



International Journal of Advanced Research in Arts, Science, Engineering & Management

Volume 12, Issue 3, May - June 2025



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

Impact Factor: 8.028



Exploring the concept of Family and social obligations of the God of Small Things by - Arundhati Roy

Palak Chaudhary

UG student of BA hons (English), Department of Amity School of languages, Amity University Lucknow,
Uttar Pradesh, India

ABSTRACT: Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is a powerful novel that delves into the intricate dynamics of family and social obligation within the rigid socio-cultural framework of Kerala, India. The novel explores the ways in which familial relationships are shaped by societal expectations, caste hierarchies, gender roles, and the politics of love and betrayal. This project critically examines how Roy presents the concept of family as both a source of comfort and oppression, highlighting the tension between personal desires and social responsibilities.

The story revolves around the twin protagonists, Estha and Rahel, whose lives are deeply affected by the actions and choices of their family members, as well as the unyielding societal norms imposed upon them. Their mother, Ammu, defies social expectations by engaging in a forbidden love affair, ultimately leading to her ostracization and downfall. Through Ammu's character, Roy critiques the patriarchal and caste-driven constraints that limit women's autonomy and dictate their roles within the family. The novel portrays family not merely as a unit of love and support but also as an institution that enforces rigid traditions, often at the expense of individual happiness.

The theme of social obligation is another crucial aspect of the novel, illustrated through the pressures exerted by society on its members to conform to established norms. The tragic fate of Velutha, a lower-caste Paravan who dares to love Ammu, exemplifies the harsh consequences of breaking social boundaries. His brutal punishment underscores the deeply entrenched caste discrimination and the power structures that prioritize societal honour over human relationships. Similarly, Baby Kochamma, the manipulative aunt, serves as a representation of societal expectations, reinforcing norms even at the cost of family bonds. Her actions demonstrate how individuals uphold and perpetuate oppressive structures out of fear, self-interest, and ingrained beliefs.

About The Author

Arundhati Roy: A Voice of Resistance and Literary Excellence

Arundhati Roy is an Indian author, activist, and public thinker celebrated for her sharp critiques of political and social injustices. She shot to international fame with her debut novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997), which not only won the Booker Prize but also solidified her status as a significant literary figure. Beyond her writing, Roy is a passionate critic of globalization, capitalism, and state oppression, making her one of the most impactful voices in modern India.

Early Life and Literary Career

Born in 1959 in Shillong, Meghalaya, to a Bengali father and a Syrian Christian mother, Roy spent her formative years in Kerala. Growing up in a politically aware environment greatly influenced her later activism. She pursued architecture at the Delhi School of Architecture, but her true calling was always in writing and addressing social issues. Her debut novel, *The God of Small Things*, is a semi-autobiographical tale set in Kerala, delving into themes of caste, gender, and forbidden love. The novel's poetic language and profound emotional depth resonated with readers around the globe, earning her the Booker Prize in 1997. Even with the book's success, Roy chose not to dive back into fiction right away; instead, she focused on her political and social activism.

Activism and Political Engagement

Roy's activism spans a broad spectrum of issues, from fighting for environmental justice to advocating for human rights and opposing globalization. She's been a passionate critic of India's nuclear policies, economic reforms, and the government's crackdown on dissent. Her essays, like *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (2002) and *Field Notes on Democracy* (2009), showcase her profound engagement with these critical topics.



One of her most significant actions was her stand against the Narmada Dam project, which led to the displacement of thousands of indigenous people. She was a key supporter of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save the Narmada Movement) and even spent some time in jail for contempt of court in 2002 because of her bold stance.

Roy has also been a fierce critic of Hindu nationalism and the Indian government's policies in Kashmir. Despite facing considerable backlash for her advocacy of Kashmiri self-determination and her critiques of state violence, she remains steadfast in her dedication to free speech and justice.

