

The Fluidity of Identity Exploring Gender and Sexuality in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract

The 'double colonization' women faced from both patriarchy and colonialism. Recent studies this abstract delves into the intricate exploring of gender and sexuality in Arundhati Roy's novel 'The God of Small Things'. The narrative unfolds within the complex socio cultural landscape of Kerala, India, weaving a tapestry of identities that challenge conventional norms. Roy artfully navigates the fluidity of identity, scrutinizing how characters negotiate their gender and sexuality in a society laden with expectations and restrictions. The protagonist, Rahel, and her twin brother Estha, confront the oppressive constructs of caste and gender, highlighting the intersectionality of their struggles. The novel's narrative structure, alternating between past and present, enhance the portrayal of identity as a dynamic and evolving force. Through vivid storytelling, Roy unveils the intricacies of individual journeys, offering profound insights into the multifaceted nature of identity in the face of societal constraints. 'The God of Small Things' stands as a poignant exploring of the profound impact societal norms can have on the fluidity of one's identity.

Keywords

Double colonization, Arundhati Roy's novel, 'The God of Small Things'

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Postcolonial critical texts have extensively documented the ways in which European imperialism influenced and oppressed women. As early as 1986, essays emerged discussing the intersection of colonialism with various sexualities, including homosexuality and lesbianism. Scholars have examined women's roles in postcolonial societies across legal, literary, and social science perspectives. Gender and sexuality have emerged as prominent themes in literature during the late twentieth century, with a focus on women's roles. The women's movement, particularly associated with second-wave feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, aimed to challenge systemic oppression. Early feminist scholar initially focused on women as a distinct group, separate from men, navigating two sets of gender ideologies. Black and postcolonial feminist critiques, along with broader postmodern shifts toward multiplicity, positionality, and fragmentation, have prompted a reconsideration of differences within the category of women. This raises the question of how gender, class, race, and sexuality intersect and shape each other in specific contexts, mobilizations, and cultural productions. Gender not only involves the social and cultural construction of being a woman or man but also encompasses relationship marked by power differences. An intersectional analysis has been crucial in moving beyond simplistic notions of gender as mere social constructs and recognizing it as a process involving the establishment, reproductions, and challenge of hierarchies.

The central theme of *The God of Small Things* revolves around women's rights, gender politics, and sexuality, making it complex to summarize due to varying perspectives across India's diverse cultural and religious communities. The nar-

rative consistently highlighting the harshness of patriarchy, depicting women characters facing bullying, molestation, and subordination to male family members. Arundhati Roy's novel, when viewed structurally, echoes the subjugation of women as a recurring motif. Ammu's struggles are emphasized, representing the plight of marginalized women in traditional Indian societies. Roy employs a powerful metaphor, likening Ammu's internal conflict to an "unsafe Edge", combining the infinite tenderness of motherhood with the reckless rage of a suicide bomber.

The women's movement in India, emerging in the early nineteenth century, led to the formation of pressure groups advocating for women's involvement in education and politics. Women actively participated in the anti-colonial nationalist struggle and post-independence movements for political and land rights. The post-independence era saw a shift towards empowering feminist images, emphasizing women as daughters and workers, challenging the earlier portrayal of women solely as mothers. Women's groups played a crucial role in addressing social mistreatment of women. Dalit and tribal women in India sought both political recognition and economic self-reliance. Simultaneously, they formed distinct lobby groups, shaping the current women's movement into a broad spectrum of political struggles led by women from diverse backgrounds, rather than a cohesive nationwide campaign.

Roy's feminist concern should be understood within the context of local articulation. It's crucial to recognize that 'gender' is a concept shaped by cultural and social constructs of femininity or masculinity, inseparable from the producing culture. Unlike western or 'first world feminism,' the fight for

women's rights in the 'Third world' needs consideration in the context of a colonial history and the gender dynamics within specific religious and territorial communities. Some critics frame women's experiences in the Caribbean, Africa, and India as a process of 'double colonization'. This concept of 'double colonization' forms the historical backdrop of Roy's novel and underscores her concurrent notification statements on women's rights.

