

Political Allegory and Class Struggle in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract

The God of Small Things (1997) by Arundhati Roy is a rich narrative and symbolic representation of delicately revealing the reality of post-colonial Indian society. The paper seeks to unveil the political allegory and investigates the oppositions between different social classes unveiling deeper insights into power structures and social hierarchies depicted in the novel which enhances reader's comprehension of Roy's examination of power dynamics and socio-political challenges in post-colonial Indian society. This paper aims to reveal the political allegory in the text through Thematic Analysis using the Marxist lens, delving into the intricate socio-political dynamics portrayed in the narrative. The findings of the research highlights how Roy uses events, characters and settings to represent the broader social and political systems symbolically.

Keywords: Political Allegory, Postcolonial India, Class Struggle, Caste System, Marxist Critique.

Introduction

Arundhati Roy is a well-known figure in Indian literature with a global reputation. The second novel of Roy, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), which was published over 20 years after her first most famous novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997), has received worldwide pre-orders. Her first novel is a huge hit, selling over six million copies and published in 40 different languages. *The God of Small Things* is the second novel in India to receive the "Booker Prize" after Salman Rushdie's 1980 novel, *Midnight Children*. In 2004, she received the Sydney Prize award for those contribution she made to non-violence and societal causes. She was also given the award of Sahitya Academy by the Indian Government for her collection of writings titled, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, but she turned it down. According to Bano (2021), *The God of Small Things* emphasises the societal awareness and encourages thoughtfulness. This novel explores various themes such as caste or struggle between class, gender equality, women's status in Indian society, Indian politics and historical events, temporary relationships, treachery, traumas of childhood and violation of love laws. Roy's this novel feature a unique narrative method. She used both modern and traditional ways to build a plot about consciousness of Indian society. She used the flashback technique to connect present and past in a novel. *The God of Small Things* achieved different responses the praise and criticism, due to a political content. The second book written by a political activist Roy was published almost 20 years after her very first well-known book, *The God of Small Things*. Bano (2021) further discusses that the author amazingly describes the surroundings of Ayemenem in details. In Roy's novel, the fictional Meenachal river is compared to the Minachil River in Kottayam, while Ayemenem is portrayed as a real-life hamlet in South Center of Kerala. Roy has demonstrated Ayemenem as a beautiful and peaceful place that was once clean and there

was a clean and green river however everything is altered into newly constructed, beaming houses made by masons, nursing staff, wire cutters and clerks of banks who are working in the Gulf regions replacing the freshness and greenery of that land. Thus, the primary goals of this paper is to examine the opposition between different classes of society depicted in the novel and also to unveil the political allegory (Kareem, 2017). The story of the novel revolves around an imaginary town in Kerala, and begins with a description of its beautiful environment. According to Roy (1997), “May in Ayemenem is a hot, brooding month. The days are long and humid. The shrinks and black crows gorge on bright mangoes in still dust green trees. Red bananas ripen. Jackfruits burst. Dissolute blue bottles hum vacuously in the fruity air” (Roy, 1997, p. 03).

Research Objectives

The objectives of the research are:

- To unveil the political allegory in Roy’s, *The God of Small Things*.
- To analyze the opposition between different social classes depicted in the novel.

Research Questions

1. What political allegories are used in Roy’s *The God of Small Things*?
2. How does the novel depict the opposition between different social classes?

Literature Review

Conducting a thorough review is a key research strategy for improving knowledge and developing theories. A review of literature can answer the research questions more effectively than a single study by including information and viewpoints from several studies (Snyder, 2019).

