A family argument can reproduce patriarchy; a marriage can become a mechanism of economic control; a love affair can become a caste crime; a child's memory can preserve an alternative version of history.

This paper therefore examines *The God of Small Things* through the interconnected lenses of race, gender and power, while recognising that caste is the novel's most immediate axis of social hierarchy. The paper uses "race" in a broader postcolonial sense: not as a simple equivalent of caste, but as a way of examining colonial constructions of difference, cultural hierarchy, Englishness and the representation of the racialised or civilisational "other." The analysis argues that Roy's novel demonstrates how caste, gender, class, religion and colonial cultural values overlap rather than operate independently. The result is a distinctly intersectional politics of representation in which the body, language, sexuality and family become sites of struggle.

2. Representation, Power and the Politics of the Other : The study of representation has been deeply influenced by feminist, postcolonial and cultural theory. Representation can be understood not as a neutral reflection of reality but as a process through which meaning is produced. A literary text does not simply show a social world; it selects, frames, orders and interprets that world. Stuart Hall's work on representation emphasises that cultural meanings are produced through systems of language and signification. What appears natural is often the result of historical and cultural processes.

Postcolonial criticism adds another dimension by asking who has historically possessed the authority to describe other cultures. Edward Said's *Orientalism* demonstrates how Western representations of the East have frequently constructed it as exotic, irrational, backward or inferior in relation to an imagined Western norm. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question about whether the subaltern can speak draws attention to the difficulties faced by marginalised subjects when the institutions through which speech becomes recognisable are controlled by dominant groups. These ideas are useful for reading Roy because her characters repeatedly encounter systems that define them before they can define themselves.

Feminist criticism similarly asks who is permitted to occupy the centre of narrative and social authority. Simone de Beauvoir's account of woman as "Other" remains relevant to the way patriarchal systems position men as normative subjects and women as secondary identities. bell hooks, meanwhile, broadens feminist criticism by insisting that gender cannot be separated

from race, class and other structures of inequality. Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality gives a more precise vocabulary for examining situations in which multiple forms of power overlap. Although Roy's novel emerges from a specifically Indian social context, these theoretical perspectives help illuminate how gender, caste, class, religion and colonial cultural values interact within the narrative.

The most important theoretical implication for *The God of Small Things* is that power is not concentrated in one institution. It moves through family relationships, caste rules, marriage, education, political parties, religious identities, economic privilege and cultural taste. The novel's characters are therefore neither simply powerful nor powerless. Chacko, for instance, is himself shaped by colonial education and family expectations, yet he exercises considerable authority over Ammu. Baby Kochamma experiences the restrictions of gender but uses the limited power available to her to discipline others. Ammu is economically vulnerable yet refuses to accept the emotional restrictions placed upon her. Velutha is highly skilled and emotionally perceptive but is rendered socially disposable by caste. This complexity makes Roy's representation of power particularly compelling.

3. Caste as a Politics of Representation : If the novel is read through the politics of representation, Velutha is perhaps its most significant figure. He belongs to the Paravan community, a historically oppressed caste, and works as a skilled carpenter and mechanic for the Ipe family. His social position is therefore paradoxical: he is valuable because of his labour, but he is denied equality because of his caste. The family can depend upon his skill while refusing to recognise his humanity on equal terms.

This contradiction exposes one of the central mechanisms of caste power. The marginalised person is often permitted to serve but not to belong. Velutha can repair things, build things and work with his hands, but he cannot cross the invisible boundary separating him from the upper-caste family. His relationship with Ammu becomes intolerable precisely because it challenges the social order that assigns people different degrees of human worth.

Roy refuses to represent Velutha merely as a victim. He is intelligent, creative, physically capable and emotionally complex. His craftsmanship gives him an identity that exceeds the category imposed upon him. The tragedy is that the social order does not allow this fuller identity to matter. Once Velutha is accused and the family's honour becomes threatened, the dominant system reduces him to a caste identity and a supposed criminal threat.

