



## A Textual Analysis of *The God of Small Things*- A Citizenship Perspective

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**ABSTRACT:** *This article presents a citizenship analysis of Roy's novel The God of Small Things. Citizenship is defined in terms of identity, rights and duties of a citizen in any society, as defined by Cogan (1998) which is the theoretical framework used in this study. This study explores how postcolonial fiction can also be studied from citizenship perspective. Through the textual analysis of Arundhati Roy's novel The God of Small Things, we present a citizenship perspective that lies within the text of the novel. We argue that the citizenship themes of identity, rights and duties are presented throughout the text. My findings suggest that various issues of gender, post-colonialism, social-caste and class can be discussed in the light of Cogan's citizenship framework. The study has recommendations for future research, teachers and readers of fiction.*

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**Keywords:** Citizenship, identity, rights, duties, caste, class, fiction

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### Introduction

This study analyses Arundhati Roy's (1997) novel *The God of Small Things* from a citizenship perspective. Citizenship being the study of identity, rights and duties, as defined by Cogan (1998), is an important perspective that can be observed in literary texts. Many modern novels like *The God of Small Things* are written from a political perspective and contain political themes. Studying the novel from a citizenship perspective, therefore, can provide new understandings of literature. This study, therefore, aims to answer the research question: How far does Roy represent elements of citizenship in her novel, *The God of Small Things*?

### *The Novelist*

Arundhati Roy (1961-present) is an Indian novelist who gained fame as the writer of *The God of Small Things*, her first novel, in 1997. The novel was an instant

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bestseller and went on to receive the Booker Prize. She has since become a political activist and written her second novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* after two decades of her first success. As the novel talks about the love story of an untouchable man and an upper-class Syrian Christian, Roy was targeted for spreading immorality and obscenity. According to Naqvi (2016), a lawyer from Kerala filed a case Roy which lasted for about ten years before it was resolved in her favour.

Tripathi (2001) calls Roy “India’s glamorous conscience” on account of her success as a political activist. She has written several political books and articles after the publication of her first novel and is known to raise her voice against atrocities in her country. She has also openly criticised leaders of the country and given her views on longstanding, controversial issues such as the Kashmir dispute (Elmhirst, 2011).

### ***The Novel***

*The God of Small Things*, published in 1997, is a Booker Prize winning debut novel by Indian author, Arundhati Roy.

The novel is set in Ayemenem, Kerala India presenting the story spanning to three generations of a Syrian Christian Anglophone family. Roy presents the story of forbidden inter-caste romantic relationship of Ammu, the divorced daughter of touchable Pappachi and Mammachi, and Velutha, the untouchable carpenter who works for Ammu’s family. The love affair ends tragically when Velutha is sent to jail on fake charges of rape eventually resulting in his death from police torture. The story is mainly narrated through the perspective of Ammu’s twins, Rahel and Estha. When the family comes to know of Ammu’s secret love affair, Ammu sends Rahel to live with his father, while having left her parents’ house she dies of illness in solitude. The story culminates in incestual lovemaking between Estha and Rahel, when the two adolescents meet after decades. Roy’s story explores the themes of class and caste relations, social discrimination, gender based power hierarchies in the South Asian context (Komalesha, 2008).

Ahmed (2007) accused that Roy’s story is marred by repetitiveness and over-writing. Parsad (2004) and Rofail (2008) argued that the novel is autobiographical as they quote incidents from Roy’s life similar to the ones happening in the novel. Rofail (2008) gives many examples from the author’s life- Like Ammu, Roy’s mother was a Christian who married a Hindu and divorced him soon after, Rahel, like the author herself, possess a rebellious nature and married an American. Thus, in *The*

*God of Small Things*, Roy wrote a personal narrative raising a powerful voice against many forms of injustice in the Indian society.

