



Vol. 3 No. 7 (July) (2025)

## **Voices in Silence: Intersectionality of Caste and Class in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things***

**Dr. Shamshad Rasool**

Lecturer, Department of English, University of Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan.

[shamshad.rasool@uog.edu.pk](mailto:shamshad.rasool@uog.edu.pk)

**Anzala Noor**

M. Phil, Department of English, University of Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan.

[anzalanoor001@gmail.com](mailto:anzalanoor001@gmail.com)

**Aneesa Kalsoom**

Lecturer, Department of English, MUST, Mirpur, AJK, Pakistan.

[aneesa.eng@must.edu.pk](mailto:aneesa.eng@must.edu.pk)

### **Abstract**

Caste is a rigid and deeply entrenched system of social stratification in South Asia. The identity assigned at birth has a profound influence on individual autonomy and societal interactions. This study examines the intersection of caste and class oppression in Roy's novel *The God of Small Things*, with a particular focus on how the intersectional identities formed by caste, class, and social expectations contribute to the marginalization and ostracism of the characters from the lower strata. Employing Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality and the qualitative content analysis method, the study investigates the deeply ingrained social structures that affect the lived experiences of the characters. The findings reveal that the entrenched social hierarchies entrap lower-caste individuals, such as Velutha, and curtail their freedom while perpetuating systemic discrimination. Characters who dare transgress caste and class boundaries face harsh repercussions, including societal exclusion, condemnation, violence, and enforced silence. The analysis also demonstrates that female characters suffer dual oppression through patriarchal control and moral surveillance. Additionally, the study examines the fragmentation of characters' identity and the intergenerational transmission of trauma and fear. Roy's narrative thus represents a strong critique of the ways caste and class shape not only the characters' public life but also infiltrate their intimate domains of personal experiences.

**Key Words:** Caste, social discrimination, stratification, oppression, untouchability, identity fragmentation, social exclusion.

### **Introduction**

The class and caste systems have long been functioning in the subcontinent. They are rigid and pervasive forms of social structure that shape individual identity, deny access to power, and hinder social mobility (Bayly, 1999; Jodhka, 2012). Supported by religion and socio-political ideologies such as *dharma* and *karma*, societal hierarchies have engendered normalized exclusionary practices and structural inequalities (Dirks, 2001). Though Indian society attempted to abolish it after India's independence in 1947, discrimination based on caste pervades as a cultural power mechanism. Social silence supports it (Guru, 2000). The



## Vol. 3 No. 7 (July) (2025)

postcolonial and feminist literature, particularly by Dalit, critiqued the oppressive structures and provided a platform to challenge them by pinpointing the ugliness of such practices (Rege, 2006).

Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) represents poignant intersections between postcolonial modernity, class, gender, and caste. Her representation of Velutha, a Paravan (a Dalit caste), and his relationship with Ammu, an upper-caste woman, uncovers the drastic repercussions of transgressing deep-rooted social hierarchies. The novel not only cross-examines the legacy of caste-based persecution but also criticizes the role of silence and social complicity that maintain caste ideology in the milieu (Spivak, 1999; Chatterjee, 2004). She pinpoints the issues related to class, caste, gender, and social norms. She portrays the brutal repercussions faced by Velutha, a Dalit, for transgressing the social hierarchies as she develops a relationship with an upper-caste woman, Ammu. The novel also explores the way modernity is influencing typical and traditional caste structures.

As mentioned earlier, the caste system is crucial in the socio-cultural setup of South Asia, specifically in India, and it has a profound influence on literature from that region. The present study focuses on the realities related to the socio-political system to expose the lived realities of caste-based attitude in Kerala's socio-political contexts. It explores the complex social structure and norms. The study also focuses on exploring the complexities, implications, and challenges faced by individuals undergoing the South Asian social system, and how individuals struggle against the rigid norms and concepts of the caste system. Literature being a reflection of society, the examination of the novel through the lens of caste and class dynamics will deepen the understanding of the functioning of the structured violence embedded in caste and class dynamics.

