



# Postcolonial Cultural Conflict in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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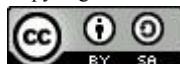
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## Abstract

Arundhati Roy defines postcolonial literature as engaging with the residual effects of European colonization on the world. *The God of Small Things*, a novel by Roy, follows the Ipe family in Ayemenem, Kerala, through two different temporal structures. The novel begins with Rahel coming back to her home; her father had returned Estha to her. The text is then told through flashbacks to the Ipe family's experiences: births, divorces, funerals, and Ammu trying to fix a mistake at the police station. Aside from these memories, two weeks later, Estha was removed from Rahel and sent to live with his father. Baby Kochamma is pleased Estha had withdrawn into silence and she had found it satisfying that this silence was not only from Rahel but from everyone. The relationship between India and English has long been a conflicted one. Concerning the country's literacy rate, with able to speak, read, and write in English, India has only a small percentage of the population who can are fluent with the English language. The lingering effects of the empire on the minds of the urban elite and semi-westernized middle classes has been culturally negotiated in the writings of women writers in postcolonial India, often from elite or moderate backgrounds, but still negotiating culture. Arundhati Roy, as an English writer, takes advantage of her position between cultures, and this dualistic culture of negotiating language becomes central to developing the character of protagonists and thus creates a larger meaning for *The God of Small Things*.

**Keywords:** women, silence, and subalternity, language, identity, and cultural dislocation

## Introduction

Arundhati Roy, born in 1961 in Shillong, Meghalaya, was born to Mary Roy, a Malayali Jacobite Syrian Christian activist and Rajib Roy, a tea plantation manager; after their separation, Roy moved with her mother and brother to Kerala, where she opened a school. All of these experiences shaped Roy's world views and guide her writing and activism. In the novel, *The God of Small Things*, Roy writes about twins Rahel and Estha as dislocated children who riddle navigate between Malayalam and English in a system that privileges a Westernized view. Therefore, their actions can be construed as acts of

either cultural dislocation or a betrayal of self, as they assimilate foreign symbols to throw themselves into a, anglicized identity.

When Sophie Mol arrives from London, their grandmother Mammachi becomes anxious about Rahel and Estha's English-speaking ability, secretly testing them and punishing them if they spoke Malayalam or made mistakes. Such obsession with English reflects a typical postcolonial condition: an ingrained devotion to the imperial language and culture, coupled with an involuntary subservience to colonial standards. Sophie Mol, their English cousin, is thus idealized. She is loved even before she



arrives, and when she dies, her loss is remembered more as an idea than a personal memory: "Sophie Mol is loved from the beginning even before she arrives, and when she died the loss of Sophie Mol became more important than her memory" (p. 186).

Culture is a complex, and often ambiguous, concept, generally implicit, but expressed in multiple distinct ways. These include the collection of understandings, beliefs, values and social behaviours developed by people who are part of a group. Culture refers to the collection of motivations, understandings, beliefs, values and social behaviours developed within a group of people. Language, meanings, customs, taboos, codes, organizations, tools, techniques, works of art; etc. Culture refers to the collection of values, knowledge, skills and customs which inform the action of an individual, or member of a social group, at a particular time. Culture also refers to a community's aesthetics, affirmations, Indigenous knowledge and innate creative abilities, represented in both traditional and contemporary form, including crafts, designs, oral and written literature, media and music, drama, dance, visual arts, festivals and items of tradition. Culture is also our historic places, healing practices, sustainable uses of resources, and patterns of behaviour which contribute to individual and collective well-being. And more broadly, culture is what we do, how we treat one another, and how we respond to the challenges of being human.

Literature as a product of culture can facilitate the necessary preparation for individuals to negotiate, comprehend, and conduct business between cultural boundaries. In relation to culture, literature has always been a means of communicating humanistic and social values. Culture accepts literary works as contributions representative of culture's value structure and existential values. Literature bears great significance to culture, and when culture's literary works embody vibrancy, they make culture more meaningful.

*The God of Small Things* (1997) is internationally acclaimed Indian English fiction that provided credence and space for Roy. It embodies the tragic parable of the Ipe family and the fraternal

twins, Rahel and Estha, living in Ayemenem village, Kerala. It depicts a narrative that manipulates time to engage with memory, loss, and sociocultural restraints a landmark text in postcolonialism, doing what all great literature does. *The God of Small Things* presents Gayatri Spivak's essay, Can the Subaltern Speak, to demonstrate how "subaltern" characters, like Ammu, Velutha, and the twins speaking against the grain and subjected or displaced in parts of the narrative are muted.

In examining the past, one can see that the greatness of civilizations is often connected to the strength of their literature. Literature can refine people's sensibilities and nurture their cultural grace. There is a direct and inherent connection between literature and culture. Literature acts as both a reflection of society and a corrective mirror, allowing people to hold themselves up for examination, decreasing the likelihood of stagnation, and increasing the possibility of learning and change.

The novel unfolds largely through Rahel's perspective, both as a child and later as an adult. She and her fraternal twin brother Estha share an unusually close bond, marked by an almost telepathic connection that makes them feel like "One." When Estha is molested by the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man, Rahel instantly senses something is wrong, though she does not fully understand what she feels. Like her mother, Ammu, Rahel is rebellious and restless, often defying rules and expectations. In adulthood, Rahel drifts through life without direction. She marries on impulse, follows her husband to America, but is unable to connect emotionally with him. Her degree in architecture comes to nothing, and she eventually returns to Ayemenem at thirty-one the same age her mother died carrying the weight of her broken past. Throughout her life, Rahel is plagued by questions about love: her insecurity over Ammu's affection as a child, and her struggle to forge meaningful connections as an adult. Scarred by betrayal and grief, her desperate need for closeness culminates in an incestuous encounter with Estha, an act not of desire but of shared pain and unbearable loss.