Implicit under a love story, Arundhati Roy has raised issues of rights, duties and identity through caste, social class and position, and gender of the characters. Ahmad (2007) contends that the focus on family relations and eroticism in the story “dismisses the actually constituted field of politics as either irrelevant or a zone of bad faith” (p. 114). However, Freed (2011) counters Ahmad (2007) for his failure to recognize that the personal events emerging from more political events actually support Roy’s cause. Bose (1998) also contends that Roy has raised some important political questions by presenting an inter-caste love affair. Roy, in an interview with Terrence McNally, revealed that as a writer she doesn’t find much difference between writing fiction and political essays since she has used both forms of writing to bring forth the same issues (Kearney, 2009). The novel received critical acclaim in India and around the world with translations in many world languages.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Citizenship and Fiction***

Fiction as a subject has great potential. Critics and educators have found many purposes of teaching and reading fictional works. Jarvis (2019) for example believe that fiction can be used to teach feminist curriculum. Several studies link citizenship with fiction. Fleming (2013) argues that as fiction “literature helps us to see moral questions in subtle ways; yet it does not resort to easy generalizations” (p. 139). Therefore, Fleming argues that citizenship can be examined through fiction. Gouthro and Holloway (2013) argue that, “educators can use fiction reading and writing as a means to explore challenging issues pertaining to lifelong learning and citizenship” (p.46). National Council for Social Studies (NCSS, 2018) suggests a list of fiction books for teaching social studies at schools. They believe that multicultural fiction texts can help young learners learn about those cultures and gain insights into the lives of people in different contexts. Lucey et al. (2013) specifically discussion citizenship in the light of the novel *The Hunger Games*. They argue that as citizenship is a multi-faceted and complex subject to teach, it can be done through the lens of novels.

In the context of the sub-continent, such studies to explore links between citizenship and fiction are limited. As we have various issues related to citizenship in the society, it is important for literary research to explore links between citizenship and fiction. In this study, therefore, we will look at *The God of Small Things* from a citizenship perspective.

### **Research Methodology**

The research question used in this study is: How far does Roy represent elements of citizenship in her novel, *The God of Small Things*? This paper followed a textual analysis approach (McKee, 2001). A close reading of the book was done in order to identify the themes of citizenship in the text. Once the novel's text related to the elements was identified, it was presented and critically disused in the data analysis section.

The fictional text used in this study was chosen based on its relevance to the sub-continent. Furthermore, as shown in the literature review, it is rich in the themes of rights and duties. The theoretical framework constitutes an important part of the methodology in textual works and is therefore, described in detail below.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

Citizenship has been defined in different ways by different academics. Some like Osler and Starkey (2002) believe it to be a status that incurred rights and duties. Heater (1999) argues that it can be divided into two paradigms- civic republican which is a duty based status and liberal tradition which is rights based. For the purposes of this study, we chose to use Cogan's (1998) model of citizenship as the theoretical framework. Cogan defines citizenship in terms of distinct elements the first three of which are identity, rights and duties. These three elements form the basis of citizenship as a citizen has an identity that they carry with them, they also have some rights and some duties as a result of the particular citizenship affiliation that they hold. Identity, rights and duties are defined in terms of political, national, legal and civic elements by Cogan.

Some researchers claim that Asian concepts of citizenship like Lee (2004) are more applicable to eastern settings as compared to Western frameworks such as that of Cogan (1998). Tan (2007) argues that religion is an important parameter when looking at citizenship in religious societies. Lee (2004) however, argues that

citizenship in Asian context is not same throughout as Asia is large and a mix of various cultures. Therefore, one parameter would not suit all.

In the light of the understanding of all models, we chose to opt for Cogan's framework as it provides distinct elements- identity, rights and duties. Moreover, it has been applied in different contexts including Asian countries (Cogan, 1998).

## **Data Analysis**

### ***Identity in The God of Small Things***

Identity is a central theme in the novel. The differences among different caste identities are portrayed as accepted truths of the Indian society and religion. Velutha is an untouchable, while Ammu and her family are upper class Hindus who have recently converted to Christianity thus becoming Brahman Christians. Though they have accepted a new faith but they are not ready to leave their superior Hindu identity and still live by the rules of that caste system.

Velutha is called "untouchable" in the novel, a person belonging to the lowest Hindu caste whom others would not even touch. Roy depicts Syrian Christians as conscious of their upper-caste origins from which they had converted to Christianity. These Brahman Christians still think of Velutha and his caste-fellows as untouchables: Pappachi and Comrade Pillai are shown to dislike Velutha on the basis of his caste. The character from Velutha's father's, Vellya Paapen, generation are portrayed to be accepting of their identity and live with the limits of their social caste as demanded by society. However, Velutha and Ammu's generation are shown to be questioning these norms. Velutha has an affair with a touchable, is a member of the Communist party which shows that he is fighting for a shift in identity.

