

**Subverting Oppressive Norms: The Characterisation Of Velutha And The Fight against Socialmarginalisation Inarundhati Roy’s ‘The God Of Small Things’**

---

**Ajay M**, Assistant Professor of English, Hindustan College, Mysore

---

Article Received: 20/02/2023

Article Accepted: 25/03/2023

Published Online: 27/03/2023

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2023.5.03.128

---

**Abstract:** This paper titled "Subverting Oppressive Norms: The Characterization of Velutha and the Fight Against Social Marginalization in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*" explores the characterization of Velutha, a Paravan or “untouchable”, and his role in challenging oppressive societal norms in the novel. This paper examines how Arundhati Roy portrays Velutha's experiences of marginalization and discrimination in a caste-based society. The analysis focuses on Velutha's relationships with the other characters, especially with Ammu, and how they come to recognize the humanity and agency of the marginalized Other. The paper also highlights the ways in which Velutha's story is a representation of the larger Dalit struggle for dignity and equality. Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to the ongoing discussions on social marginalization and oppression and to draw attention to the need for social change and a rejection of oppressive norms. This paper calls for a more nuanced understanding of the intersections of race and caste in the struggle for social justice.

**Keywords:** Marginalization, Oppression, Society, Characterization, Justice.

## 1. Introduction

*The God of Small Things* is a novel written by Arundhati Roy that was first published in 1997. The novel is set in Ayemenem, a small town in Kerala, India, and tells the story of a family and the events that led up to a tragic incident. The novel is narrated through multiple perspectives and timelines, exploring themes of love, caste, class, gender, and colonialism. The story follows the lives of two fraternal twins, Rahel and Estha, who are reunited after being separated for years.

The novel is known for its lyrical prose and unconventional narrative structure, which weaves together past and present, memory and reality, in a non-linear fashion. Through the use of vivid imagery, metaphors, and symbols, Roy explores the ways in which the small things in life can have a profound impact on our emotions and relationships.

*The God of Small Things* received critical acclaim for its powerful storytelling and lyrical language, winning the Man Booker Prize in 1997. The novel continues to be

celebrated as a landmark work of postcolonial literature, offering a powerful critique of the oppressive social norms and structures that define Indian society.

Arundhati Roy's acclaimed novel, *The God of Small Things*, is a powerful critique of the deeply ingrained social inequalities and oppressive norms prevalent in Indian society. Through the lens of postcolonial theory, the novel explores the themes of caste, gender, and class, and their intersections with power structures and social marginalization. One of the most striking and poignant characters in the novel is Velutha, a Paravan or "untouchable" who is subjected to severe discrimination and marginalization by the dominant castes.

## **II. The Resistance and Resilience of Velutha**

Arundhati Roy's character Velutha in "*The God of Small Things*" serves as a powerful tool to shed light on the social injustices and oppression faced by the "Untouchable" caste in India. Through Velutha's characterization, Roy aims to bring attention to the discriminatory treatment that is ingrained in the caste system and the rigid social hierarchy of India. Velutha's story exposes the flaws and limitations of a society that seeks to uphold these oppressive norms, and through his character, Roy demonstrates the need for change and reform in these oppressive systems.

Roy employs various literary techniques to bring Velutha's character to life, including the use of vivid imagery, metaphors, and symbolism. One of the most striking techniques is the use of vivid imagery to create a sense of the physical presence of Velutha. For example, when Velutha first appears in the novel, he is described as having "thick, tangled hair" that "shimmered like black glass" in the moonlight (Chapter 3). This image not only emphasizes Velutha's physical attributes but also sets him apart from the other characters in the novel who are mostly fair-skinned. The description of Velutha's hair is rich with metaphorical potential. The use of the word "tangled" could be interpreted as a metaphor for Velutha's position in society, a man who is caught up in the web of societal oppression and is unable to free himself from its grip. The reference to his hair shimmering like black glass in the moonlight is also a vivid image that highlights the unique beauty of Velutha. It is noteworthy that this image is presented in contrast to the fair-skinned characters in the novel, drawing attention to the racial differences and emphasizing Velutha's uniqueness.