### Research Objectives

In the South Asian context, the caste system functions as a deeply embedded mechanism of control, exclusion, and identity formation. Roy's *The God of Small Things* has been selected for this study as it undertakes caste-based oppression, class inequality, and the silencing of the peripheral voices. Accordingly, this study sets out to gain the following objectives:

- To analyze how deep-rooted social hierarchies shape the characters' interpersonal relationships, life choices, and identities in Roy's *The God of Small Things*.
- To explore the social, political, and emotional repercussions of the characters' resistance to or compliance with the dominant socio-cultural structures within the narrative.
- To examine how silence is a mechanism of characters' subjugation and resistance within the framework of social stratification.

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge on the issues of race, class, and discrimination. It can help in deciphering the deep-rooted social injustice and inequalities that exist in South Asia, particularly in the region of India, and the ways in which the masses are marginalized through tacit social ideals, which turn up as social hierarchies resulting in discrimination, oppressive systems, and restrictions on individuals based on their caste identity.



## Literature Review

Social hierarchies highlight the structured ranking of social groups or individuals based on factors such as wealth, power, social status, and occupation. This ranking is often influenced by religious or cultural beliefs, where certain groups are considered superior or inferior. Hutton (1963) views caste as a collection of groups or families bearing a common name, claiming a common ancestor, and following the same heredity. According to Velassery (2005), casts can be defined as the traditional and endogamous division of ethnic units having a position of superior or inferior social ranks. Kar (2007) claims that the system of caste was initially created to promote the harmonious working of society, but it has become a system of oppression, prejudice, and discrimination.

A caste system is an important type of social hierarchy based on a strict division of society into dissimilar groups, usually based on family lineage, occupation, and social status (Bayly, 1989; Dumont, 1980). In a caste, individuals born in a particular caste or group are expected to follow the traditions, customs, norms, and values associated with that group (Dirks, 2001). The caste system in South Asia has been a larger and more important part of any society. It is a process of dividing people into different social classes or groups, as castes for Hindus are made in their Holy Scripture, the *Bhagavad Gita* (Bryant, 2007). It begins with the Brahmins (the highest), Kshatriyas (second highest), Vaisyas, Sudras, and Untouchables, who are considered outside of the caste system altogether (Ambedkar, 2014; Sharma, 2002). In India, it is historically one of the important dimensions where people are divided based on religion, tribe, class, gender, region, and language (Gupta, 2007).

Sekhon (2000) states that the caste system in India is a closed system of stratification, which reflects that an individual's social status is beholden to the caste they were born into, because people's behaviour and interaction are limited to social status. Kar (2007) stated that caste is determined by behavior, not by birth, but in the modern world, caste is resolute as soon as the individual is born. While focusing on poverty, Silva and Ajith (2001) reveal that the low caste is affected by their positions in society, including their freedom, security, and adaptation to the modern market economy. Colonialism played a great role in creating corruption and oppression in the modern-day caste system. It can be observed that the caste system played a great role in creating poverty in South Asia, such as in India, Sri Lanka, and Nepal.

Ninian (2008) reveals the fact that people belonging to the lower caste in India are forced to live in poverty because of their caste. He mentioned that the figure of people who are facing poverty and discrimination in India because of the caste system is approximately 180 million to 220 million. Thekaekara (2005) highlights that in South Asia, lower castes are essentially rejected from society, are forbidden to hold jobs because of their caste, and they are living in isolation and absolute exclusion from the cradle to the grave. Gavhale (2017) exposes that the social system of South Asian countries is being shaped by the caste system. It is suffering from many inequalities and social evils, such as problems in employment, education, and development.