The brother and sister, Ammu and Chacko, are further portrayed as rebelling against the norms of the traditional castes by taking their own life decisions. Ammu is shown to break tradition when she marries without the consent of her parents, gets divorced which was unheard of for a woman in her family, expresses a need for love after the divorce and falls in love and has a relationship with an untouchable. Her brother Chacko also marries of his own choice, an out of caste, British woman who he later gets divorced from. However, the way Chacko and Ammu are treated by their parents and relatives in very similar circumstances (getting divorced after marrying outside their caste of their own choice) is very different on account of their gender identity. Roy (1997, p. 43) writes about how Ammu was sympathised with

after her divorce, “Old female relations with incipient beards and several wobbling chins made overnight trips to Ayemenem to commiserate with her about her divorce. They squeezed her knee and gloated. She fought off the urge to slap them.” Chacko’s ex-wife, on the other hand, was welcomed in the family home and taken care of by the whole family. The discriminative society did not treat Ammu well after her divorce.

Another part of the identity of the characters is the influence of post-colonial identity. The older generation including Ammu’s father, Pappachi, is shown to respect the English without question. Pappachi is so fond of the English that he would not trust his own daughter when she told him that an Englishman asked her husband to send his wife to him for a night. Pappachi could not believe that any English person could have such low morality. The second-generation of Indians who came after the partition were less colonial. Chacko who had studied at Oxford and tried to speak like an Englishman was mocked at by his sister, Ammu, for his “read aloud” manner of talking. The third generation is depicted to have Rahel who married an American and moved to the States. This shows the world’s power shift from Britain to the USA.

Gender related identity issues are also an important theme in Roy’s work. The writer has shown her standpoint on the prevailing realms of patriarchy when she has addressed the issues related to the modern woman’s struggle for identity through her portrayal of three generations of Indian women- Mammachi, Ammu and Rahel (Bose, 2015). Indian folk stories depict women as the givers. Same is the case with religion. Whenever, women raise their voice against any injustices in the society, it is seen as a Western influence (Jackson, 2010). Roy has revolted against such norms by showing a rebellious character, Ammu, in her novel. Meyer (2013) points out that as a postcolonial woman, Ammu has voiced, through her actions, her rebellion towards the subjugations she has suffered at the hands of the societal norms. Passos (2003) further argues if we compare the characters of Margaret, Chacko’s ex-wife with Ammu, it is not just a comparison of two female characters but a case of the postcolonial identity covering the gender identity. In this generation the British ex-wife is treated respectably while Ammu is disgraced on her divorce and her affair. However, in the next generation, Ammu’s kids Rahel and Estha are not defined by general gender stereotypes- Estha, the boy, is obedient and mute, while Rahel, the girl, is rebellious and outgoing (Friedman, 2005). Komalesha (2008) argues that with

these new roles, Arundhati Roy is pointing out a possibly more complex understanding of these identities in the light of the modern socio-cultural factors.

Postcolonial studies on Roy's novel suggest that it has many issues related to a postcolonial identity (e.g. Sohn, 2013; Rajeev, 2011; Nandi, 2010). Roy uses many words of a South Indian language Malayalam without necessarily explaining any terms in English, which is a main tell to her postcolonial identity as an author (Rajeev, 2011; Sohn, 2013). Aijaz Ahmad (2007) a well-known critic of Roy also identifies this linguistic feature as a major postcolonial element of the novel. Furthermore, Roy presents Pappachi and his family having a regressing influence of colonial masters which is a way of presenting the decreasing influence of colonisation on previous colonies (see also, Komalesha, 2008; Friedman, 2005). The reader reads of Pappachi being an ardent follower of the British values, his son Chacko going to Oxford but being mocked by his sister Ammu for his mimicking accent and in the third generation, Rahel who is Ammu's daughter goes to America instead of Britain. Chu (2006) points out that Roy goes another step on the way of showing regression of colonial influence by pointing out the power shift from colonialism to imperialism.

Rajeev (2011) highlights that "we (Indians) are people who are forced into an anglicized pattern of thinking and practice which is enabled by the public school education established by the colonial rulers" (p. 53). He further points out that Estha's Elvis Presley hair style, when he was nine, can be cited as an example of the said colonial impact. Tickell (2007) asserts that "the novel appears to acknowledge both [. . .] collective and subjective forms of postcolonial resistance" (p. 75). Tickell (2007, p.75) quotes the twins' "playful subversion of Anglophile texts" as an example. As all critics would agree, identity is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon which can be at the same time influenced by many adjacent factors. Therefore, it may be assumed that when Rahel and Estha were growing up there were still some remains of the colonial influences as suggested by Rajeev (2011) but people had started to grow out of the impact of the coloniser as well, as suggested by Tickell (2007).