Marxist Theory and Class Struggle

The theory of Marxism is developed by Karl Marx and Friderich Engles, provides the theoretical framework for analyzing class struggles within *The God of Small Things*. This theory is also considered as an economic and a socio-political theory. This theory criticises inherent inequalities in the capitalist systems. It highlights the conflict between the ruling class, also known as bourgeoisies and the working class or proletariats, emphasising how economic structures promote exploitation and class divisions (Pratiwi, 2009). This theory suggests a society without classes. The novel’s portrayal of characters such as **Velutha** (an Untouchable) and **Ammu** (a Syrian Christian) highlights the exploitation and oppression of the lower classes by the upper class. Through these characters, Roy critiques the entrenched **class divisions** in Indian society, demonstrating how social hierarchies perpetuate inequality and suffering (Bibi, Ashfaq, Ullah, & Abbas, 2021). According to Kalita & Namati (2021), Marx argues that the economic circumstances of the members of society are the primary cause of its division. The novel gives a glimpse that neither communism nor any other religion that promotes equality can eradicate injustice, class difference and the patriarchal system from society. The story of the novel represents the upper class through the characters like Pappachi, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, Chacko and the lower class is portrayed through the characters of Velutha, Ammu, Rahel and Estha. Therefore, this paper examines the conflict between social classes based on wealth, which is vividly portrayed in this novel. This concept is evident in the novel’s depiction of the stark disparities between characters like **Chacko** and **Velutha**. **Chacko**, who studied at Oxford and represents the bourgeoisie, contrasts sharply with **Velutha**, a laborer who is subjugated by the caste system. This opposition between the two characters is a direct representation of the **class struggle** Marx describes.

Political Allegory and the Caste System

Roy’s novel *The God of Small Things* captures the researcher's interest because of its complex weaving of political allegory set against the backdrop of postcolonial India. The main aim of

literature review is to investigate the scholarly works that examine the political implications of Roy's novel, with a special emphasis on its allegorical representation of social hierarchies, caste oppression, and political turmoil in Kerala, India. Roy's characters and events in the novel, allegorically represents broader social and political issues. For example, the rigid caste system in India is portrayed through the experiences of characters like Velutha, an Untouchable and Ammu, a member of the Syrian Christian community, highlighting the oppression and discrimination faced by marginalized groups. Additionally, the review brings all these works together to show how Roy has used allegory, narrative style and symbolism to criticise the political and social injustices. It also identifies gaps in prior research, specifically about the importance of Marxist theory in reading the political commentary in the novel, which provides a foundation for this research to provide different perspectives. The concept of political allegory remained the topic of interest for many scholars and researchers for many centuries around the world. Political allegory is one of the most effective literary techniques that enables a writer to express their views on political structures, beliefs and ideas and social problems using symbolic characters, different narratives and events. Authors can analyse or critique the power structures, oppression and class struggles by incorporating deep socio-political connotations in their works. As a political allegory offers a framework to reveal the hidden layers that create a link between the cultural and political circumstances of that time, that's why researchers have always recognised the importance of studying and using it as a tool.

Gender and Class in *The God of Small Things*

In addition to caste, Roy explores the intersection of **gender and class**, using **Ammu** as a representative of women caught in a patriarchal society. Though **Ammu** comes from an upper-class family, her gender exposes her to oppression and marginalization. Despite her education and independence, she is confined by societal norms that restrict women's roles to marriage and motherhood. Her inability to remarry, following a failed marriage, results in her ostracization from her own family, highlighting the rigid gender roles that limit women's agency in both public and private spheres. Roy's depiction of **Ammu's** struggles exemplifies how **gender oppression** functions within a capitalist system, where women are doubly oppressed—by both their class and their gender. The oppression faced by Ammu and the exploitation of Velutha illustrate Marx's concept of **double oppression**, where marginalized groups face multiple forms of exploitation simultaneously.

The Political Allegory of Postcolonial India

The God of Small Things, can also be interpreted as a political allegory by highlighting the themes of colonial legacy and identification of characters in terms of post-colonial India, particularly through the lens of **class** and **caste**. The judiciary and police are shown as institutions that deliberately oppose the lower-class in order to safeguard the interest of the higher class. The brutal treatment of police with Velutha, in spite of his innocence, is a prime example of how the state upholds class distinctions and oppresses the marginalised. Therefore, class opposition is strengthened by these institutions, which represent the partnership between the power of the state and upper-class domination (Roy, 1997, p.47). Bano (2021) further **stated that the transformation of Ayemenem**, once a peaceful town, reflects the broader **transformation** of India from a colonial past to a modern, capitalist society. Roy has demonstrated Ayemenem as a beautiful and peaceful place that was once clean and there was a clean and green river however everything is altered into newly constructed, beaming houses made by masons, nursing staff, wire cutters and clerks of banks who are working in the Gulf regions replacing the freshness and greenery of that land.