## Research Methodology

The study is qualitative. Therefore, it employs the Textual Analysis method for data analysis. It unfolds the hidden meanings of text (Neumann, 2015) and



## Vol. 3 No. 7 (July) (2025)

involves the exploration of the hidden meanings of a text. Being a sociology of interpretations, it allows a researcher to make inferences, draw meanings, and understand a phenomenon. This study analyses themes, structures, dialogues, relationships of the characters, and the language used by the author to highlight the complexities related to the social class and caste system in *The God of Small Things*. This method is a fascinating way to explore the tacit meanings of a literary text.

### Analytical Framework

Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality serves as an analytical tool in this study. Intersectionality refers to the ways various dimensions of a person's identity, such as class, caste, gender, race, and sexuality, interact in complex ways, producing unique experiences of oppression and privilege. Crenshaw's conception is instrumental in understanding how individuals are often subjected to multiple, simultaneous forms of marginalization that cannot be examined in isolation. Her theory addresses the limitations of single-axis frameworks that analyze discrimination through only one category, such as race or gender, without considering how these categories intersect. It is useful for the understanding of how individuals experience multiple forms of oppression and discrimination based on intersecting identities. The core tenets of Intersectionality include Multiplicity of oppression, Structural inequality, Social justice orientation, Interconnectedness of identity categories, Visibility of the marginalized, and Contextual specificity.

This framework particularly helped in analyzing how the characters in *The God of Small Things* suffer from compound oppression in a milieu formed by inflexible social hierarchies, gender roles, and class structure. It also encompasses how intersecting identities affect access to power, agency, and dignity. The application of this framework exposed the multifaceted nature of discrimination and contributed to ongoing discourses on inclusivity, resistance, and social equality.

### Discussion and Findings

Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* (1997) is set in Kerala, India, and narrates the complex dynamics within a Syrian Christian Family. The narrative structure of the novel, rich symbolism, and its exploration of social issues such as gender, class, and caste make it a multifaceted work of literature.

In the novel, Ammu is portrayed as a woman who is living in a patriarchal society and facing gender-based discrimination. Her social status as a divorcee intensifies her marginalization, negating the social rights and protection that marriage provides. In her marginalization, her gender, socio-economic status, and caste intersect. Her relationship with Velutha, a Dalit (a man who belongs to a lower caste), illustrates the compounded discrimination and oppression stemming from both gender and caste. The line "He left no footprints in sand, no ripples in water, no image in mirrors" (p. 202) reflects Velutha's social invisibility due to his caste and class. As an untouchable Paravan, his existence and contribution are systematically erased, highlighting the intersection of class and caste discrimination. He remains unacknowledged and excluded from social recognition and rights.

The line "Ammu had an elaborate Calcutta childhood ritual of blessing people





## Vol. 3 No. 7 (July) (2025)

before they embark on a journey" (p. 80) indicates Ammu's social status, as a woman from a higher caste who defies set social norms by having a relationship with an untouchable Velutha and faces severe social and familial backlash. Their transgression of caste difference brings the worst repercussions for both Ammu and Velutha. The traditional and cultural restrictions imposed on her as a woman are exacerbated by her caste status as she engages in taboo relationships. She faces severe consequences because of disobeying the rituals mentioned in the narrative: "Ammu learned to live with this cold, calculating cruelty... she did exactly nothing to avoid quarrels and confrontations. It could be argued that she sought them out, perhaps even enjoyed them" (p.182). Ammu's relatives disown her and leave her alone without any support. Society rejects her, leading her to face a lonely death.

Through the character of Baby Kochamma, Roy highlights the intersection of gender, caste, and age. Being an unmarried old woman, her manipulation and bitterness stem from her unfulfilled desires and societal restrictions on her autonomy. Her dream of marrying her lover, Father Mulligan (Irish priest), was destroyed. Her belief that "She had the fate of the wretched Man-less woman" (p.47) makes her furious against patriarchal and strict social norms. She tries to manipulate a plot against Ammu and Velutha in her jealousy. She discovers their romantic relationship, raises questions due to caste difference, and starts dehumanizing Velutha based on his caste. Her actions against Velutha and Ammu reflect internalized caste prejudice and her desire for power and control within the family and society.