Estha avoids higher education and instead finds solace in domestic routines, though his withdrawn and melancholic nature puzzles those around him. Despite his silence, Estha displays a logical and practical mind. It is his idea to run away to the History House after Ammu lashes out at them, and it is he who prepares food and supplies for their escape. Tragically, this practicality makes him the easier target of Baby Kochamma's manipulation, forcing him to identify Velutha in custody and falsely testify against him. Burdened with guilt and haunted by truths too painful to bear, Estha grows into a man consumed by solitude and silence, carrying perhaps the heaviest weight of all.

Ammu, the daughter of Mammachi and Pappachi, is the mother of Rahel and Estha. Strong-willed and rebellious, she refuses to accept the limitations imposed on her by family and society. At eighteen, she escapes Ayemenem by marrying a Bengali tea-estate manager she barely knows. But her marriage quickly collapses when her husband's alcoholism turns violent and degrading, ultimately leading her back to her childhood home. After divorcing Ammu, he demands custody of Estha, thereby splitting the twins and inflicting a wound on them that never heals. Later, when offered a chance to take Estha to Australia, he rejects him, sending the boy back to Ayemenem. His abandonment underscores his selfishness and indifference, making him a symbol of paternal failure in the story.

By the time Ammu and the twins return to Ayemenem, Baby Kochamma has become domineering, jealous, and manipulative. Resentful of Ammu and threatened by the twins, she works tirelessly to preserve her power in the household. Her long-nurtured bitterness erupts when she discovers Ammu and Velutha's affair. Using the scandal to her advantage, she manipulates the police into arresting Velutha, implicates him falsely in Sophie Mol's death, and pressures Estha into testifying against him. Her unrequited love curdles into lifelong malice, and she emerges as one of the most destructive figures in the novel. In Arundhati Roy expressed her views "D'you know what happens

when you hurt people?" Ammu said. 'When you hurt people, they begin to love you less.' (p.69).

Velutha is the novel's most tragic figure and the symbolic "God of Small Things." Exceptionally skilled as a carpenter and mechanic, he works at *Paradise Pickles and Preserves* and occasionally in the Ipe household. Loved by the twins for his kindness and creativity, Velutha becomes a father figure to them, allowing them the freedom to be themselves. His affair with Ammu, however, seals his fate. Despite the purity of their love, the rigid caste system and Baby Kochamma's vindictiveness mark him for destruction. Even his association with the Communist Party cannot save him Comrade Pillai, seeking political advantage, denies him protection. When accused of Sophie Mol's death, Velutha is brutally beaten by the police and dies in custody. In his life, Velutha embodies both tenderness and transgression; in his death, he represents the brutal consequences of caste oppression and social prejudice.

### Conclusion

Literature is not only national, but also personal. Literature happens over the generations, and it reflects, not only the work of individual writers, but the collective genius of a people. Literature for a nation becomes its autobiography; just as history for a nation is the biography. The study of literature places us in immediate contact with the life within, values, and aspirations of successive generations. Literature must therefore be studied within the social, political, and economic contexts in which it was written or received. It illuminates the relationship between society and the writer, while also engaging with broader issues such as class struggles, cultural identity, and social transformation. By addressing these themes through art, literature not only reflects societal struggles but also provides a vision for their resolution, contributing to the progress and reform of society. Literature is often described as a mirror of society because it reflects the realities of human life and social existence. In its true sense, literature refers to written works in different forms novels, poetry, stories, plays, and fiction. It may also include texts



that combine factual information with imaginative creation. The origins of literature can be traced back to the dawn of human civilization, where society has always acted as both a source of inspiration and a model for writers. Literature not only presents abstract ideas but also gives them concrete form, addressing themes such as alienation, assimilation, and social issues, while simultaneously reflecting political, cultural, and historical realities. Literature exists in a variety of forms, including oral and written, it can be in novels, poetry, drama, and storytelling, which utilize language to engage readers' imaginations while also providing unique visions of life. Literature is a creative work; literature is universal, engaging with the spiritual, emotional, and intellectual aspects of humanity. Culture, on the other hand, may be broadly defined as the collective set of values, beliefs, traditions, and lifestyles that shape any society. Its relationship with literature is profound and inseparable. The study of literature is incomplete without an understanding of the cultural contexts that influence it. For this reason, culture must be integrated into the teaching and learning of literature. Teachers and students alike can employ a variety of techniques, methods, and approaches depending on their environment and resources. For instance, some methods may rely on prescribed materials, while others may focus on making cultural elements more accessible to students or on the motivational value found within literary texts. When effectively integrated, cultural aspects enhance the teaching of literature, paving the way for deeper insights into the target culture. *The God of Small Things* presents Kerala ironically called "God's Own Country" as deeply ungodly for its marginalized characters. The natural beauty of Ayemenem is juxtaposed with the suffering of those whose innocence, dignity, and humanity are violated. As in Naipaul's *Area of Darkness*, Roy's Ayemenem becomes her "heart of darkness" a landscape where social hierarchies, colonial legacies, and cultural

obsessions converge to oppress the "small things." Against the dominance of the "big things," Ammu, Rahel, Estha, and Velutha embody love and humanity, but their transgressions are crushed, leaving little trace behind. The novel, then, carries forward the haunting motif of the permanent silencing of the subaltern and the tragic erasure of those who resist the mainstream order.

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