Research Methodology

The current research is based on qualitative method. Qualitative research is a method to collect and analyse a non-numerical data in order to get better understanding of thoughts, attitudes and experiences. It is used to gain good comprehension of problem and develop new ideas in research. Qualitative research is suitable to unveil the political allegory in *The God of Small Things* because it thoroughly examines the complicated symbols and themes. Different methods like thematic analysis can reveal the political allegory in the novel effectively, providing thorough understanding of its themes, hidden message and character's lives that quantitative methods may overlook.

Sources of Data Collection

This research incorporates two major sources of data collection. It includes:

Primary Data

The text of Arundhati Roy novel *The God of Small Things* serves as the main source of information. Through the detailed analysis of the concerning text, this research explores the allegorical portrayal of class struggle, caste discrimination and political powers. The elements, for instance characters, story events and symbols are examined to unveil the deeper sociopolitical messages.

Secondary Data

It includes scholarly publications, journals and research papers about the novel and Marxist literary theory. These are the examples of secondary sources. It offers a more comprehensive framework for analysing the sociopolitical effects discussed in the text of novel.

Data Collection

The data collection process focuses on collecting textual proofs from the novel, *The God of Small Things* in order to investigate hidden political allegory and opposition between different social classes according to the set aims and objectives of the study. The researcher used a qualitative method, in order to analyse the primary text while using secondary sources like journals, articles to interpret the meanings of relevant text. The researcher collects the primary data that supports the connection between the theory of Marxism and Roy's *The God of Small Things*. The study also explains the assembled data through Marxist and thematic analysis.

Data Analysis

Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* is the source of information. The study unveils the political allegory and examines the opposition between different social classes of Indian society under the theory of Marxism. This research follows a qualitative method by applying "Thematic analysis" proposed by Braun and Clarke, 2006 to analyse the text of the novel *The God of Small Things*. According to Maguire & Delahunt (2017), thematic analysis is a method of recognising themes or patterns in qualitative data. The goal of thematic analysis is to identify themes or interesting patterns in the text, which are subsequently utilized to address research issues or make a problem statement. A strong thematic analysis does not only summarise a data but also interprets and gives it a meaning. Braun & Clarke (2006) claimed that, mastering the qualitative approach as a primary method is essential since it provides basic skills that may be

used to a variety of research types. The choice of thematic analysis was made because it allows for a systematic investigation of the novel's institutional oppression, social injustice and class struggle. It also assists in revealing the novel's underlying political connotation both hidden and apparent. It supports the Marxist framework, which makes it possible to analyse the power dynamics and social hierarchies in an organised manner.

This method involves six steps:

Familiarisation with the Data

At this stage it is compulsory to closely read the text of, *The God of Small Things*, thoroughly to get familiarization with the themes of class struggle and oppression. At this stage, it is useful to make notes and document the first impression.

Generating the Primary Codes or Coding

At this stage data is organised into systematic and meaningful ways that is relevant to research question. For example, these codes may include lower class oppression, communism and resistance etc.

Searching for Themes

At this stage recognising patterns and links allow us to group codes into possible themes.

Reviewing Themes

Themes are refined to make sure that it appropriately reflects the data, at this stage.

Identifying and Characterising Themes

This step explains each theme in details and determines its importance. Every theme was thoughtfully named and organised to correspond with the discussion chapter.

Writing Up

At this stage a coherent story is written that makes the connection between a research question and themes. The concluding themes served as discussion chapter's basis, providing an organised and sound reading of novel.

Theoretical Framework

This research follows a qualitative approach, using the theory of Marxism. It was introduced by Karl Marx in 19th century and the publication of political pamphlet, *The Communist Manifesto*, 1848 co-written by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, also proved a milestone in the development of this theory. The Russian Revolution of 1917 also played a significant role in spreading the Marxist ideology, leading to the global influence of socialist and communist movements. The "Manifesto" was issued as a platform for the "Communist League", the union of workingmen that began in Germany and subsequently became international and prior to 1848, it was a secret society due to political situations in the continent. According to Munzer (1948), though it is a collective work, the "Manifesto" owes its core proposition to Marx. The current mode of financial production and trade, as well as social organization, form the foundation for political and intellectual history in each period. Therefore, class struggle has been a part of human history since the breakup of early tribal groups with shared land ownership. Due to the history of class struggle between the oppressed and exploiting classes, the proletariat and the exploited class, is currently unable to free themselves from the bourgeoisie without liberating society as a whole from oppression, exploitation, and class-discrimination. This theory analyses class struggle and

proposes a classless society. It advocates for a socialist system led by working class(proletariat) and progressing towards communism. In *The God of Small Things* use of political allegories through themes and characters mirror Marx's concept of class struggle and oppression shedding light on power dynamics.