In *The God of Small Things* a notable instance of these interconnected oppressions occurs in Ammu's early marriage. The English tea estate manager, Mr Hollick, proposes that he will secure her husband's job in exchange for her companionship. When Ammu refuses and faces abuse from her husband, she divorces him, returning to Ayemenam where societal disapproval awaits. Ammu's dilemma revolves around her body becoming a symbol of desire and disgrace, with her rejection of the colonial setting's expectations leading to her being stigmatized in the patriarchal Syrian Christian community. The contemporary struggle for women in post-independence Kerala is characterized by a 'double colonization', where the clash is less between traditional values and colonialism, but more between tradition and neo-colonial aspects of globalization. Arundhati Roy notes in interviews that women in resistance movements are challenging both their community's traditions and the imposed modernity driven by the global economy, carefully choosing elements from their tradition and modernity. It's a delicate balancing act.

In 1974, a significant moment in the Indian women's movement occurred with the release of a United Nations-commissioned report that investigated the social, political, and economic status of women. The "Towards Equality" report highlights a discrepancy between the theoretical inclusion and the practical challenges women face, as illustrated in "*The God of Small Things*". The narrative in the novel reveals that Ammu's experiences of oppression are compounded by her disadvantaged legal status, humorously misconstrued by her children as "locusts stand I". This legal inequality is further exemplified by the contrasting situations of Ammu and her brother Chacko, who asserts his dominance by claiming, "What's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine". Arundhati Roy subtly references a history of eviction and her mother's involvement in the ongoing struggle for women's rights.

The unjust legal and societal forces conspiring against Ammu in "*The God of Small Things*", leading to a situation with no further opportunities, are particularly distressing when considering that by the late 1960s, Kerala was gaining recognition as a social and economic success. Despite Kerala's achievements, including high life expectancy and literacy levels, and low infant mortality rates, Robin Jeffrey notes that women, despite progress, still have limited involvement in public politics. The historical contrast between the property rights of women in the Syrian Christian community and certain Hindu castes, like the Nayars, may have influenced Kerala's comparatively progressive stance on women's rights.

While Nayars practiced a direct family system with women having inheritance rights, the arrival of British colonialism brought challenges for Syrian-Christian women, who faced legal discrimination despite educational advantages in the early twentieth century.

Ammu's 'unsafe edge' disrupts the conventional order not just by challenging sexual norms but by intertwining supposedly incompatible elements of her sexuality—motherhood and amorousness. This defiance, reminiscent of formidable Hindu goddesses like Kali, defies societal norms and caste laws that aim to keep these aspects separate. The taboo-breaking nature of Ammu's sexuality echoes the symbolism of powerful goddesses used politically. The early nationalist movement, now embraced by Hindu feminists, witnessed a shift in Indian women's pursuit of equality. This transition moved away from perceiving women's bodies merely as vessels for racial and national rejuvenation, associated with motherhood. Radha Kumar underscores this change, emphasizing a move towards asserting rights, opposing the idea of subjecting women's bodies to social control. Ammu, a divorced mother, becomes vulnerable to societal control due to her maternal status. When she rejects her husband's demand to permit the plantation manager's advances, Pappachi struggles to believe her, highlighting societal biases about an Englishman coveting another man's wife.

Ammu's position as a divorced mother challenged traditional gender norms, while Arundhati Roy's novel explores the limitations imposed by masculine gender expectations through characters like Pappachi, Kari saipu, and the orange drink lemon drink man. Anuradha Dingwaney needham suggests that Velutha's affair represents a transformative "reenvisioning" of conventional family roles, proposing a shift in the roles of father and husband/partner. Instead of viewing Ammu and Velutha's relationship as a violation of gender politics, it can be seen as a visionary moment envisioning their transformation and the potential for a family structure liberating women and children from entrenched patterns of subordination.

References

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