I. INTRODUCTION

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) is a powerful novel that delves deep into the themes of family, love, and social obligations against the backdrop of the strict caste and class systems in Indian society. Set in the small town of Ayemenem, Kerala, during the late 1960s and 1990s, the story follows the heartbreaking journey of fraternal twins, Estha and Rahel. Their lives are profoundly influenced by societal expectations, family pressures, and the repercussions of defying entrenched social norms. Roy masterfully intertwines personal stories with larger social injustices, shedding light on the deep-rooted inequalities and power dynamics that shape relationships in India.

At the core of the novel lies a tangled web of family ties that define the characters' existence. The Ipe family, to which the twins belong, is led by the formidable matriarch Mammachi and her strict, traditional son, Baby Kochamma. These characters uphold conventional values that stifle personal desires and reinforce the stark divide between the privileged and the marginalized. Ammu, the twins' mother, endures societal scorn and family rejection after leaving her abusive husband, which underscores the limited autonomy and agency granted to women in a patriarchal society. Through Ammu's challenges, Roy critiques how family can serve as both a source of comfort and a tool of oppression, perpetuating societal norms even at the expense of individual happiness.

II. THE ROLE OF FAMILY IN INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY IN THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

In "The God of Small Things," Arundhati Roy delves into the profound influence of family on personal identity, illustrating how expectations, traditions, and societal pressures can shape who we are. The story focuses on the Ipe family, whose shared history, cultural values, and personal struggles intertwine to mold their identities and choices. Through the lives of characters like Estha, Rahel, Ammu, and Velutha, Roy emphasizes that family can be a source of both love and support, as well as oppression and pain.

The twin protagonists, Estha and Rahel, are key to understanding how family plays a role in shaping identity. As children, they share a deep connection, forged by their experiences in the troubled Ipe household. Their mother, Ammu, is a strong yet vulnerable figure who defies societal norms but ultimately faces rejection from her own family. This rejection leaves a mark on the twins, contributing to their fractured sense of self. After Estha is forcibly taken away from Rahel, his silence and emotional distance in adulthood reveal the long-lasting effects of trauma rooted in family dynamics. Rahel also grapples with feelings of displacement, highlighting how a lack of acceptance can lead to emotional turmoil and a fragmented identity.

Ammu's character further exemplifies the tension between personal identity and family expectations. As a divorced woman, she finds herself marginalized both within her family and society, showcasing how rigid cultural norms can stifle individual freedom. Her secret relationship with Velutha, an Untouchable, challenges the strict caste system, but the tragic consequences—Velutha's brutal death and Ammu's own alienation—demonstrate how family and societal structures enforce conformity at the expense of personal desires. Ammu's story underscores how identity is shaped by the constraints imposed by family and society, particularly for women who dare to challenge patriarchal norms.

III. THE BURDEN OF FAMILY EXPECTATIONS

In "The God of Small Things," Arundhati Roy delves into the heavy weight of family obligations, shedding light on how societal norms and strict traditions steer the lives of individuals. The story reveals that the duty to family often comes at the expense of personal happiness, leading to suffering, repression, and heartbreaking outcomes. Through the journeys of characters like Ammu, Estha, Rahel, and Baby Kochamma, Roy critiques the stifling nature of familial and social expectations, illustrating how they mold destinies and restrict personal freedom.

A particularly striking example of the burden of family obligations is found in Ammu's story. As a woman from a conservative Syrian Christian family, she faces immense pressure to adhere to the norms of marriage and obedience.



When she leaves her abusive husband and returns home with her twins, Estha and Rahel, she is treated like an outcast. Her quest for independence and love, especially in her relationship with Velutha, is viewed as a betrayal that brings shame to her family. Ammu's eventual rejection by her own kin and her tragic demise underscore the heavy toll of family obligations, particularly for women, who are often expected to sacrifice their own desires for the sake of social acceptance.

