

Caste and Social Hierarchies as Borders: The Physical and Social Segregation of Dalit Communities in *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract

Caste is one of the most deeply rooted social structures in Indian society, shaping relationships, opportunities, and identities. In Indian literature, many writers have highlighted the oppressive nature of caste hierarchies and the marginalization of Dalit communities. *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy presents a powerful critique of caste-based discrimination through the tragic story of Velutha, an “Untouchable,” and his relationship with Ammu, a woman belonging to a higher social group. The novel reveals how caste functions as a rigid border that controls social interactions, physical spaces, and personal freedoms. Dalits are systematically excluded from social equality and forced to exist on the margins of society.

This research paper examines how caste operates as both a **physical and symbolic border** that segregates Dalit communities in the novel. The study explores the ways in which Roy portrays social hierarchies, spatial segregation, and violence against those who challenge caste norms. By analysing characters, narrative events, and symbolic elements in the novel, the paper highlights how literature exposes the hidden realities of caste oppression. The findings show that Roy’s narrative not only criticizes traditional caste structures but also emphasizes resistance and human dignity.

The paper argues that *The God of Small Things* portrays caste as a system that controls bodies, relationships, and spaces. Through its portrayal of marginalization and injustice, the novel raises awareness about social inequalities and encourages readers to question oppressive traditions that continue to influence Indian society.

Keywords: Caste system, Dalit marginalization, social hierarchy, untouchability, segregation, Indian English literature, postcolonial literature etc.

Introduction

The caste system has historically shaped Indian social organization. Originating as a hierarchical structure that divided society into groups based on occupation and birth, caste gradually evolved into a rigid system that determined social status, access to resources, and personal relationships. The lowest groups in this hierarchy, commonly referred to as Dalits or “Untouchables,” have long been subjected to discrimination and exclusion. Although the Indian Constitution abolished untouchability, caste discrimination persists in various forms across the country.

Literature has played a crucial role in exposing these inequalities. Many Indian writers use fiction to portray the lived experiences of marginalized communities and to critique oppressive social structures. One of the most influential works addressing caste discrimination in modern Indian literature is *The God of Small Things*. The novel, set in Kerala during the late twentieth century, explores themes such as caste, gender, family, and social injustice.

Roy’s narrative focuses on the story of twins Rahel and Estha and the tragic consequences of forbidden relationships in their family. At the centre of the novel is the relationship between Ammu, a divorced woman from a Syrian Christian family, and Velutha, a Dalit carpenter. Their love violates what Roy calls the “Love Laws”—rules that determine “who should be loved, and how much.” The violation of these unwritten social laws leads to devastating consequences for both characters.

The novel vividly portrays how caste operates as a powerful social border. Dalits are not only treated as socially inferior but are also physically separated from dominant communities through spatial segregation and occupational restrictions. Through the character of Velutha, Roy exposes the harsh realities faced by Dalits who attempt to cross these boundaries. Scholars note that the novel demonstrates how caste hierarchies shape identity and limit the freedom of lower-caste individuals, often resulting in exclusion and violence.

Thus, *The God of Small Things* becomes more than a personal story; it is a powerful commentary on the persistence of caste discrimination in modern India.

Review of Literature

Many scholars have examined the representation of caste and Dalit marginalization in Roy's novel. Researchers have emphasized how the narrative reveals the intersection of caste, class, and gender in shaping the experiences of marginalized individuals.

Studies on the novel highlight how caste identity determines the social status of characters and restricts their personal freedom. According to critical research, Roy portrays caste as a deeply entrenched system that controls the lives of individuals from birth, particularly those belonging to lower social groups.

The other scholars focus on the character of Velutha as a symbol of Dalit resistance. Velutha's skills, intelligence, and kindness challenge the stereotypes associated with Dalits. However, despite his abilities, he remains trapped within the rigid boundaries of caste hierarchy. His relationship with Ammu becomes an act of rebellion against the social order, ultimately leading to his violent death.

Another line of scholarship explores the intersection of caste and modernity in the novel. Researchers argue that Roy illustrates how traditional caste structures persist even in modern, educated societies. Although the characters live in a relatively progressive environment, caste prejudice continues to dictate their attitudes and actions.

Scholars have also examined the spatial dimension of caste segregation in the narrative. Dalits are shown living in separate areas, working in lower-status occupations, and being denied access to social spaces. This physical separation reinforces social inequality and prevents meaningful interaction between different caste groups.

The critics highlight Roy's critique of patriarchal and feudal systems. The oppression of women and Dalits often intersects, creating multiple layers of marginalization. Female characters such as Ammu face discrimination not only because of caste boundaries but also because of gender norms. Overall, existing literature demonstrates that Roy's novel provides a profound critique of caste hierarchies and exposes the structural inequalities embedded in Indian society.

