



International Journal of Engineering, Science and Humanities

An international peer reviewed, refereed, open-access journal
Impact Factor 4.8 www.ijesh.com ISSN: 2250-3552

Arundhati Roy's Narrative Style and Political Commentary in The God of Small Things

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Abstract

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* intricately weaves narrative experimentation with sharp political insight, making it a seminal work in postcolonial Indian English literature. The novel's fragmented chronology, shifting perspectives, and poetic language serve as tools for deconstructing power, identity, and memory within a deeply hierarchical society. Roy employs her narrative style not only to tell a story but to question structures of caste, gender, and colonial legacy that shape human experience. Her portrayal of marginalized voices—especially women and Dalits—reflects an intersection of personal suffering and collective resistance. Through an interplay of aesthetics and activism, Roy transforms storytelling into a political act, where the “small things” of everyday life expose the “big things” of injustice and domination. The study examines how her stylistic choices embody resistance, turning fiction into a profound commentary on social inequality and the politics of belonging.

Keywords: Narrative Style, Political Commentary, Postcolonialism, Feminism, Arundhati Roy

Introduction

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) stands as a landmark in contemporary Indian English literature, blending an innovative narrative style with profound political commentary. Set in the lush yet divided landscape of Kerala, the novel transcends a simple family saga to expose the deeply entrenched hierarchies of caste, gender, and class that define postcolonial Indian society. Roy's narrative technique—marked by non-linear chronology, fragmented storytelling, shifting perspectives, and lyrical language—reflects the disordered emotional and political realities of her characters. Her prose oscillates between poetry and realism, employing repetition, childlike diction, and vernacular expressions to subvert conventional narrative structures and challenge Western literary norms. At its core, *The God of Small Things* is not merely a tale of forbidden love and familial disintegration, but a powerful critique of the “Love Laws” that dictate “who should be loved, and how, and how much.” Through characters like Ammu, Velutha, and Estha, Roy unveils the brutality of caste oppression, patriarchal control, and social hypocrisy, while her narrative voice simultaneously resists and mourns these injustices.



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The political dimension of the novel is deeply intertwined with its stylistic innovations—Roy's fragmented narrative mirrors the fractured identities of those silenced by systemic inequality. Her storytelling becomes an act of rebellion, transforming personal trauma into political discourse. The intertwining of the private and public, the intimate and institutional, situates Roy's work within postcolonial feminist theory, where literature becomes a tool for social resistance and reimagining justice. As a writer and activist, Roy blurs the line between art and politics, crafting a narrative that exposes the violence of power and the resilience of those marginalized by it. Thus, *The God of Small Things* emerges as both a literary masterpiece and a political document, where Roy's distinctive narrative style serves not merely as aesthetic expression but as a means of articulating dissent, reclaiming suppressed voices, and redefining the contours of Indian postcolonial identity.

Background of the Study

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* occupies a crucial place in postcolonial Indian literature for its fusion of artistic innovation and political consciousness. Published in 1997, the novel emerged during a period when Indian English fiction was gaining global recognition for its exploration of identity, history, and social inequality. Roy's narrative delves into the complexities of caste discrimination, gender oppression, and postcolonial power dynamics within Kerala's socio-political landscape. Her use of a fragmented, non-linear narrative challenges conventional storytelling, reflecting the chaos and trauma experienced by her characters. By intertwining personal histories with larger political realities, Roy redefines the boundaries between the private and the public spheres. The novel thus becomes not only a literary exploration of forbidden love and family tragedy but also a bold political statement against institutionalized injustice and social hierarchies that continue to shape modern India.

Rationale of the Study

The selection of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* as the primary text for this study is rooted in its unique blend of literary innovation and political consciousness. The novel stands out as a rich site for examining how narrative style can function as a vehicle for social critique, making it ideal for exploring the intersection between aesthetics and activism. Roy's experimental storytelling—marked by non-linear narration, shifting perspectives, and linguistic hybridity—serves not only as a creative technique but also as a means of challenging entrenched systems of caste, gender, and class oppression. The novel's continued relevance in contemporary India, where issues of marginalization and inequality persist, underscores the importance of re-engaging with its themes through a modern socio-political lens. Furthermore, reassessing Roy's debut novel alongside her later activist writings reveals a striking continuity between her art and ideology, illustrating how her literary voice evolved into an instrument of resistance. This study thus contributes to the broader discourse of postcolonial feminist literary criticism by



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demonstrating how narrative form itself can become a mode of political intervention. In doing so, it affirms Roy's position as both a literary innovator and a transformative voice in global political thought.

