

Dalit Subjugation and Intersectionality in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997)

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Abstract

Discrimination and deprivation is a recurring theme of significance in Dalit narratives and Dalit. Notably, studies on Dalit novels have primarily concentrated on exploring the diverse aspects of the darker side of the experience, emphasizing the social and economic hardships, misery, and psychological and physical exploitation faced by the community. This study examines Dalit victimhood through a critical reading of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), focusing on intersectionality as a site of oppression. The novel depicts the inscriptional nature of subjugation and intersectionality of oppression to maintain the hierarchical system in society. In the process, it sheds insights on forms of construction of social identities such as caste, class, and gender that frame Dalit life experiences.

Keywords

Dalit; Dalit subjugation; intersectionality; caste.

Introduction

The term 'subaltern' refers to individuals or groups, considered subordinate in terms of social class, caste, age, gender, and other factors that lead to discrimination. It refers specifically to individuals who occupy the lowest position within the social hierarchy. Dalit literature has emerged as a form of protest and revolt, as well as a call for the establishment of an egalitarian society rooted in humanism. Dalit literature often depict the experiences and consciousness of its writers, who seek to create a new model of society that is more considerate of human values. By challenging caste-based systems, the writers of Dalit literature aim to create a society in which individuals can live in harmony, equality, and respect. Dalit literature, a crucial voice in the Indian literary scene, serves as a platform for the expression of the experiences of marginalized communities. This literary genre frequently delves into the consciousness of the

subaltern, capturing the delicate interplay between identity and adversity. Critical studies on Dalit novels frequently emphasize the depiction of socio-economic challenges, physical and psychological exploitation, and the pervasive humiliations faced by Dalits. The primary objective of this research is to expand knowledge of Dalit voicelessness through an analysis of intersectionality in Arundhati Roy's novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997). Roy's narrative offers a profound examination of Dalit exploitation, extending beyond the traditional confines of socio-economic deprivation. This novel, through its intricate storytelling and abundant symbolism, depicts the discrimination faced by the character Velutha as an individual whose interactions with multifaceted forms of exploitation result from his voicelessness based on caste, gender, and class identities. *The God of Small Things* emphasizes the intersectional nature of oppression and defenselessness. Arundhati Roy skillfully

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interweaves the interactions with the surroundings, thus depicting how Dalits reflect and amplify the struggles. This study closely analyzes how these interactions function as a metaphor for the more extensive socio-political dynamics that impact Dalit communities.

An Overview of Subjugation and Intersectionality

According to the Molesworth Marathi-English dictionary, the term 'Dalit' means suppressed, crushed, or broken into pieces. Dalit literature emerged in a literary movement in the first Dalit writer's conference, which was held in 1958 in Bombay (Kumar, 2019). 'Dalit' basically addresses a particular community occupying the lowest social position within the hierarchy based on the Hindu varna system. As Literature, it has emerged as a form of protest, and a call for establishing an egalitarian society rooted in humanism. The literature reflects the intense experiences and consciousness of its writers, who seek to create a new model of society that aligns with human values that challenge caste-based discrimination. Dutt (2016) points out that the intersectionality of discrimination such as caste, class, and gender is a well-established framework within Dalit literature and feminist theory. According to Sharma (2019), Dalit eco-experiences are unique and vibrant, and these experiences involve living close to nature and constantly negotiating and challenging caste domination by expressing an environmental imagination. The liberation of Dalits from societal expectations and norms can happen through their expression of innate creativity and curiosity, and their heightened sense of self-expression. Roy's narrative approach in the novel, with a thematic emphasis on Dalit experience within the broader spectrum of environmental concerns, presents a powerful indictment of the socio-political dynamics at work in postcolonial India (Chae, 2015). Runa (2023) argues that intersectionality is the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as caste, class, and gender, which can lead to overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination and disadvantage. Roy's architectural background is