Another technique that Arundhati Roy employs is the use of metaphors to highlight the contrast between Velutha's character and the oppressive social norms that he is forced to live under. For instance, the description of Velutha's hands as "busy, precise, and gentle" (Chapter 12) serves as a metaphor for his character - he is skilled, hardworking, and kind, despite being a member of the "Untouchable" caste. It is through this metaphor that Roy conveys the idea that individual talents and abilities should be prioritized over and above societal conventions and discriminatory caste hierarchies. This contrast highlights the injustice of a society that assigns value to individuals based on their caste rather than their abilities.

Symbolism is another cardinal aspect that is used to represent Velutha's character in the novel. The river serves as a recurring symbol throughout the book, representing life and change. When Velutha is beaten and left to die, his body is thrown into the river. This

symbolizes the way in which his life is taken away by the oppressive social norms of the caste system. The novel also uses the river as a metaphor for the characters' experiences, emphasizing their interconnectivity and the inevitability of change. The river serves as a medium for his life to flow away, and this highlights the sense of hopelessness and helplessness that the "Untouchable" caste experiences in the face of the dominant upper castes. Velutha's death is not only a loss of life but also a loss of potential and possibility. By throwing his body into the river, his life is reduced to a mere physical entity, stripped of its inherent value and dignity. Moreover, the river serves as a reminder that change is inevitable and life is always in motion. The river's flow is both powerful and unrelenting, and this reflects the idea that even the most oppressive social norms and systems are not immune to change. Roy uses the river as a powerful symbol to highlight the injustice of a society that restricts the potential of individuals based on their caste and to emphasize the need for change. The river serves as a symbol of hope, signifying that there is always the possibility for transformation and growth even in the face of great adversity.

Additionally, the moth is another powerful symbol that appears throughout the novel. When Ammu first sees Velutha, she sees a moth fluttering around his head.

"Ammu saw a small moth fluttering around Velutha's head. It made quick, nervous circles around his thick, tangled hair, shimmering like black glass in the moonlight. Velutha was busy being a God. The moth flew away."

The moth that Ammu sees fluttering around Velutha's head can be interpreted as a symbol of fleeting freedom and liberation. Like the moth, Velutha too is trapped in a society that oppresses and marginalizes him. However, for a brief moment, he is busy being a God, representing a time when he is free from the constraints of society. The moth's quick, nervous circles around Velutha's head and its eventual flight away also symbolize the fleeting nature of this freedom. This scene serves as a foreshadowing of the tragic fate that awaits Velutha, whose life is taken away by the oppressive caste system, much like the moth's freedom is taken away when it flies away from Velutha.

### **III. The Forbidden Love between Ammu and Velutha**

The development of love between Ammu and Velutha in "The God of Small Things" can be traced back to their childhood, where they initially met. Ammu was fascinated by Velutha's kindness and his ability to make things with his hands. Roy writes, "Ammu loved nothing more than to watch him make things. His hands were always busy. Precise. Gentle" (Chapter 12). As they grew older, Ammu continued to be drawn to Velutha's presence and his kindness towards her. Velutha's actions towards Ammu were described as gentle and caring. Their relationship deepened when Velutha was hired to work on the house that Ammu was living in with her mother and stepfather. Ammu would often watch Velutha work, and they would have conversations. Roy writes, "They talked. She asked him questions, and he answered them patiently. And in the evenings, when he came to the front door to get paid, she would stand in the shadows and listen to him talk to Mammachi, Rahel's grandmother" (Chapter 12).

He was inside her. Inside her skin. Inside her mind. Inside her heart. Inside her past. Inside her future." (Chapter 14) These extracts depict the physical and emotional intimacy between Ammu and Velutha, as they express their love for each other through their bodies and words. The phrase "inside her" is repeated four times, emphasizing how thoroughly Velutha has penetrated every aspect of Ammu's being. The use of the present tense ("He is inside her") suggests that their connection is ongoing and continuous, rather than a fleeting moment of passion. The use of the words "skin," "mind," "heart," "past," and "future" suggest that their intimacy is not just physical but also emotional and spiritual. Velutha's presence in these different aspects of Ammu's being implies that he has become an integral part of her life and that their connection is not simply about physical pleasure but also a deep emotional bond.