Discussions & Analysis

The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy is a powerful political allegory which criticizes the themes of postcolonial India's institutionalized power structures, caste-based discriminations, and structural oppression. These themes are identified through 'Thematic Analysis of Braun and Clarke (2006)' to highlight the class opposition and political allegory. It facilitated the organization of the discussion around important themes including class struggle, violence in institutions, and caste oppression. The experiences of marginalized characters like Velutha and Ammu serve as a symbolic representation of how social and political inequalities impact the people's lives in the novel. Roy examines the inability of post-independence India to achieve justice and equal treatment by fusing human tragedies within larger sociopolitical realities.

The most powerful allegorical element of the novel is the caste system, in which Velutha "Untouchable" is represented as subjugated lower class being exposed to social and institutional oppression. His forbidden love with Ammu, who is a Syrian Christian, stands for rebelling the strong social limits, which finally leads to his cruel death. The role played by the state in maintaining caste system and class inequalities is prominent in Velutha's imprisonment and brutal death, showing how the government institutions instead of providing justice enforces the oppression.

"Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan's footprint. In Mammachi's time, Paravans, like other Untouchables, were not allowed to walk on public roads, not allowed to cover their upper bodies, not allowed to carry umbrellas. They had to put their hands over their mouths when they spoke, to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed" (Roy, 1997, p. 71).

It reflects the caste discrimination and marginalisation of a lower caste in the hands of upper caste in this novel. These lines are clear reflection of how the lower caste was treated with hatred even they were not allowed to breath openly in the air and also carrying an umbrella was a big sin. According to Roy (1997), *The God of Small Things* depicts the condition of Paravans in such words:

"After Independence they found they were not entitled to any government benefits like job reservations or bank loans at low interest rates, because officially, on paper, they were Christians, and therefore casteless" (Roy, 1997, p. 71).

These lines give a message that how these Untouchables were deprived of fundamental rights even after independence just for the reason that they belong to a lower caste or considered as casteless. The character of the novel, Velutha who is also a Paravan or Untouchable, appears as a powerful representation of this system of dehumanisation or marginalisation. His status as an "Untouchable" deprives him from the basic human rights and exposes him to oppression. For example, despite his skills, Velutha's achievements cannot raise or upgrade his status in society.

The novel also supports Marxist ideas of class struggle because it provides a lens to examine *The God of Small Things* to understand that how bourgeois maintain their control over proletariats by class and caste division. The characters like Baby Kochamma and Chacko, symbolise the affluent bourgeois, who always try to maintain their dominance over Paravan workers including Velutha who represents lower class or proletariat, which gives a stark contrast throughout the narrative. The upper class always enjoys financial security, protection from law, good education while the lower class is always entangled in oppression and social injustice.

Findings

The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy is a powerful political allegory which criticises the themes of postcolonial India's institutionalised power structures, caste-based discriminations and structural oppression. These themes are identified through "Thematic Analysis of Braun and Clarke (2006)" to highlight the class opposition and political allegory. It facilitated the organisation of discussion around important themes including class struggle, violence in institutions and caste oppression. The experiences of marginalised characters like Velutha and Ammu serves as a symbolic representation of how social and political inequalities impact the people's lives in the novel. Roy examines the inability of post-independence to achieve justice and equal treatment by fusing human tragedies within larger sociopolitical realities. The most powerful allegorical element of the novel is the caste system, in which Velutha "Untouchable" is represented as subjugated lower class being exposed to social and institutional oppression. His forbidden love with Ammu, who is a Syrian Christian, stands for rebelling the strong social limits, which finally leads to his cruel death. The role played by the state in maintaining caste system and class inequalities is prominent in Velutha's imprisonment and brutal death, showing how the government institutions instead of providing justice enforces the oppression. The novel also supports Marxist ideas of class struggle because it provides a lens to examine *The God of Small Things* to understand that how bourgeois maintain their control over proletariats by class and caste division. The characters like Baby Kochamma and Chacko, symbolise the affluent bourgeois, who always try to maintain their dominance over Paravan workers including Velutha who represents lower class or proletariat, which gives a stark contrast throughout the narrative. The upper class always enjoys financial security, protection from law, good education while the lower class is always entangled in oppression and social injustice. The connection between Ammu, Chacko and Velutha demonstrates that how social interactions are influenced by the class systems. For example, Chacko maintains his elevated status even after his failed marriage and economic constraints. On the other hand, Ammu endures gender inequality and oppression despite being from the upper class. Therefore, Chacko who belongs to a higher social status enjoys as compared to Velutha who is always underestimated and humiliated despite his skills due to his lower caste and poor economic background. The effects of class oppression by bourgeois are clear in tragic death of Velutha, in which official institutions such as police and judiciary system along with elites strengthen the concept that lower class people have no rights to claim the justice.