Velutha is the most prominent portrayal of oppression based on the intersection of caste and class. As a Dalit, he faces social discrimination. He must remain in a lower economic position as a labourer. His intelligence and skills are ignored and unrecognized; his only identity is as an Untouchable Paravan. His relationship with Ammu brings caste and class-based violence upon him. He becomes a culprit for the community's rigid adherence to social and emotional hierarchies, facing physical and institutional violence. It refers to the inescapable and destructive power of class and caste discrimination in society.

Roy, through the characters of Estha and Rahel, highlights the intersection of age and gender and also highlights how societal norms about masculinity prevent them from speaking out about the discrimination they experienced. The abuse experienced by Estha is a poignant example of how societal expectations of masculinity can silence male victims. His inability to speak out about the abuse is due to the cultural norms that dictate the untouchable should behave stoically, strongly, and uncomplainingly. The portrayal of the Ayemenem house and the Kochamma family's history indicates the colonial legacies. Their socioeconomic status and their inspiration towards Western culture reflect the impacts of colonialism that intersect with caste and class issues in Indian society.

The statement "Pappachi would not allow Paravans into the house. Nobody would. They were not allowed to touch anything that Touchable touched. Caste Hindus and Caste Christians" (p.72) reflects the systemic nature of caste discrimination and also explains how it infuses everyday life, affecting and deciding the interactions and social status of individuals. Pappachi's acceptance of these norms reflects his collaboration in perpetuating and maintaining the oppressive structures. The lines also highlight the environment in which the characters live and face the barriers.



## Vol. 3 No. 7 (July) (2025)

Characters' experiences of discrimination, oppression, and marginalization cannot be attributed to a single factor but to the convergence of class, gender, age, caste, and social norms. Through Crenshaw's lens, analysis of the novel underscores the depth of Roy's critique of Indian society and the inescapable nature of intersecting social inequalities. Roy intricately weaves the narrative that unveils the deep-seated issues related to the caste system in South Asia through the tragic love story of Velutha and Ammu, the broader historical and social context, and the trauma faced by Estha and Rahel. The novel also highlights the devastating effects of caste-based discrimination on individuals and society.

The central characters of the novel, Ammu and Velutha, are prominent examples of the harsh realities of the caste system. Velutha is a Dalit, or Untouchable Paravan, belonging to the lower caste, while Ammu belongs to the Syrian Christian family, which is categorized as upper-caste. The forbidden love between them is the key point of discrimination based on caste and social inequalities. Through it, they challenge societal norms and assert their freedom of choice. Their love becomes an act of defiance against social control.

Roy uses several symbols for a better understanding of oppression and discrimination based on caste. The abandoned mansion that is located across the river from Ayemenem House and recognized as "History House" serves as a powerful symbol of historical oppression and injustice based on the caste system in India. The mansion, once owned by an Englishman, Kari Saipu, symbolizes colonial power and its eventual decline in South Asia. His abandoned mansion underscores the global impact of the history of colonialism and also redirects a society that is struggling to move from its historical and traumatic past. The mansion stands as a forbidden space, like the rigid caste system that directs complex and strict social boundaries. Velutha and Ammu both find temporary refuge in it, and their presence there leads to severe consequences.

Roy depicts police viciousness through the character of Velutha, and it also stands for the traditional violence against the lower class. The characters belonging to the upper class are seen as brutal, slaves of their social status, having no sympathy or humanity for the lower class, and also in support of caste-based violence. The characters of Mammachi and Baby Kochamma play a very poignant role in inflicting caste-based violence on Velutha. Baby Kochamma manipulates the situation to ensure his punishment. She also has the belief that Dalits are unacceptable and must be suppressed violently. This brutality reflects the systemic nature of caste oppression in South Asia, particularly India. To sum up, the above discussion highlights the ways Roy intricately knits a narrative that unveils the deep-rooted issues linked with the caste system and social discrimination.