### ***Rights in The God of Small Things***

Roy in her fiction highlights different kinds of oppressions leading to a struggle for rights among the weak and powerful groups in the Indian society. As Olsson (2011) writes, "in Roy's description of Kerala in the novel, there are several

layers of oppression stemming from colonialism, patriarchy, religion and caste” (p. 6). One of the dominant themes in *The God of Small Things* is negation of rights based on caste. The Indian society treats this group as ‘subhuman’ denying the rights to equality given to its citizens in the constitution. Komalesha (2008) contends that Roy has given a strong expression to this form of oppression deep-rooted in the Indian society.

Roy has given representation to the negation and exploitation of the rights of Dalits. In narrator’s words: “Pappachi would not allow Paravans into the house. Nobody would. They were not allowed to touch anything that Touchables touched. Caste Hindus and Caste Christians” (Roy, 1997, p.73). Velutha is portrayed as an untouchable who is not allowed to literally touch any touchable, the people belonging to other castes above the Dalits in the hierarchy. He cannot attend school or get professional education with the touchable children, and is not allowed to have a relationship outside the group of untouchables. Since the Dalits are denied their rights to education and jobs, they remain economically deprived and downtrodden without any social influence. Velutha breaks these norms when he falls in love with Ammu who is a touchable Christian, an upper caste woman. He is falsely charged with rape and is tortured to death by police denying his basic rights to fair trial or even a hearing (Roy, 1997).

Erwin (2012) contends that Velutha’s tragic fate is a warning to other untouchables to forbid them from breaking the norms by falling into relationships with touchables and it “reconfirms the immutable status of ‘untouchability’” p. 334). This argument can be countered by the fact that Dalits were not supposed to be the readers of a novel originally written in English, the language used as medium of instruction in elite Indian schools only. Roy (1997) chose fiction to communicate her message against the caste-based oppression to the educated class in India (the expected audience of Roy’s English novel in India) and she is not trying to warn the Dalits, the very people whose oppression she is giving voice to.

Provision and negation of rights on the basis of gender is another rights theme in the novel. Roy portrays how women are denied their legal rights due to their gender. The author highlights the issue of the rights that the women are entitled under the constitution but in practice the patriarchal society does not let them exercise their rights. Ammu, as a divorced woman, is denied her right as she could not file complaint and when she attempts to do it she is harassed by the police.

Ammu and her brother Chacko (both divorced) jointly run the pickle factory of their mother, but Chacko is the sole legal owner of the factory as Ammu has no legal rights over the property. Ammu is denied the right to an equal education unlike her brother who is sent abroad for graduation from Oxford. Ammu as a woman in a patriarchal society and Velutha as an untouchable are not allowed to have a romantic relationship: “Where they really lived. Where the Love Laws lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much” (Roy, 1997, p. 177). But when they break the societal norms they have to pay a heavy price for it. Furthermore, Ammu’s father beats his wife Mammachi regularly who suffers domestic abuse helplessly unless their son Chacko grows young to stop his father.

Aslam (2014) argues that the men of the first and second generations are portrayed as typical patriarchs who oppress their women while being gentlemen for the outside world. This shows the hypocrite behaviour of the patriarchal men who have different moral and social standards for men and women. Ironically, the women also play their part in patriarchal oppression by helping men enjoy more rights while refusing the similar rights to women. Mammachi and Baby Kochamma understand Chacko’s ‘needs’ and help him bring women in the house through a special door (Thakur, 2013; Roy, 2009). However, these same women detest Ammu for marrying of her own choice and later divorcing her husband. Even the cook, Kochu Maria, reprimands Estha and Rahel saying they should leave and go to their father’s house (Bee, 2014; Stockdale, 2008). Thus Roy depicts that gender rights are more problematic for older women than the women of younger generation with men as well as other women being oppressors.