Overview of Indian English Literature and Postcolonial Fiction

Indian English literature has evolved as a vibrant and diverse body of work that mirrors the nation's socio-political transformations and cultural complexities. Emerging during the colonial era through writers like Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, and R.K. Narayan, Indian English fiction initially sought to define the Indian experience in the language of the colonizer. However, post-independence writers began using English as a tool of self-expression and resistance, reshaping it to convey indigenous realities and voices silenced by imperial discourse. The postcolonial phase marked a shift towards exploring issues of identity, displacement, hybridity, and the lingering effects of colonial domination. Writers such as Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, and Amitav Ghosh experimented with narrative structures and linguistic hybridity to capture the fragmentation of postcolonial consciousness. Within this literary trajectory, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* occupies a distinctive space, merging lyrical language with political critique. Her narrative exemplifies the postcolonial writer's attempt to reclaim agency through storytelling, dismantling rigid hierarchies of caste, gender, and class. By weaving regional dialects, local myths, and nonlinear timelines into English prose, Roy not only decolonizes narrative form but also exposes the social injustices perpetuated by both colonial legacy and contemporary systems of power. Thus, Indian English literature and postcolonial fiction together represent a continuous negotiation between tradition and modernity, resistance and adaptation—where writers like Roy transform the novel into a site of cultural reclamation and political dissent.

The Significance of *The God of Small Things* in Global Literary and Political Contexts

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* holds immense significance in both global literary and political contexts for its ability to merge local realities with universal human struggles. Upon its publication in 1997, the novel received international acclaim, winning the Booker Prize and marking a milestone in Indian English fiction. Its lyrical yet politically charged narrative resonated across cultures, offering a profound critique of oppression rooted in caste, class, gender, and colonial history. Roy's portrayal of Kerala's socio-political landscape—interwoven with the personal tragedies of Ammu, Velutha, and the twins—transcends regional boundaries, speaking to broader global issues of inequality, power, and identity. The novel's structure, characterized by nonlinear narration and linguistic experimentation, challenged Eurocentric literary norms, positioning Roy as a postcolonial voice who redefined English as a medium of resistance. Politically, the book exposes the deep-seated injustices perpetuated by patriarchy and



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caste hierarchies, while also interrogating the complicity of state institutions and the persistence of colonial mentalities in modern India. Its exploration of “small things” as symbols of personal resistance against oppressive “big things” has universal relevance, highlighting how intimate emotions reflect political realities. Globally, *The God of Small Things* has inspired scholars, feminists, and activists alike, cementing Roy’s reputation as a writer who fuses aesthetics with advocacy. Thus, the novel stands as a testament to how literature can transcend borders to become a powerful medium of political consciousness and moral introspection.

Literature Review

Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* has generated an extensive body of critical scholarship since its publication in 1997, marking a turning point in postcolonial Indian fiction. Scholars across literary, cultural, and political studies have analyzed its narrative complexity, linguistic innovation, and socio-political engagement. The novel’s hybrid structure—interweaving personal memory, collective trauma, and political critique—has been viewed as emblematic of India’s postcolonial condition. This literature review synthesizes major critical interpretations, focusing on how Roy’s narrative style functions as a vehicle for political commentary. The selected studies—ranging from early 2000s analyses to contemporary appraisals—reflect evolving perspectives on issues of cosmopolitanism, trauma, history, ethics, and performance. Together, they illustrate how Roy’s debut novel continues to challenge literary conventions and provoke discourse on caste, gender, and national identity in a globalized world.