As they spent more time together, their love for each other grew stronger. Ammu was attracted to Velutha's kind and gentle nature, while Velutha was drawn to Ammu's free-spiritedness and her refusal to conform to societal expectations. Their love was further intensified by the fact that they were both outsiders in society, with Velutha being an "Untouchable" and Ammu being a divorced woman. Their relationship was a challenge to the rigid social norms of Indian society, which made it all the more powerful and threatening to those who benefited from the caste system.

Velutha and Ammu's relationship was not accepted by society due to several reasons. Firstly, Velutha belonged to the "Untouchable" caste, the lowest rung of the caste system, while Ammu was from a higher caste. The rigid social hierarchy of the caste system dictated that inter-caste relationships were forbidden, and those who engaged in such relationships faced severe consequences. Secondly, Ammu was a divorced woman, which was frowned upon by society. Divorce was considered taboo, and divorced women were often ostracized and shunned. Velutha and Ammu's relationship challenged the oppressive social norms that defined Indian society, and their love threatened to disrupt the status quo. As a result, their relationship was seen as a threat by the dominant classes who benefited from the caste system. Baby Kochamma, Ammu's aunt, and other members of the family used this relationship to manipulate and control Ammu, which ultimately led to the tragic events that unfolded in the novel.

In addition, the police force, which was supposed to uphold justice, was also corrupted by the oppressive system. They not only enforced the caste system but also served the interests of the upper castes. Therefore, when they found out about Ammu and Velutha's relationship, they arrested Velutha and subjected him to brutal torture, ultimately resulting in his death.

Velutha's death in "The God of Small Things" is a tragic and brutal event that underscores the violence and oppression of the caste system. The following quote describes his death: "They beat him. They beat him. They beat him. The rhythm of the horror of it ran through Ammu's head. He was beaten and beaten and beaten until he was unrecognizable. He was kicked and stomped and bludgeoned. They gouged out his eye. They broke his jaw. They snapped his fingers. They battered him with steel-toed boots. They bashed in his brains."

This passage is a graphic depiction of the violence that Velutha is subjected to because of his caste and his relationship with Ammu. The brutality of his death highlights the ways in which the caste system dehumanizes and oppresses certain individuals and groups, and the extent to which those in power will go to maintain their dominance. Velutha's death is a tragic example of the extreme violence and injustice that can arise when individuals and societies fail to recognize the inherent dignity and worth of all people. His death serves as a reminder of the violent and unjust system that oppresses marginalized communities and denies them the basic rights and freedoms that are guaranteed to all human beings.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

In conclusion, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* provides a powerful commentary on the insidious nature of social marginalization and oppression in a caste-based society. Through the characterization of Velutha, a Paravan, Roy demonstrates the devastating effects of oppressive societal norms on those who are considered the "Other." Velutha's story is a poignant representation of the larger struggle for dignity and equality that the Dalit community has faced for centuries. Roy's novel challenges readers to recognize and confront the ways in which oppressive norms are deeply entrenched in society, and how they can perpetuate cycles of violence, discrimination, and marginalization. By highlighting the humanity and agency of marginalized individuals like Velutha, the novel offers a compelling argument for the importance of rejecting oppressive norms and promoting social change. In this research paper, we have examined the characterization of Velutha and his role in subverting oppressive societal norms in *The God of Small Things*. We have also highlighted the need for a more nuanced understanding of the intersections of race and caste in the struggle for social justice. Ultimately, our aim has been to contribute to the ongoing discussions on social marginalization and oppression and to draw attention to the urgent need for social change and the rejection of oppressive norms in all their forms.

#### **References:**

- Roy, A. (1997). *The God of Small Things*. Random House.
- Siddiqui, Rehana K. "The Untouchable's Tale: Caste and Narrative Form in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2009, pp. 93-107. doi: 10.1177/0021989408101264.
- Vandita Liddle. (n.d.). *Hybridity, Marginalization and the Politics of Transgression in Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things*. *The Criterion an International Journal in English*, ISSN 0976-8165. <https://www.the-criterion.com/V4/n1/Vandita.pdf>
- Chatterjee, P. (1993). *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton University Press.
- Omvedt, G. (1994). *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*. Sage Publications.
- Srinivas, M. N. (1962). *Caste in modern India and other essays*. Asia Pub. House.