The narrative also illustrates the severe consequences faced by characters, whether they obey or defy caste and social boundaries. Ammu faces social ostracism because of her love relationship with Velutha. Her rejection of societal norms and caste boundaries leads to rejection by her family and society. Living in a patriarchal society, she is not even allowed to think about making personal choices. The act of choosing someone from a lower caste and making a love relationship with him is not acceptable, and she faces oppression as a woman who challenges the boundaries set for women in a male-dominated society. She remains silent in the face of this oppression by her family and society. She is denied the right to raise her voice against the oppression and defend herself



## Vol. 3 No. 7 (July) (2025)

against gender discrimination.

Through her silence and powerlessness, Roy raises her voice against the social boundaries that oppress her because of disobeying the rigid societal norms. It represents how women are dominated and not allowed to make choices for their lives, and have no right to speak in their defense within patriarchal societies in South Asian communities. Her act of choosing someone who is not equal to her social status highlights her act of rejecting societal norms and leads her towards tragic consequences. She died in poverty and isolation.

Velutha also faces severe consequences for breaking and challenging the social norms, as he belongs to a lower caste and is identified as an Untouchable Paravan. According to societal rules, the love relationship between Ammu and Velutha is forbidden because of caste differences between them. As a consequence of his love affair, he faces physical assault and discrimination from police and Ammu's family just because of his connection with the lower caste system. He was brutally treated by society and beaten by the police, and he died in this situation. The ways he is treated by police and society highlight the social and institutional injustice, brutality, and caste-based bias. His death in the battle of social standards serves as a reminder of the violent and oppressive enforcement of caste boundaries. He experiences a lack of legal justice as his death goes unpunished, and he faces a lack of social protection. Such behavior reflects the prejudice within the societal and legal system. He faces legal injustices, life-threatening oppression, and social discrimination just because he is a Dalit, an Untouchable Paravan, not acceptable in society. He dies as a result of denying societal expectations and rules made for lower castes. The character of Velutha Roy also raises his voice against the issues related to power, identity, and social change.

Estha and Rahel, the twins, are affected by the whole situation faced by them. They both suffer lifelong psychological trauma because of the tragic events surrounding Ammu and Velutha. Rahel's life is marked by aimlessness, and emotionally, he is empty. Estha becomes mute and withdraws from social relationships. Their life becomes meaningless and purposeless for them due to the consequences of social oppression present in their surroundings. The destruction of their family unity and societal rejection significantly impact their lives, and lead them towards disconnection and loss from their heritage and identity. Their act of committing incest highlights their psychological stage to understand the things; they are too young to face such sensitive events. They are emotionally affected a lot, and to console themselves or to deal with their psychological complexities, they commit incest. Their act of incest is also not acceptable for society, and their act also highlights that societal expectations or rules are meaningless for them, and they are violating them without considering anything.

The characters who break the social boundaries and defy caste norms face consequences in the form of impacting their personal and familial relationships and social exclusion. The community's collective obedience to these strict and life-taking rules and boundaries creates an environment of fear, inhumanity, and intolerance. Members of Ammu's family, such as Mammachi and Pappachi, and Baby Kochamma, are presented as supporters of caste-based oppression. But the novel also depicts the oppression faced by them as Mammachi undergoes the physical and verbal assault by Pappachi without any complaint. She accepts her



## Vol. 3 No. 7 (July) (2025)

role as an oppressed wife and mother. She also stands for the social expectations for women to be submissive to oppression. She is not allowed to raise her voice against her oppression. She suppresses her desires to conform to the societal norms of a patriarchal society.

Through her writing, Roy tactfully portrays the severe consequences experienced by characters who either deny or obey defined social and caste boundaries. She raises her voice against the evil side of social norms through personal relationships linked with tragedies, institutional violence, and social ostracism. She highlights the destructive and unescapable impacts of the caste system on society and individuals. Everyone faces discrimination in the struggle to fulfil societal norms, no matter whether he/she is obeying or disobeying the norms set by society for individuals.