Caste also shapes the representation of touch. In a caste system structured by ideas of purity and pollution, the body becomes political. Who may touch whom? Who may enter which spaces? Whose body is considered clean, respectable or dangerous? Roy makes these questions central to the relationship between Ammu and Velutha. Their physical intimacy is socially explosive because it violates a boundary that is more powerful than individual desire.

The violence against Velutha reveals how representation can become a precondition for physical violence. Before the police beat him, he has already been represented as someone who deserves punishment. The social narrative comes first; the institutional violence follows. Roy thus demonstrates that oppression does not begin with the visible act of violence. It begins when a person is linguistically and socially transformed into a category that makes violence appear justified.

4. Gender, Patriarchy and the Politics of Respectability : Ammu is the novel's most important figure for examining gendered power. Her life is constrained at multiple stages: first as a daughter, then as a wife, and later as a divorced woman and mother. Her central problem is not that she lacks intelligence or desire. It is that the structures around her repeatedly refuse to grant her the autonomy that men assume as natural.

Ammu's marriage is not presented as a romantic solution but as a consequence of

restricted choices. Her return to her parental home after the marriage fails does not restore her freedom. Instead, she becomes a woman who has violated expectations: she is divorced, she has children and she is economically dependent on her family. Her sexuality is therefore judged more harshly than male sexuality. Chacko can conduct relationships with women working in the family factory without suffering equivalent social condemnation, while Ammu's relationship with Velutha is treated as an unforgivable transgression.

This asymmetry reveals the politics of respectability. Patriarchal families often define respectable femininity through obedience, sexual control and self-sacrifice. Ammu's refusal to remain emotionally passive makes her dangerous to the system. She desires love on terms that recognise her as a person rather than a daughter, wife or mother. Her tragedy is that the social order provides almost no legitimate space for such desire.

Roy also exposes the relationship between patriarchy and property. Ammu does not possess the economic independence that would allow her to separate herself from family authority. Chacko, by contrast, inherits the family's social and economic legitimacy. His education and masculinity make his authority appear natural. The novel thus demonstrates that gender power is reinforced by economic power.

Baby Kochamma offers another important perspective. She has internalised patriarchal values so deeply that she helps reproduce them. Her unfulfilled desire for Father Mulligan contributes to her bitterness, but her later authority over the household shows how oppressed subjects can participate in oppressive systems. Roy avoids the simplistic idea that women are automatically united against patriarchy. Gendered power can produce competition, surveillance and punishment among women themselves.

5. Race, Colonialism and the Cultural Politics of Englishness : Race is not the primary category through which *The God of Small Things* organises social hierarchy. Caste is more directly central. Nevertheless, the novel repeatedly engages with the cultural consequences of colonialism and with forms of racialised representation. Englishness functions as a marker of status, education and cultural legitimacy, and the family's relationship with England reveals how colonial values can survive after formal colonial rule has ended.

Sophie Mol occupies a privileged symbolic position partly because she arrives from England and is connected to Chacko's English former wife, Margaret. The family's excitement around Sophie is excessive compared with its treatment of Rahel and Estha. Her foreignness is associated with prestige. She is imagined as special, and the children become conscious of the unequal attention she receives.

The figure of Sophie Mol can therefore be read as part of the novel's critique of colonial cultural hierarchy. The family is not simply Indian versus English. Instead, Englishness has been absorbed into the family's own system of value. Colonial power survives as an aspiration, a taste and a measure of respectability. The children encounter this hierarchy before they possess the language to understand it.

In this sense, Roy's style participates in a broader postcolonial practice of linguistic appropriation. The language that once carried imperial authority becomes flexible and local. English is no longer simply the language through which India is described by outsiders; it becomes a medium through which Indian experience can reshape the language itself.

The novel therefore complicates the category of race. It does not present a simple opposition between white and non-white characters. Instead, it shows how colonial hierarchies can become internalised within local societies. The result is a layered structure in which caste, class, education, religion and Englishness interact. Race becomes relevant not as a substitute for caste but as part of the cultural history through which distinctions of superiority and inferiority are produced.