Research Tools

This research paper adopts a **qualitative textual analysis** approach. The primary source of data is the novel *The God of Small Things*. Close reading techniques are used to examine narrative elements such as characters, dialogue, symbols, and events that illustrate caste discrimination and social segregation.

The study also relies on secondary sources, including scholarly articles, literary criticism, and theoretical works related to caste studies, postcolonial theory, and Dalit literature. These sources help contextualize the novel within broader social and literary frameworks.

The research uses the following analytical approaches:

1. **Postcolonial Theory** – to examine power structures and social hierarchies.
 2. **Dalit Studies Perspective** – to understand the lived experiences of marginalized communities.
 3. **Sociological Analysis** – to explore the relationship between caste and social organization.
- By combining these methods, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of caste as a social and spatial border in Roy's novel.

Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of this research are:

1. To examine the representation of caste hierarchies in *The God of Small Things*.
2. To analyze how Dalit communities are physically and socially segregated in the novel.
3. To explore the role of Velutha as a symbol of resistance against caste oppression.
4. To study the impact of caste discrimination on relationships and personal freedom.
5. To evaluate how Roy uses literature as a tool to critique social injustice.

Subject Matter

Caste as a Social Boundary

One of the central themes in the novel *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy is the role of caste as a rigid social boundary that governs human relationships and social behaviour. In Indian society, caste is not merely a marker of identity; it functions as a powerful system that determines social status, opportunities, and the acceptable limits of interaction between individuals. The novel portrays caste as an invisible yet deeply influential border that controls everyday life and reinforces social inequality.

In the story, the Syrian Christian family to which Ammu belongs occupies a relatively privileged position in the social hierarchy. Although they are not directly part of the traditional Hindu caste system, they still internalize and practice many of its hierarchical values. Their attitudes toward Velutha reveal how caste prejudice extends beyond religious boundaries and becomes a broader social ideology. The family benefits from their social position and therefore participates in maintaining the existing hierarchy.

Velutha, on the other hand, belongs to the Paravan community, a Dalit group historically subjected to untouchability and social exclusion. Even though Velutha is intelligent, skilled, and hardworking, society refuses to acknowledge his abilities on equal terms. His identity as an "Untouchable" defines his social position and restricts his freedom, regardless of his personal qualities.

The novel demonstrates that caste operates not only through formal rules but also through deeply ingrained attitudes and beliefs. These invisible boundaries regulate friendships, employment, and even love. Through Velutha's experiences, Roy reveals how caste discrimination limits opportunities and reinforces inequality, showing that social hierarchy continues to shape human relationships and individual destinies.

Spatial Segregation of Dalit Communities

The God of Small Things, Arundhati Roy vividly portrays the physical separation of Dalit communities from dominant social groups, highlighting how caste discrimination is reflected in spatial arrangements. The novel shows that segregation is not only social or psychological but also geographical. Velutha and other members of the Paravan community live in areas located away from the central settlement where the upper-caste and socially privileged families reside. This physical distance reinforces the idea that Dalits are outsiders who must remain on the margins of society.

The separation of living spaces serves as a constant reminder of the rigid boundaries created by caste hierarchy. Even when Velutha works for the Ipe family and demonstrates exceptional skill as a carpenter and mechanic, he cannot cross these invisible lines of social space without facing suspicion and hostility. His movements and interactions are closely monitored because society believes that Dalits must remain within the limits assigned to them.

This spatial segregation reflects the historical reality of many Indian villages and towns where Dalits were traditionally forced to live in separate settlements known as “Dalit colonies” or “cheris.” These areas were often located at the outskirts of villages, far from the main social and economic centers. Dalits were frequently denied access to shared resources such as temples, wells, schools, and other public facilities. Such arrangements ensured that caste divisions remained visible and firmly established in everyday life.

By portraying these divisions in the novel, Roy emphasizes that caste discrimination is deeply embedded not only in social attitudes but also in the organization of physical space. The landscape itself becomes a symbol of inequality, reflecting how society structures power, privilege, and exclusion.

The Character of Velutha

The God of Small Things, the character of Velutha stands out as one of the most complex, tragic, and sympathetic figures created by Arundhati Roy. Velutha belongs to the Paravan community, a group historically treated as “Untouchable” within the rigid caste hierarchy of Indian society. Despite his social position, Velutha is portrayed as intelligent, creative, and highly skilled in carpentry and mechanical work. He can repair machines, build furniture, and solve practical problems, which makes him extremely valuable to the Ipe family’s pickle factory. His abilities and dedication demonstrate that talent and intelligence are not determined by caste. However, in the social structure depicted in the novel, such qualities do not erase the stigma attached to his birth.

Velutha’s character also reflects kindness and emotional depth. He shares a warm bond with the twins, Estha and Rahel, who see him not as an “Untouchable” but as a caring friend. Their innocent acceptance of Velutha contrasts sharply with the prejudiced attitudes of the adult world.