Conclusion

The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy is not just an account of personal tragedies but it is a complex commentary on sociopolitical situation which highlights the class structures, gender inequalities and caste system. Through the lens of thematic analysis Roy, challenges the sociopolitical conditions of her age, highlighting the deeply ingrained hierarchies that remain despite freedom of India. Through the character of Pappachi, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, Chacko as well as main incidents the novel emphasises the harsh impacts of Colonialism, demonstrating that the benefits of class and power are enjoyed by the family of Syrian Christian

while the casteless or lower-class people are oppressed. According to Marxist point of view, this illustrates how economic disparities and class inequalities still exist, which supports the notion that elite class maintains its power while the marginalised are suppressed and remain silent. Moreover, the novelist explores the relationship between individual lives and more significant institutional factors while criticising the rigid caste system, oppression, gender discrimination, the shortcomings of political movements such as Communism and lasting effects of Colonialism. Marxist theory, which examines economic systems and its effects on social structures provides help to understand all these aspects that causes inequalities in a society. The victimisation of Ammu and Velutha is a component of a larger oppressive system rather than a personal that upholds class and caste discrimination. Their pains highlight the Marxist notions of social stratification and exploitation by serving as an allegory for postcolonial society's failure in attaining true justice. In conclusion, *The God of Small Things* transforms from a novel into a critical sociopolitical critique on the weaknesses and shortcomings of postcolonial India. The novel rich allegory makes it a powerful Marxist critique on societal injustices by illuminating the ways in which power, ideology and class affect lives. Roy challenges the readers to think about the reality of systematic oppression by reading this novel and leaves the question for a reader that if real change can be achieved in a system which still favors the powerful people?

Recommendations for Future Research

The study emphasises the importance of political allegory by unveiling it and strongly criticises the class struggle, caste discrimination and sociopolitical issues of India. This investigation can be extended more in future by examining other Indian novels in their use of political allegory to highlight relevant sociopolitical issues. For example, comparative analysis with works like Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* could offer a broader perspective by using Marxism as criticism on postcolonial narratives. Additionally, the connection between gender role and class oppression in postcolonial novels could also be a subject of future research. *The God of Small Things* illustrates character of marginalised women like Ammu under the patriarchal structures and class hierarchies. Analysis of similar works may give deeper understanding of the ways in which postcolonial cultures maintained their gender and financial inequalities.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) can also be used to analyse the narrative style and language of the novel. Van Dijk's Socio-cognitive model and Wodak and Meyer's theoretical framework can also be used to reveal the power dynamics in the novel. It will help to understand that how discourse can shape the power structures in society.

Roy is a prominent and active political thinker; her political speeches and essays can also be analysed in addition to this novel to see how her involvement in the real world influences her fiction. It needs a deeper contextual understanding of Roy's ideological position. the relation between literary and political studies can be strengthened by multidisciplinary approach.

Finally, this study emphasises that how important it is to teach the political allegory in the study of literature. Future studies could examine how postcolonial novels such as *The God of Small Things* can be incorporated into literary curricula to encourage students to critically think about themes of injustice, class discrimination and power structures. Under such a frame work, literature could be used as an instrument to criticise society, and a way to understand the ideological disputes and historical struggles.

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