evident in the structured depiction of the sociocultural landscape, including the caste system's impact on the characters (Rizvi, 2014). The novel's representation of social class underscores the profound effects of these hierarchies on individual lives, with the phrase 'Things can change in a day' encapsulating the potential for sudden, drastic transformations (Akeel, 2021). The poignant exploration of the Dalit experience through the lens of environmental imagination presents a complex bond between the impoverished Dalits and their environment. As Brahmane and Chandramouly (2017) rightly pointed out, the relationship between Dalits and the environment exhibits an ecological concept of intersectionality by establishing a connection with the natural world based on exploitation. They imbue their experiences of oppression into the environment, thereby preserving their lived reality of marginalization. The study of power structures and binarism in the novel, elucidated by Fairclough's methodology of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), uncovers the inherent connection between the subordinate status of the Dalit community within the social hierarchy and the exploitation of the natural environment (Tahreem et al., 2020). The approach of intersectionality to environmental imagination provides an insight into the experiences of Dalits, illuminating the intersections of caste, class, and environmental degradation that influence the lives of the most disadvantaged individuals in Indian society. The thesis of Michel Foucault deals with the relationship between knowledge and power and can be employed to elucidate one of the primary modes through which Dalits were subjugated. Foucault's idea posits that knowledge, encompassing its development and dissemination as truth, is intrinsically connected to the process of domination. The Dalit experience, as portrayed in various literary works, often explores the compounded oppression that arises from these intersecting social hierarchies. Dalit women face gender bias, caste discrimination, and economic deprivation, which is reflected in their differential achievements in human development indicators (Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015).

Intersectionality of Caste, Class, and Gender

The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy delves deeply into the various forms of intersecting exploitation faced by Dalits and the portrayal of the brutality of society faced by the character named Velutha. Through the character of Velutha and the detailed depictions of the treatment of the other people in the community, Roy effectively illustrates social injustices. Mukul Sharma (2022) argues that the production of environmental inequality intersects thematically in terms of caste spaces, both private and public, along multiple axes. Anti-caste thinkers often emphasized that experience, space, and justice are significant factors in the formation of thought and action. It is acknowledged that space has a significant impact on Dalit lives. The novel is set in the Indian state of Kerala during the 1960s and focuses on the unfortunate destiny of the Ipe family. The narrative is conveyed through the perspectives of Rahel and Estha, twin siblings who return to their familial home after a significant amount of time has passed. The storyline shifts between their childhood and adulthood, illuminating how their lives were irreversibly transformed by a series of cataclysmic occurrences. The critical incident unfolds when their English cousin, Sophie Mol, perishes in a drowning accident during a visit to India. This unfortunate event exposes concealed secrets and prohibited relationships, most notably the illicit love affair between their mother, Ammu, and Velutha, a Dalit carpenter. This romantic liaison defies the rigid caste system, culminating in Velutha's inhumane beating and subsequent death at the hands of the police, which is sanctioned by both the family and society. The novel depicts Velutha in a way that highlights the treatment of Dalits in society as well as the plight of women who are living as divorcees. Even if Ammu wants to be with a Dalit man, Velutha, the societal norms do not typically condone the idea of treating individuals from lower castes as equals, particularly within the Hindu community. Women are frequently expected to marry within the same community to uphold the community's reputation. If not, they are subject to ostracism and punishment for their actions, which are viewed as crimes. This type of treatment is

frequently inflicted upon Dalits, who are perceived as social outcasts. Velutha, a Dalit, is relegated to a life of servitude and manual labor due to his exceptional skills and talents as a carpenter. Despite his abilities, his lower caste status makes him vulnerable to systemic exploitation and abuse, and his economic situation further intensifies his marginalization. The character Velutha is shown in such a way that disregards his abilities and contributions as a professional, revealing the deeply entrenched prejudices and inflexible social barriers that hinder Dalits from achieving recognition and advancing in society.

Making nonsense of all that Touchable cunning.... The Headlines in their heads.

DESPERADO CAUGHT IN POLICE DRAGNET..

For this insolence, this spoiling-the-fun, their quarry paid.

They woke Velutha with their boots.

Estha and Rahel woke to the shout of sleep surprised by shattered kneecaps.

Screams died in them and floated belly up, like dead fish in it. Cowering on the floor, rocking between dread and disbelief. History in Live pe they realized that the man being beaten was Velutha. Where had he come from? What had he done? Why had the policemen brought him here?

They heard the thud of wood on flesh. Boot on bone. On teeth. The muffled grunt when a stomach is kicked in. The muted crunch of the skull on cement. The gurgle of blood on a man's breath when his lung is torn by the jagged end of a broken rib.