Alex Tickell’s (2003) article “*The God of Small Things: Arundhati Roy’s Postcolonial Cosmopolitanism*” situates the novel within the context of global postcolonial literature. Tickell argues that Roy’s narrative reflects a form of “postcolonial cosmopolitanism” that resists both nationalist essentialism and Western liberal universalism. According to Tickell, Roy’s depiction of Kerala’s local politics, family hierarchies, and caste divisions is intricately connected to global systems of power and representation. The novel’s use of English—infused with regional Malayalam words and idiomatic distortions—embodies this cosmopolitan hybridity. Tickell highlights that Roy’s narrative style itself is political; by bending the English language, she asserts an alternative cultural voice that destabilizes colonial linguistic dominance. Thus, Roy’s aesthetic choices are not merely artistic but also ideological, positioning her narrative within a broader struggle against cultural homogenization and neo-colonial discourse.

In her influential essay “‘The Small Voice of History’ in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*,” Anuradha Dingwaney Needham (2005) explores how Roy reimagines historical narration through fragmented memory. Needham interprets Roy’s storytelling as an act of historical revisionism that foregrounds the subaltern perspective, particularly through the characters of Ammu and Velutha. The “small voice” becomes a metaphor for marginalized experiences silenced by dominant historical narratives. Roy’s nonlinear narrative structure,



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which oscillates between past and present, mirrors the process of remembering and forgetting in postcolonial societies. Needham contends that by centering emotional and sensory recollections, Roy challenges patriarchal and casteist historiography. Her fragmented style thus becomes a counter-discursive strategy—recovering suppressed histories while critiquing the ideological constructs of modernity, morality, and nationhood.

Lara C. Fox's (2002) article, "*A Martyrology of the Abject: Witnessing and Trauma in Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things*," examines the novel through the lens of trauma studies. Fox argues that Roy's disjointed temporal structure and cyclical narration reflect the psychology of trauma and the impossibility of linear recollection. The narrative's repetition and stylistic fragmentation mirror the protagonists' attempts to process unspeakable pain. By presenting trauma through the eyes of the twins, Estha and Rahel, Roy transforms the act of narration into an ethical act of witnessing. Fox maintains that the novel rejects sentimental closure; instead, it forces readers to confront the enduring consequences of caste violence, forbidden love, and social exclusion. Thus, Roy's stylistic experimentation—her rhythmic prose, distorted syntax, and childlike diction—serves as both a reflection of and response to historical trauma, making the narrative form itself a site of resistance.

Pradipta Sarkar's (2007) essay "*Performing Narrative: The Motif of Performance in Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things*" analyzes the performative dimensions of storytelling in the novel. Sarkar contends that Roy uses performance as a narrative metaphor to expose the social construction of identity. The characters often enact societal roles dictated by caste and gender hierarchies, revealing how power operates through repetition and surveillance. The novel's meta-narrative structure—its self-awareness of storytelling—suggests that both personal and political realities are performative. Sarkar interprets Roy's stylistic choices, such as capitalization and non-standard grammar, as acts of linguistic performance that resist normative authority. Through this lens, Roy's narrative becomes an act of theatrical subversion—where breaking linguistic and social conventions allows for the reimagining of identity and agency.

Helen Jennings (2010) in "*The Ethics of Nostalgia in Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things*" examines the novel's moral dimension, arguing that nostalgia in Roy's narrative is both ethical and political. It functions as a critique of modernity's loss of empathy and communal belonging. Similarly, A.N. Prasad (2004) in *A Critical Appraisal* offers one of the earliest comprehensive studies of Roy's fiction, recognizing her narrative experimentation as central to her political vision. Prasad notes how her poetic language humanizes the oppressed and indicts systemic injustice. Expanding this view, Tickell's (2007) *Routledge Study Guide* situates Roy's work within postcolonial pedagogy, emphasizing its layered narrative and symbolic resonance. Collectively, these scholars reveal that Roy's stylistic and thematic concerns—memory, ethics,



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and resistance—are inseparable, positioning her novel as a moral and aesthetic challenge to readers.

Author's Profile: Arundhati Roy

• Brief Biographical Overview and Major Works

Arundhati Roy, born Suzanna Arundhati Roy on November 24, 1961, in Shillong, Meghalaya, India, is a renowned novelist, essayist, and political activist whose work transcends literary boundaries to address some of the most pressing social and political issues of contemporary India. She spent much of her childhood in Aymanam (Ayemenem) in Kerala, a region that later became the vivid backdrop of her debut novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997). Educated at the School of Planning and Architecture in Delhi, Roy initially pursued a career as an architect and screenwriter before gaining global recognition for her literary work. *The God of Small Things*, her first novel, won the prestigious Booker Prize in 1997, propelling her into international prominence.