### ***Duties in The God of Small Things***

The novel primarily discusses violation of rights which leads to the question of whether duties are being performed. Roy’s stance regarding the duties can be understood from various events within the novel. Those in power, including men and upper class members, do not perform their civic and legal duties towards others in society. Law enforcement agents are depicted as neglecting their legal duties. Ironically, the Policeman whose primary duty is to protect the citizens and implement the law, harasses women, kills the untouchable during custody. The policeman who harasses Ammu when she goes to see Velutha, is not noticed by anyone around him in a crowded police station. Ironically the sign behind him reads:

***Politeness.***

***Obedience.***

***Loyalty.***

***Intelligence.***

***Courtesy.***

***Efficiency.*** (Roy, 1997, p. 8)

Velutha, the untouchable character in the novel, is treated badly throughout: false accusations of rape and imprisonment lead to torture and death in police custody. The narrator illustrates Velutha's pathetic condition at the police station in these words: "He [Velutha] was naked, his soiled mundu had come undone. Blood spilled from his skull like a secret. His face was swollen and his head look liked a pumpkin, too large and heavy for the slender stem it grew from" (Roy, 1997, pp. 319-320). This example shows how the policemen abuse their power over the weak, do not fulfil their duties and completely violate their code of conduct. The society portrayed in the novel develops a number of pseudo civic duties which are followed by all individuals. Comrade Pillai, despite having political power, is shown to have abandoned his duties as a party leader. Friedman (2005) points out that as the leader of the party Comrade Pillai's should have saved Velutha, during his imprisonment. However, he chose to remain silent as that bode in his favour as otherwise he would be in clash with some influential people. Krishnamurthy (2011) further argues that the duties in the society depicted in Roy's novel are closely knit to the caste-based and patriarchy-bound norms prevalent in the society. When Ammu and Velutha act against the patriarchal and caste-based boundaries, one is punished by death and the other by social isolation. In the light of the above argument therefore, it can be concluded that the condition of civic and legal duties- their condition and defiance- in the Indian society, are depicted by Arundhati Roy in her novel.

### **Findings**

The discussion on the Roy's representation of the gender issues shows that the novel has social, religious, cultural as well as post-colonial identity issues. The religion-based division of the 'touchable' and 'untouchable' discriminates and marginalises the poor and weak of the society. This division is used to disenfranchise a segment of the society and justify oppression against them. It has been argued that

though (comparatively) new ideals have been introduced in Indian society such as Christianity and Indian Marxism but they could not get rid of the social class values of the Hindu society (Komalesha, 2008). When a lower class, untouchable Velutha falls in love with an upper-class Syrian Christian, Ammu, it is seen as a moral transgression by the society (Krishnamurthy, 2011; Bose, 1998). Indian society is deeply rooted with these caste-based identities as is shown by the reactions this inter-class love affair faces and the fate that the two characters meet. The Article 17 of the Constitution of India (as cited in National Portal of India, 2016) addresses the issue of untouchability and strictly prohibits discrimination on the basis of caste. However, the practice is quite different- the humans are still being termed “untouchables” even in 21st century and are facing injustices as depicted in the novel.

Further, the women in the novel are denied their rights within their homes as Mammachi faces physical abuse and Ammu is denied right to property, education etc. Roy depicts this generation of women, Ammu in particular, fighting for their rights but the context is unsupportive as shown in Ammu’s case who meets a helpless death after leading a struggling life. However, the third generation, represented by Rahel, does not have to face such problems of rights as she leads a life of her own choice.

Furthermore, Roy’s novel portrays the violation of rights consequently raising the question of whether duties are being performed. The discussion shows that those in power, especially patriarchal men and members of upper class, do not perform their civic and legal duties in the society. Law enforcement personnel neglect their duties and misuse their official power accorded to them to protect the citizens and implement law. Ironically, the Policeman is depicted using his power to harassing women and kill the untouchable during custody. Hence, the powerful shun their civic and legal duties while the weak are victimized in the name of violation of law.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, we argue that *The God of Small Things* being a politically rich novel depicts Indian society’s issues related to identity, rights and duties. Roy, being part of the Indian society and having witnessed most of the events in the novel, has portrayed the violence and injustice that she observed around her. On the basis on my analysis, we conclude that various issues of gender, post-colonialism, social-caste and class are discussed in the novel which come under the overarching framework of

citizenship by Cogan (1998). In the light of this study, it can be argued that the text of *The God of Small Things* can be used to teach citizenship themes in novels at various levels. Furthermore, future research can be conducted to analyse other novels from a citizenship perspective. It will help critics, teachers and academics to understand the link between citizenship and fiction.

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