Estha and Rahel, as children, also feel the impact of these family expectations. Following the traumatic events surrounding Sophie Mol's death and Velutha's murder, Estha is thrust into silence and isolation, a punishment driven by the family's need to protect its reputation. His lifelong retreat from the world reflects the emotional burden of carrying family shame. Rahel, too, is deeply marked by these experiences, with her aimless adult life echoing the damage wrought by the oppressive family structure. Their struggles poignantly illustrate how family obligations can profoundly shape individual identity in painful and enduring ways.

Patriarchy and Family Dynamics

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* provides a deep and insightful critique of patriarchy and its impact on family dynamics. It reveals how gender-based power structures shape relationships, enforce oppression, and restrict individual freedom. The novel delves into how traditional family roles, societal expectations, and generational hierarchies uphold patriarchal control, affecting women, children, and even men in various ways. Through the lives of characters like Ammu, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, and Estha, Roy illustrates how the patriarchal family system enforces strict norms and punishes those who dare to challenge them.

Patriarchy's Control Over Women

One of the most powerful examples of patriarchy in the novel is the treatment of women within the Ipe family. Ammu, the mother of the twins, suffers from patriarchal oppression both from her family and society as a whole. As a divorced woman, she loses her autonomy and is constantly reminded of her low social status. Her love affair with Velutha, an Untouchable man, is seen as an unforgivable sin—not just because of caste boundaries, but also because it symbolizes a woman asserting her own desires. The consequences she faces—being exiled from her family home and ultimately dying in isolation—highlight how women who challenge patriarchal norms are often cast aside and destroyed. Mammachi, the twins' grandmother, also endures patriarchal violence, but she internalizes it in a different way. She suffers physical abuse at the hands of her husband, Pappachi, who resents her success as a businesswoman. Despite his cruelty, she remains devoted to him even after his death, reflecting how patriarchy conditions women to accept and rationalize their oppression. Mammachi's submissiveness stands in stark contrast to Ammu's defiance, illustrating how women in patriarchal systems often find themselves either enduring suffering or facing punishment for resisting it.

Intergenerational Conflict

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* delves into the complexities of intergenerational conflict, shining a light on the struggle between tradition and modernity, parental control and personal freedom, and how the choices made in the past ripple through the lives of future generations. The novel paints a vivid picture of how strict family expectations, societal norms, and ingrained prejudices create rifts between different generations within the Ipe family, ultimately leading to heartache and tragedy.

The Burden of the Past: How Generational Conflicts Shape Identity

The trauma that the older generation inflicts has a profound impact on Estha and Rahel, shaping who they are and how they navigate their futures. As children, they bear witness to the fallout from their mother's rebellion—her humiliation, exile, and eventual death—leaving deep emotional scars. Estha, silenced and separated from his sister, retreats entirely from the world, while Rahel, feeling adrift and disconnected, wanders through life without a true sense of belonging. Their experiences highlight how the expectations and failures of one generation can echo through to the next, influencing them in significant ways.

Chacko, Ammu's privileged brother, represents generational conflict from a different angle. Despite being educated in England and exposed to progressive ideas, he still clings to patriarchal norms, running the family business and treating women as if they owe him something. His hypocrisy—championing Marxist ideals while enjoying his own privileges—illustrates the clash between traditional values and modern influences in India's evolving social landscape.

Women's Role in the Family

In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy delivers a compelling critique of the patriarchal systems that shape women's roles within the family. Through characters like Ammu, Mammachi, and Baby Kochamma, the novel delves into the constraints, challenges, and expectations that women face in a strictly patriarchal society. The women of the Ipe family are trapped by cultural norms that define them as caregivers, obedient daughters, and submissive wives. When



they dare to step outside these roles, they encounter harsh repercussions, underscoring the deeply rooted gender inequalities present in Indian society.