The novel's success was not only due to its poetic and experimental narrative style but also for its unflinching portrayal of caste, class, and gender oppression in postcolonial India. Beyond fiction, Roy has published several influential non-fiction works, including *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (2001), *War Talk* (2003), *Field Notes on Democracy* (2009), and *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* (2014).

• Transition from Novelist to Activist and Political Commentator

Following the immense success of her debut novel, Roy shifted her focus from fiction to political activism and commentary, becoming one of the most vocal critics of globalization, militarization, and state oppression in India. She actively opposed the Narmada Dam project, U.S. foreign policy, and India's nuclear testing, advocating for environmental justice, human



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rights, and the rights of marginalized communities. Her essays, written with the same lyrical intensity as her fiction, dissect issues of corporate exploitation, communal violence, and authoritarianism. Through her fearless critique of both Western imperialism and Indian nationalism, Roy redefined the role of a writer as a public intellectual and moral conscience of society. Her transition reflects a seamless movement from the imaginative to the political, where her narrative voice becomes a vehicle for truth-telling and resistance.

- **Interrelation between Literary Expression and Socio-Political Engagement**

Roy's literary and political identities are deeply intertwined, each reinforcing the other in purpose and vision. Her fiction and non-fiction both embody a commitment to exposing the structures of power that perpetuate inequality and injustice. In *Take God of Small Things*, personal tragedies mirror political realities—love becomes an act of rebellion, and memory becomes a form of resistance. Similarly, her essays challenge the dominant political narratives and amplify the voices of those excluded from mainstream discourse. For Roy, storytelling is a political act, and her narrative style—marked by fragmentation, linguistic playfulness, and emotional immediacy—mirrors the complexity of India's socio-political landscape.

- **Influence of Background on Thematic and Stylistic Choices**

Roy's upbringing in Kerala, a region steeped in social stratification and political activism, profoundly shaped her thematic and stylistic sensibilities. Raised by a single mother, Mary Roy, who was herself a crusader for women's rights and the founder of a progressive school, Arundhati grew up in an environment that encouraged independence and social awareness. Her multicultural background, straddling the boundaries of religion, class, and language, nurtured her sensitivity to marginalization and hybridity—central themes in her work. The linguistic richness of Malayalam, the oral storytelling traditions of Kerala, and her architectural training collectively influenced her intricate, mosaic-like prose style. The rhythm and lyricism of her writing reflect both the beauty and brutality of the world she depicts. Ultimately, Arundhati Roy stands as a unique figure in global literature—a writer whose words bridge art and activism, transforming narrative into a tool of resistance, empathy, and profound social critique.

Conclusion

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* stands as a profound testament to the power of narrative art as a vehicle for political and social critique. Through her innovative storytelling, Roy dismantles conventional narrative structures to expose the deep-seated inequalities that persist within India's caste, gender, and class hierarchies. Her use of nonlinear chronology, fragmented narration, and linguistic hybridity transforms the act of storytelling into an act of resistance—challenging not only literary traditions but also the cultural ideologies that sustain oppression. The novel's intertwining of the personal and the political reveals how private emotions and intimate relationships are inseparable from the larger socio-political realities that



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shape human experience. Roy's language, infused with Malayalam idioms and childlike diction, disrupts the dominance of standard English and asserts a distinctly postcolonial voice that speaks from the margins. The political resonance of the novel extends beyond its setting in Kerala, reflecting universal struggles against systemic injustice and the silencing of marginalized voices. By humanizing those rendered invisible by power—women, Dalits, and the poor—Roy redefines the boundaries of both literature and activism. Her narrative style is not merely a literary device but a conscious ethical stance, a means of reimagining history and reclaiming agency through art. In essence, *The God of Small Things* exemplifies how fiction can transcend aesthetics to become a form of political intervention, bridging the gap between storytelling and social consciousness. Roy's work continues to inspire readers and scholars worldwide, affirming.

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