6. The Family as a Political Institution : The Ipe family is often described as a dysfunctional family, but such a description is too limited. Roy presents the family as a political institution. It is a space where larger social ideologies are reproduced through everyday behaviour. The family decides who is respectable, whose grief matters, which relationships are acceptable and whose mistakes will be remembered.

The phrase “Love Laws” captures this process. The novel’s memorable idea that the social order decides “who should be loved” and “how” turns private emotion into a political category. Love is not allowed to remain personal. It is regulated by caste, class, gender and family honour.

Ammu and Velutha violate the Love Laws because their relationship crosses caste and gender boundaries. The children’s attachment to Velutha also becomes significant because they recognise him emotionally before they understand the social prohibition surrounding him. Their childhood perspective exposes the artificiality of the caste boundary: to the children, Velutha is a person. To the adults and institutions that control them, he is a social problem.

The novel answers these questions by eventually shifting narrative attention towards those whose voices have been excluded. Roy makes the reader understand that the official version of events is not necessarily the truthful one. The family’s story is a constructed narrative, and the novel itself becomes a counter-narrative.

7. Childhood, Memory and Narrative Authority : One of Roy’s most innovative decisions is to tell much of the story through the perceptions of Rahel and Estha. Children do not understand social structures in the same way adults do, but their partial understanding can expose contradictions that adults have learned to accept.

The twins notice sounds, colours, gestures, words and small acts of cruelty. They often misunderstand adult language, but their misunderstandings are revealing. A child can hear an official explanation and simultaneously sense that something is wrong. Roy’s narrative form gives this intuition literary authority.

The fragmentation of time is essential to this strategy. The reader learns early that something terrible has happened, but the full meaning of that event emerges slowly. Memory is not presented as a stable archive. It is recursive, incomplete and emotionally charged. This structure mirrors the experience of trauma: the past is not simply behind the characters; it repeatedly interrupts the present.

By privileging memory over chronology, Roy also challenges the conventional hierarchy of historical narration. Official histories tend to arrange events neatly: first this happened, then that happened. Trauma does not work in such a sequence. A smell, a word or a place can suddenly return a person to an earlier moment. The novel’s form therefore becomes an ethical representation of psychological experience.

The children’s perspective also allows Roy to expose the absurdity of adult hierarchies. The twins do not initially understand why Velutha should be treated as inferior or why Sophie Mol should be treated as more important. Their confusion becomes a moral resource. The reader is invited to ask whether the social rules adults consider natural are actually natural at all.

8. Narrative Form as Resistance : The politics of representation in *The God of Small Things* cannot be separated from its narrative technique. Roy’s language is playful, lyrical and fragmented, but the playfulness has a political function. Conventional literary realism often creates the impression that social reality can be represented transparently. Roy instead makes readers aware that language itself shapes what can be known.

Capitalisation, repetition and unusual syntax create a childlike but also subversive language. Words acquire emotional meanings beyond dictionary definitions. The novel repeatedly returns to certain phrases and images, turning them into motifs of memory and power.

This stylistic strategy also disrupts the authority of standard English. Roy writes in English, but not in a way that simply reproduces the conventions of British literary prose. Indian cultural contexts, sounds and rhythms reshape the language. The result is a form of linguistic resistance: the coloniser's language becomes a space for postcolonial invention.

The novel's title itself signals this politics. The "God of Small Things" is not a conventional deity who rules history from above. The phrase points towards the small, intimate and easily ignored experiences that official systems dismiss. A touch, a smell, a child's fear, a forbidden meeting, a memory or a word can become historically significant. Roy reverses the hierarchy between the grand and the small.

In this sense, the novel's form performs what its content argues. The social order says that certain people and experiences are small. The narrative makes them large enough to occupy the centre of literary attention.

9. Velutha, the Body and the Violence of the State : The police violence against Velutha demonstrates how social prejudice becomes institutional violence. The authorities do not encounter him as a neutral individual. They encounter a person already represented as a threat. The result is a devastating reminder that the state does not operate outside society's prejudices; institutions can reproduce the categories created by social hierarchy.

Roy also draws attention to the irony of Velutha's physical skill. He is a maker and repairer, a person capable of transforming materials and fixing broken objects. Yet the social system refuses to recognise his capacity to transform his own life. He is permitted to make things but not to cross the caste boundary. This contrast gives his character symbolic power.