Women as Victims of Patriarchy

A key theme in the novel is how patriarchy restricts women within the family unit. Ammu, the mother of the twin protagonists, exemplifies this oppression. Growing up in a conservative Syrian Christian family, she is denied the same opportunities as her brother, Chacko, solely because she is a woman. While Chacko gets to study at Oxford and eventually take charge of the family business, Ammu's options are limited to marriage. After she leaves her abusive husband, her family views her as a burden rather than offering support. She faces shame, her children are labeled illegitimate, and her personal desires—especially her love for Velutha—are seen as scandalous. Her eventual exile and tragic death serve as a powerful symbol of the punishment that awaits women who dare to defy patriarchal expectations.

Mammachi, Ammu's mother, embodies an older generation of women who, despite their strength, have absorbed patriarchal beliefs. She's a skilled entrepreneur running a successful pickle factory, yet she still submits to her abusive husband, Pappachi. Her quiet endurance of his violence highlights just how deeply rooted gender roles can be, where women are often expected to endure pain without pushing back. Ironically, she imposes these same beliefs on her daughter, refusing to stand by Ammu when she's ostracized for her relationship with Velutha, a Dalit man.

Then there's Baby Kochamma, Ammu's aunt, who is also a product of patriarchal constraints. In her youth, she fell in love with a Catholic priest but was forced to suppress her feelings, leading her to a life filled with bitterness and manipulation. Rather than challenging the oppressive system that robbed her of love, she becomes a part of it, ensuring that Ammu and the twins face consequences for their choices. Her character illustrates how some women internalize patriarchal values and end up perpetuating oppression, especially against other women who dare to break away from traditional roles.

The Impact of Social Obligations on Personal Freedom in *The God of Small Things*

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* offers a poignant critique of how strict social obligations can stifle individual freedom, especially for women and marginalized groups. The novel delves into how societal expectations—deeply rooted in caste, gender roles, and family honor—shape personal choices, hinder happiness, and often lead to heartbreaking outcomes. Through the experiences of characters like Ammu, Velutha, Estha, and Rahel, Roy powerfully illustrates the harsh effects of these obligations on personal freedom.

Ammu: The Cost of Defying Tradition

Ammu's journey serves as a striking example of how social obligations, particularly those linked to gender and caste, can rob individuals of their freedom. As a woman in a patriarchal Syrian Christian family, Ammu is denied the chance for higher education and financial independence. In stark contrast to her brother, Chacko, who enjoys the privilege of studying abroad and inheriting the family business, she finds herself trapped in an unhappy marriage to an abusive partner. When she finally decides to leave him, she's branded a disgrace and ostracized by her own family.

Velutha: The Tragic Fate of the Oppressed

Velutha, a Paravan from a lower caste, bears the heavy burden of social hierarchy. Even though he's intelligent, talented, and compassionate, his caste denies him opportunities. His love for Ammu is viewed as a grave sin, resulting in a horrific punishment. When Baby Kochamma wrongfully accuses him of kidnapping and assaulting Ammu, the police respond with brutal violence, highlighting how the caste system not only restricts personal freedom but also permits extreme brutality against those who dare to defy its rules. Velutha's tragic end serves as a powerful reminder of how inflexible social structures rob individuals of their right to love and live authentically.

Estha and Rahel: The Inheritance of Trauma

Estha and Rahel, the twin main characters, are profoundly impacted by their family's social expectations. As the children of a divorced mother, they find themselves ostracized by their own relatives. Estha, in particular, endures great suffering—after being coerced into falsely accusing Velutha, he is sent away, creating a permanent rift between him and his sister. The trauma from their childhood, shaped by the societal pressures on their mother, leaves them emotionally scarred and disconnected. When they finally reunite, their silence speaks volumes, illustrating how the heavy burden of family and societal expectations can stifle personal expression and emotional health.