Blue-lipped and dinner-plate-eyed, they watched, mesmerized by something that they sensed but didn't understand: the absence of caprice in what the policemen did. The abyss where anger should have been. The sober, steady brutality, the economy of it all (308).

Injustices against Velutha

Baby Kochamma manipulates the circumstances by falsely accusing Velutha of heinous crimes, including the abduction of the twins, Rahel and Estha, and holding him responsible for the demise of Sophie Mol. These accusations, though groundless, serve to incite the police against Velutha. The discovery of Sophie Mol's body in the river aggravates the situation, providing a convenient target as Vallatha for the family's anger on Ammu and Vallatha's relationship. Velutha finds refuge in "The History House", an abandoned building situated by the river. Unfortunately, the police, prompted by Baby Kochamma's deceptive claims and fueled by societal bias, apprehend him. The officers brutally attack Velutha, demonstrating a callous disregard for his suffering. The violent assault is described in detail, highlighting the excessive and cruel nature of the police's actions. Velutha's death symbolizes pervasive caste-based violence and discrimination where class, caste, and gender intersect to underscore the powerlessness of Velutha as a social being.

Heir Work, abandoned by God and History,
by Marx, by Man, by Woman and (in the
hours to come) by Children, lay folded on
the floor. He was semi-conscious, but wasn't
moving.

His skull was fractured in three places. His
nose and both his cheekbones were smashed,
leaving his face pulpy, undefined. The blow
to his mouth had split open his upper lip and
broken six teeth, three of which were
embedded in his lower lip, hideously
inverting his beautiful smile. Four of his ribs
were splintered, one had pierced his left
lung, which was what made him bleed from
his mouth. The blood on his breath bright
red. Fresh. Frothy. His lower intestine was
ruptured and haemorrhaged, the blood
collected in his abdominal cavity. His spine
was damaged in two places, the concussion
had paralysed his right arm and resulted in a
loss of control over his bladder and rectum.
Both his kneecaps were shattered.

Still, they brought out the handcuffs. Cold
... (310)

With the sour metal smell. Like steel bus-
rails and the bus conductor's hands from
holding them.

That was when they noticed his painted
nails. One of them held them up and waved
the fingers coquettishly at the others. They
laughed. 'What's this?' in a high falsetto.
'AC-DC?'

One of them flicked at his penis with his
stick. 'Come on, show us your special secret.
Show us how big it gets when you blow it
up.' Then he lifted his boot (with millipedes
curled into its sole) and brought it down
with a soft thud.

They locked his arms across his back. Click.
And click (311).

Velutha's relationship with Ammu, a woman from a higher caste, vividly portrays the nature of caste and class standards in society. The affair constitutes a defiant act against rigid caste regulations, but it also incurs severe repercussions. After the relationship is exposed, Velutha is falsely implicated in abduction, leading to his brutal beating and eventual demise at the hands of the police. This susceptibility of Dalits is violently penalized for violating social constraints, regardless of innocence. The upper-caste society shows its dominance through the use of state-sanctioned violence and social exclusion. The police, representing the authority of the state, framed unfounded accusations against Velutha, reflecting the systemic bias and brutality faced by Dalits. Velutha's demise is not merely a personal tragedy but a powerful representation of the broader social mechanisms governing caste hierarchies and economic exploitation against the community.

Conclusion

The representation of the vivid portrayal of the sociopolitical realities faced by Dalits, particularly the victimization of one community by another, in the novel *The God of Small Things*, sheds light on the brutal treatment against the Dalits,

specifically referencing the Ayemenem incident of killing for false accusations. The character of Velutha serves as a microscopic representation of the orthodoxy's brutality of the upper caste against Dalits and the intersectionality of social identities such as caste, class, and gender acts as a pitfall for the lives of Dalits. The act of discrimination, oppression, and inequality is brutal treatment. Social identities such as caste, gender, class, socio-

economic status, and other forms of suppression intersect to maintain the hierarchical system and social injustice. It therein continues to serve as a timely reminder of persisting inequalities, their forms of presence and therefore the need for greater awareness and sensitivity to these structures of 'truth and power' in order to contest them for equitable societies.

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