The most significant turning point in Velutha’s life is his relationship with Ammu. Their love challenges the rigid caste hierarchy and violates what the novel describes as the “Love Laws” that dictate who is allowed to love whom. This relationship symbolizes the possibility of breaking the social boundaries imposed by caste. However, society reacts with hostility and violence to this act of defiance.

Velutha becomes the victim of brutal punishment when he is falsely accused and violently beaten by the police. His tragic fate illustrates how caste functions as a powerful mechanism of control, ensuring that those who challenge the established hierarchy are severely punished.

Violence as a Tool of Social Control

The God of Small Things, Arundhati Roy powerfully illustrates how violence functions as an important mechanism for maintaining caste hierarchies. The novel reveals that social systems based on inequality often rely on intimidation, punishment, and fear to preserve their authority. Violence becomes a method through which dominant groups ensure that marginalized communities remain within the boundaries assigned to them. In this context, Velutha, a member of the Dalit Paravan community, becomes the central victim of such oppression.

Velutha’s tragic fate demonstrates the extreme consequences faced by Dalits who attempt to challenge rigid caste structures. When his relationship with Ammu becomes known, the social order perceives it as a serious violation of caste norms. As a result, Velutha is falsely accused of crimes he did not commit and is brutally beaten by the police. This act of violence is not merely a reaction to a personal conflict but rather a deliberate attempt to reinforce social control. By punishing Velutha so harshly, the authorities and upper-caste society send a clear message that crossing caste boundaries will not be tolerated.

The violence depicted in the novel is not limited to physical brutality. It also includes psychological oppression and constant humiliation. Dalits are repeatedly reminded of their supposed inferiority through social exclusion, discrimination, and the denial of dignity. These experiences create fear and discourage individuals from challenging the hierarchical system.

Through this powerful portrayal, Roy exposes the deep cruelty and injustice embedded in caste oppression. The novel reveals that violence—both physical and psychological—has historically been used to sustain caste hierarchies and silence those who seek equality and social justice.

Resistance and Social Critique

The God of Small Things, Arundhati Roy not only portrays the harsh realities of caste discrimination but also highlights subtle moments of resistance against oppressive social structures. Although the narrative is filled with suffering, injustice, and tragic consequences, it also presents characters who challenge the rigid norms imposed by

society. These moments of defiance reveal the human desire for dignity, freedom, and equality despite the presence of powerful social barriers.

One of the most significant acts of resistance in the novel is the relationship between Velutha and Ammu. Their love directly challenges the strict caste hierarchy that dictates who can interact with whom. By entering a relationship with Ammu, Velutha defies the deeply rooted social rules that forbid intimate relationships between individuals of different castes. Similarly, Ammu's decision to reciprocate his love represents her rejection of the social restrictions imposed upon her as both a woman and a member of a privileged community. Their relationship symbolizes a courageous attempt to break the invisible boundaries created by caste and social convention.

The narrative voice of the novel itself serves as a form of resistance. Through detailed descriptions and emotional storytelling, Roy exposes the hypocrisy and cruelty of a society that claims to uphold moral values while perpetuating discrimination and injustice. By presenting the tragic consequences of caste prejudice, the author encourages readers to critically examine these social structures.

Thus, Roy uses literature as a powerful tool of social critique, urging readers to question the legitimacy of caste hierarchies and imagine a more humane and egalitarian society.

Findings of the Study

The analysis of *The God of Small Things* reveals several important findings:

1. The novel portrays caste as a powerful system that controls social relationships and personal freedom.
2. Dalit communities experience both social and spatial segregation, reinforcing their marginalization.
3. The character of Velutha represents the struggles and aspirations of oppressed communities.
4. Violence is used as a mechanism to maintain caste hierarchy and punish transgression.
5. Roy's narrative challenges readers to confront the persistence of caste discrimination in modern society.

Conclusion

Caste continues to be one of the most significant social issues in India, affecting millions of people despite legal reforms and constitutional protections. Through *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy provides a powerful literary critique of caste-based discrimination and the marginalization of Dalit communities.

The novel demonstrates how caste functions as both a social and physical border that restricts human relationships and reinforces inequality. By portraying the tragic story of Velutha and Ammu, Roy highlights the devastating consequences of challenging caste norms.

At the same time, the novel encourages readers to question the legitimacy of these oppressive structures. Through its emotional depth and critical perspective, the narrative exposes the hypocrisy of a society that claims to value equality while continuing to enforce hierarchical divisions.

The God of Small Things serves as an important contribution to Indian literature and social discourse. It reminds readers that literature can be a powerful tool for raising awareness, promoting empathy, and inspiring social change. By confronting the realities of caste oppression, the novel urges society to move toward a more just and inclusive future.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper

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