Baby Kochamma: Enforcing Social Norms

Baby Kochamma embodies the enforcers of social expectations—those who cling to oppressive traditions, even when they inflict pain. In her youth, she broke the mold by falling for a priest, but when her love went unreciprocated, she devoted herself to upholding the very rigid societal rules that had once confined her. She punishes Ammu for daring to



defy these norms, manipulates Estha into betraying Velutha, and ultimately perpetuates the cycle of trauma within the family.

IV. CONCLUSION

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* offers a heartfelt look at how social obligations—shaped by caste, gender, family honor, and societal norms—can stifle personal freedom and dictate individual lives. The novel powerfully shows how deeply rooted traditions can suppress personal desires, leading to suffering, injustice, and even tragedy. Through the journeys of Ammu, Velutha, Estha, and Rahel, Roy critiques the rigid frameworks that shape Indian society and sheds light on the painful repercussions of challenging these unspoken rules.

A striking example of personal freedom being stifled by social obligations is found in Ammu's story. As a woman in a patriarchal society, she faces limitations that her brother, Chacko, does not. While he enjoys the freedom to study abroad and take over the family business, Ammu's path is dictated by societal expectations—she is expected to marry, adhere to tradition, and accept whatever life hands her. When she attempts to break free from these constraints by divorcing her abusive husband and pursuing a relationship with Velutha, she pays a heavy price. She is shamed, ostracized from her family, and ultimately dies alone and forsaken. Ammu's heartbreaking fate serves as a poignant reminder of how women's choices are often controlled by family and societal pressures, leaving little space for true independence or joy.

REFERENCES

Certainly, here's an expanded bibliography for your project on family and social obligations in *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy:

Books:

1. Bhatt, Indira, and Indira Nityanandam, eds. *Explorations: Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things*. Creative Books, 1999.
2. Dodiya, Jaydipsinh, and Joya Chakravarthy, eds. *The Critical Studies of Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things*. Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001.
3. Mullaney, Julie. *Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things: A Reader's Guide*. Continuum International Publishing Group, 2002.
4. Navarro-Tejero, Antonia. *Gender and Caste in the Anglophone-Indian Novels of Arundhati Roy and Githa Hariharan: Feminist Issues in Cross-cultural Perspective*. Edwin Mellen Press, 2005.
5. Roy, Amitabh. *The God of Small Things: A Novel of Social Commitment*. Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2005.
6. Sharma, R.S., and Shashi Bala Talwar. *Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things: Critique and Commentary*. Creative Books, 1998.
7. Tickell, Alex. *Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things*. Routledge, 2007.

Journal Articles and Theses:

8. Malik, Seema. "Social Perspectives in Arundhati's Roy's *The God of Small Things*." *Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2013, pp. 196-200.
9. Tasel, Linda. "Patriarchal Society: Three Generations of Oppression in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*." *Södertörns University College*, 2005.
10. Chatterjee, Debasree, Debajit Datta, and Mrinmoyee Naskar. "The Paradox of Development: Forest Rights, Mining and Displacement in Odisha, India." *Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2019, pp. 387-394.

Online Resources:

11. "Family and Social Obligation Theme in *The God of Small Things*." LitCharts.
12. "The Theme of Transgressing Social Boundaries in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*." DiVA Portal, Södertörn University, 2005.
13. "Downtrodden Society in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*." *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, vol. 5, no. 5, 2020, pp. 1602-1605.



14. "A Critical Study of Social Realism in Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things." International Journal of Multidisciplinary Educational Research, vol. 11, no. 1, 2022, pp. 15-20.
15. "A Contextual Analysis of Social, Cultural & Political Divides in Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things." PNR Journal, 2022.
16. "The Ethics of Nostalgia in Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things." Journal of Contemporary Literature, vol. 2, no. 1, 2010, pp. 175-190.



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA



International Journal of Advanced Research in Arts, Science, Engineering & Management (IJARASEM)

| Mobile No: +91-9940572462 | Whatsapp: +91-9940572462 | ijarasem@gmail.com |

www.ijarasem.com