### Conclusion

The analysis of *The God of Small Things* reveals the deep-rooted impact of the entrenched caste system on individual lives and relationships in Indian society. Through the tragic love story of Ammu and Velutha, Roy exposes the repercussions of challenging caste boundaries and societal expectations. Velutha's death in this context becomes a powerful symbol of violence inflicted by a rigidly stratified social order and the violent nature of caste discrimination. The portrayal of lived experiences of the characters trapped in intersecting systems of caste, class, and silencing the oppressed, poignantly, explores systematic oppression and the cost of transgressing socially constructed boundaries. The analysis also underscores how caste identities govern personal choices, relationships, and access to justice, limiting individual autonomy. It also reveals the consequences faced by characters for rejecting the cultural and social expectations associated with a particular caste and set of social rules. It highlights that a person is bound to make decisions according to the caste with which he is connected. Roy, through her characters, highlights the issues faced by them because of social hierarchies. She highlights how individuals are treated within a social system—apart from the caste system, every individual is facing social discrimination on different bases.

This study recommends critical conversations about social equality and justice for dismantling caste and class hierarchies to create a more just and equitable society.

### References

- Ambedkar, B. R. (2014). *Annihilation of caste: The annotated critical edition*. Verso Books.
- Bayly, S. (1999). *Caste, society, and politics in India from the eighteenth century to the modern age*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bryant, E. F. (2007). *Krishna: A sourcebook*. Oxford University Press.
- Chatterjee, P. (2004). *The politics of the governed: Reflections on popular politics in most of the world*. Columbia University Press.
- Crenshaw, K. W. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics. *The University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139–167.
- Dirks, N. B. (2001). *Castes of mind: Colonialism and the making of modern India*. Princeton University Press.





## Vol. 3 No. 7 (July) (2025)

- Dumont, L. (1980). *Homo hierarchicus: The caste system and its implications* (Rev. ed.). University of Chicago Press.
- Gavhale, S. R. (2017). Issue of Social Exclusion in India: Perspectives and Challenges. *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 22(6), 28-35.
- Gupta, D. (2000). *Interrogating caste: Understanding hierarchy and difference in Indian society*. Penguin Books.
- Guru, G. (2000). *Dalits in pursuit of modernity*. In R. Thapar (Ed.), *India: Another millennium?* (pp. 278–295). Penguin Books.
- Hutton, J. H. (1963). *Caste in India: Its nature, function, and origins*. Oxford University Press.
- Jodhka, S. S. (2012). *Caste*. Oxford University Press.
- Kar, D. (July 1, 2007). Religion and roots of India's caste system. *The Washington Post*.
- Neuman, W. L. (1992). *Social research methods: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. University of Wisconsin Press.
- Ninian, A. (2008). India's untouchables: The Dalits. *Contemporary Review*, 1689, 186-192.
- Rege, S. (2006). *Writing caste/writing gender: Narrating Dalit women's testimonies*. Zubaan.
- Roy, A. (1997). *The God of small things*. India Ink.
- Sekhon, J. (2000). *Modern India*. McGraw-Hill.
- Sharma, U. (2002). *Caste*. Open University Press.
- Silva, K. T. & Ajith H. (2001). Poverty, social exclusion and the impact of selected legal measures against caste discrimination in South Asia || , In P. Robson & A. Kjonstad (Eds.), *Poverty and the Law* (pp. 59- 71). Hart Publishing.
- Spivak, G. C. (1999). *A critique of postcolonial reason: Toward a history of the vanishing present*. Harvard University Press.
- Thekaekara, M. M. (2005, July). Combating caste. *New Internationalist*, 380 [http://www.newint.org/features/2005/07/01/combating\\_caste/](http://www.newint.org/features/2005/07/01/combating_caste/)
- Velassery, S. (2005). *Casteism and human rights: Toward an ontology of the social order*. Marshall Cavendish Academic.