

Breaking Boundaries: the Dynamics and Consequences of Forbidden Love

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Abstract

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* explores the impact of societal structures, such as caste, patriarchy, and politics, on individual identity, relationships, and forbidden love. Set in Kerala, India, the novel follows twins Estha and Rahel as they navigate a world governed by rigid social hierarchies. The narrative delves into themes of power and oppression, especially through the love affair between Ammu, a woman from a higher caste, and Velutha, an "Untouchable." Their relationship challenges the deeply ingrained caste system, leading to tragic consequences. The novel also examines the tension between personal desires and societal norms, as well as the lasting effects of trauma and loss on the characters' lives. By weaving the political and personal, Roy creates a layered narrative that reveals the complex forces shaping human existence.

Keywords: Trauma, Oppression, Politics, Memory, Loss, Identity

Power and Social Hierarchies

One of the central themes of *The God of Small Things* is the context of the Indian caste system and patriarchal structures. Roy presents a world in which characters are shaped and restricted by their caste, gender, and social class. The Ipe family, at the heart of the novel, grapples with societal expectations that place a heavy emphasis on preserving honor and maintaining rigid boundaries between "Touchables" and "Untouchables."

The character of Velutha, an "Untouchable" or Dalit, embodies the most explicit example of how power dynamics operate within the novel. His love affair with Ammu, a woman from a higher caste, challenges the deeply ingrained social order and brings devastating consequences. The relationship between Ammu and Velutha becomes a central point of tension, highlighting how social hierarchies dictate the lives of individuals and determine their fates.

Roy also highlights the oppressive nature of patriarchy through characters like Ammu, who, as a divorced woman, is stigmatized and denied agency in her own life. The power dynamics in the novel are not limited to caste but extend to the ways in which women's bodies and choices are controlled by a patriarchal society.

Identity and the Individuals Vs. Society

The God of Small Things is also an exploration of identity, particularly in the ways individuals struggle against societal norms

and expectations. The novel's characters are trapped by the roles imposed upon them, whether due to caste, gender, or familial obligations, particularly Estha and Rahel, the twins, by the rigid societal expectations that govern their behavior.

Ammu's sense of self is constrained by her role as a woman and mother in a conservative society, while Velutha's identity as an "Untouchable" defines the limits of his existence, no matter his personal qualities or abilities. Roy vividly depicts how society's harsh rules suffocate individual expression, with characters constantly forced to repress their desires and adhere to societal norms.

The novel presents this clash between individual identity and societal expectations as a central tension that shapes the narrative. In many ways, the story reflects the larger Indian context of how caste and social structures define identity, limiting individual freedom and autonomy.

Forbidden Love and Desire

At the heart of *The God of Small Things* lies the theme of forbidden love. Roy explores various forms of love that defy social conventions, most notably the relationship between Ammu and Velutha, which crosses the boundaries of caste. Their love is condemned by society, seen as a transgression that must be punished. The "Love Laws" in the novel, which dictate "who should be loved, and how, and how much," reveal the deep-rooted prejudices and taboos that govern relationships.

The forbidden nature of Ammu and Velutha's love mirrors the larger theme of desire and its suppression within a rigidly structured society. Their love becomes an act of rebellion, but it also underscores the tragic consequences of defying societal rules. The affair ends in tragedy, as Velutha is brutally punished for daring to cross caste lines, while Ammu is ostracized for her choices.

The novel also explores the forbidden love between Estha and Rahel, whose relationship transgresses the boundaries of familial and societal norms. Roy portrays this love as complex and multifaceted, reflecting the deep emotional scars left by their shared trauma. The twins' bond, though unconventional, becomes a source of solace and understanding in a world that has failed them.

Memory, Trauma and Loss

The non-linear structure of *The God of Small Things* allows Roy to delve into the ways memory and trauma shape the lives of her characters. The narrative moves between past and present, revealing how the trauma of the events that unfolded in the twins' childhood continues to haunt them into adulthood. Memory plays a crucial role in the novel, as the characters attempt to reconcile their present lives with the past events that have defined them.

For Estha and Rahel, the trauma of their family's unraveling—the death of their cousin Sophie Mol, the brutal punishment of Velutha, and their identities—lingers. The novel suggests that trauma is not a singular event but a lingering presence that shapes the emotional and psychological lives of its characters.

Loss is also a pervasive theme in the novel, as the characters grapple with the consequences of their choices and the harsh realities of a society that punishes those who deviate from the norm. The loss of innocence, love, and the sense of belonging are central to the novel's emotional core, as each character experiences the pain of being unable to fully express or realize their desire.

The Political and the Personal

Roy skillfully intertwines the political and the personal in *The God of Small Things*. The novel is set during a time of political unrest in Kerala, with the rise of communism playing a backdrop to the personal struggles of the Ipe family. The socio-political upheaval becomes inseparable from the characters' personal lives.

Example Works Related to Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

Love in the Time of Cholera

This novel explores the lifelong, often forbidden, love between Florentino Ariza and Fermina Daza, showcasing how societal expectations and circumstances shape romantic relationships.

The Scarlet Letter

This classic novel deals with forbidden love and the consequences of transgressing social and religious norms, particularly focusing on the affair between Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale.

Atonement

The novel revolves around a love affair between Robbie Turner and Cecilia Tallis, which is shattered by false accusations and the rigid class distinctions of British society.

Romeo and Juliet

Shakespeare's timeless tragedy about two lovers whose relationship is forbidden due to a feud between their families is a powerful exploration of love in defiance of societal restrictions.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is a powerful exploration of the ways in which societal structures—caste, patriarchy, and politics—shape the lives of individuals and their relationships. Through its richly layered narrative, the novel examines the complexities of identity, the consequences of forbidden love, and the lingering effects of trauma. By highlighting the “small things” that accumulate to define the larger tragedies of life, Roy creates a poignant meditation on the inescapable forces that govern human existence.

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