His death also demonstrates how narratives are used to justify violence. The official story surrounding Sophie Mol's death is more acceptable to the powerful than the truth about the relationship between Ammu and Velutha. Once the dominant narrative is established, Velutha becomes disposable. The novel's retrospective structure challenges this official story by making the reader reconstruct what really happened.

Representation here is not decorative. It has life-and-death consequences. To control the story is to control the interpretation of the event; to control the interpretation is to determine who is blamed, who is mourned and who is forgotten.

10. An Intersectional Reading of the Novel : The God of Small Things is particularly productive when read intersectionally because no major character can be understood through one category alone. Ammu's experience is shaped by gender, class, marital status, sexuality and family dependence. Velutha's experience is shaped by caste, class and labour. Rahel and Estha experience childhood, gender, family trauma and social marginalisation. Chacko benefits from masculinity and class privilege while also experiencing the limitations of colonial education and family expectations.

This intersectional structure prevents a simple opposition between oppressor and victim. A person may be privileged in one context and marginalised in another. Chacko, for example, experiences disappointment and cultural alienation, but his masculinity gives him freedoms that Ammu does not have. Baby Kochamma is constrained as a woman, yet she uses family authority to punish those she sees as transgressors. Ammu is disadvantaged within the family, yet her social position remains different from Velutha's. The children are privileged by caste and class, but they are also emotionally harmed by adult conflicts they cannot control.

Intersectionality also helps explain why the relationship between Ammu and Velutha is so threatening. It challenges several boundaries simultaneously: male/female, upper caste/lower caste, employer/worker, respectable/transgressive, family outsider/family insider. Their relationship cannot be contained by a single category of social control. That is precisely why the response to it is so extreme.

14. Conclusion: Who Owns the Story? : The God of Small Things demonstrates that the politics of representation is ultimately a struggle over meaning. Caste determines whose body may cross social boundaries. Patriarchy determines which desires are respectable. Colonial cultural values shape ideas of prestige and Englishness. Institutions transform social prejudice into official narratives. Families reproduce these structures through everyday acts of judgement and control. Yet literature can interrupt this process by telling another story.

Roy's achievement lies in bringing the apparently small into contact with the structures of the large. A child's perception can reveal an adult hypocrisy. A forbidden touch can expose a caste system. A woman's desire can challenge patriarchy. A linguistic experiment can question colonial authority. A fragmented memory can contest an official history.

The novel therefore refuses the assumption that politics belongs only to elections, governments and public institutions. Politics exists inside the family, inside language, inside the body and inside the stories people tell about one another. Representation is one of the places where power becomes ordinary and invisible.

Through Ammu, Velutha, Rahel, Estha, Chacko, Baby Kochamma and Sophie Mol, Roy creates a world in which identities are never isolated. Gender intersects with caste; caste intersects with class; class intersects with colonial cultural memory; childhood intersects with trauma; private desire intersects with public authority. The novel's narrative form mirrors this complexity by refusing a single linear perspective.

The final significance of *The God of Small Things* lies in its challenge to the hierarchy of stories. The powerful may produce official narratives, but literature can preserve the memories those narratives exclude. The marginalised may be silenced socially, but the novel can return them to the centre of attention. The body that society labels impure can become the site of tenderness. The woman judged immoral can become the bearer of desire and agency. The child who does not understand the rules can reveal how irrational those rules are.

In this sense, the politics of representation is not simply about adding marginalised characters to literature. It is about changing the conditions under which stories are told. It asks us to reconsider whose voice counts as knowledge, whose experience counts as history and whose life deserves narrative attention.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* ultimately suggests that the most powerful challenge to domination may begin with a deceptively simple act: telling the story differently. Once the story changes, the categories through which we see the world can change with it. And once those categories are questioned, the structures that depend upon them can no longer appear entirely natural.

The political question that remains is therefore also a literary one: Who gets to speak? Who gets to be remembered? Who gets to define love, respectability and belonging? And, most importantly, who gets to write the story?

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