

POSTCOLONIAL IDENTITY IN THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

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Abstract:

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is a profound exploration of postcolonial identity, examining the ways in which historical, social, and cultural forces shape individual and collective consciousness in post-independence India. Set in Kerala, the novel portrays characters navigating the lingering effects of British colonialism, entrenched caste hierarchies, and gendered social expectations. Roy highlights the complexities of hybrid identity, as characters negotiate the tension between traditional values and Western influences, illustrating the psychological and social consequences of cultural dislocation. Caste and class structures emerge as central determinants of postcolonial identity, shaping access to power, social mobility, and personal relationships. The forbidden love between Ammu and Velutha exemplifies the intersection of caste, gender, and societal norms, revealing the persistent constraints on personal freedom in postcolonial society. Language serves as both a marker of identity and a site of resistance, with Roy's experimental narrative blending English and local dialects to reflect the hybridity of postcolonial subjectivity.

Memory and trauma further inform identity, as characters grapple with personal and collective histories shaped by oppression, social injustice, and familial loss. Women's experiences, particularly those of Ammu, demonstrate the gendered dimensions of postcolonial identity, highlighting how patriarchy interacts with caste and colonial legacies to shape subjectivity. Ultimately, the novel illustrates that postcolonial identity is multifaceted, fluid, and continuously negotiated, influenced by the interplay of historical legacies, social hierarchies, cultural hybridity, and personal experience. Roy's work offers a nuanced portrayal of the enduring effects of colonialism on the individual psyche and social structures, making it a seminal text for understanding postcolonial consciousness in literature.

Keywords: Postcolonial Identity, Hybridity, Caste, Gender, Memory.

INTRODUCTION:

Arundhati Roy is an Indian author, activist, and political commentator, born on November 24, 1961, in Shillong, Meghalaya. She grew up in a multicultural environment—her father, a Syrian Christian, and her mother, a Bengali Hindu, exposed her to diverse cultural influences, shaping her worldview. Roy studied architecture at the School of Planning and Architecture in Delhi, and her early career involved designing homes and working in stage design. Her literary breakthrough came with her debut novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997), which won the Booker Prize and brought her international recognition. The novel, set in Kerala, explores complex social issues such as caste, gender, and postcolonial identity, showcasing Roy's lyrical narrative style and deep social critique.

Beyond literature, Roy is a prominent activist, focusing on environmental issues, human rights, and anti-globalization causes. She has written extensively on nuclear weapons, displacement due to development projects, and communal politics in India. Her essays and non-fiction works, such as *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, highlight her commitment to social justice and her critical engagement with political power. Roy continues to influence both literary and political spheres, combining storytelling with activism to address pressing global and local issues.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:

This study explores the Postcolonial Identity in *The God of Small Things*.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

This study is based on secondary sources of data such as articles, books, journals, research papers, websites and other sources.

POSTCOLONIAL IDENTITY IN THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

1. Hybridity and Cultural Conflict

In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy explores postcolonial identity through the lens of cultural hybridity. The narrative is set in Kerala, India, during the post-independence era, a time when the legacy of British colonialism still permeated social, political, and personal spheres. The characters are often caught between two cultural worlds: the traditional Indian society shaped by caste and religion, and the Western ideals introduced during colonial rule. This tension produces hybrid identities that struggle to find coherence.

For example, Ammu, the mother of Rahel and Estha, embodies the conflict of postcolonial identity. She is educated, modern, and independent in ways that challenge traditional Indian social norms, particularly in her defiance of caste rules and gender expectations. Yet, her Westernized outlook isolates her from her family and society, highlighting the alienation inherent in hybridity. Roy portrays Ammu's struggles not simply as personal failings but as consequences of a larger colonial legacy that disrupted indigenous social structures. The clash between modernity and tradition manifests in daily life and affects familial relationships, gender roles, and social mobility.

Similarly, the mixed heritage of Estha and Rahel reflects the complexities of postcolonial identity. They inherit a world where traditional hierarchies, shaped by centuries of colonial interference, govern interpersonal interactions. Their very existence challenges social norms, especially concerning caste and gender, suggesting that identity is not static but fluid, shaped by historical and cultural contexts. Roy's treatment of language also reinforces hybridity. The narrative's shifting tenses, use of local dialects alongside English, and playful linguistic experiments mirror the fractured and hybrid identities of the characters. Language, a tool of colonial power, becomes a medium through which characters navigate, resist, and articulate their postcolonial realities.

The Ayemenem house, central to the story, serves as a symbolic site of cultural tension. It embodies the residue of colonial influence—its architecture, furnishings, and domestic habits suggest Westernized sensibilities—but it also houses traditional social hierarchies, particularly

regarding caste. The household thus becomes a microcosm of postcolonial India, where conflicting cultural norms coexist, clash, and shape the identities of its inhabitants. Roy suggests that postcolonial identity is not merely a matter of choosing between tradition and modernity but negotiating a complex interplay of historical, social, and cultural influences. Moreover, the trauma experienced by the characters can be read as a reflection of colonial history. The psychological scars borne by Ammu, Estha, and Rahel stem not only from personal experiences but from systemic pressures rooted in colonialism. Roy's narrative implies that the colonial project created enduring structural inequalities and cultural dislocations, leaving postcolonial subjects to navigate an ambivalent space where belonging is constantly questioned. By emphasizing the tension between hybrid cultural influences, Roy critiques the lingering colonial structures that prevent postcolonial subjects from forming cohesive identities.

2. Caste, Class, and Social Hierarchy

Caste and class play a central role in shaping postcolonial identity in *The God of Small Things*. Roy situates the narrative in a society still deeply influenced by rigid hierarchies that were both reinforced and complicated by colonial rule. Colonialism introduced new economic structures, Western education, and bureaucratic systems, yet traditional social stratifications persisted, often blending with these modern influences to create complex forms of social oppression. The characters' identities are inextricably tied to these systems, demonstrating how postcolonial subjects negotiate their sense of self within a society marked by historical inequalities.

Velutha, the Untouchable and skilled carpenter, exemplifies the intersection of caste and postcolonial identity. Despite his intelligence, talent, and dignity, Velutha is marginalized due to his caste. His relationship with Ammu challenges societal norms and highlights the rigid boundaries that still define social interactions in postcolonial India. Roy uses their forbidden love to expose the contradictions and tensions inherent in a society that claims to be modern yet remains bound by deeply entrenched hierarchies. Velutha's tragic fate underscores how caste continues to define and limit postcolonial identity, illustrating the enduring influence of historical oppression on personal freedom and social mobility.

Class also intersects with caste to shape identity. Characters such as Chacko, the Anglo-Indian heir of the family estate, represent a different form of postcolonial identity—privileged by class and colonial inheritance yet disconnected from local traditions. His Western education and exposure to global ideas give him an air of authority, yet his moral shortcomings suggest that colonial influence produced not only material advantage but also ethical and social dislocation. Roy suggests that class and caste hierarchies continue to produce inequities that affect how individuals navigate their personal and social identities in a postcolonial context.

The Ayemenem household functions as a microcosm of these hierarchies. The spatial and social arrangements within the house mirror the rigid stratification of caste and class outside its walls. Servants, such as Velutha, occupy defined spaces that reinforce their social marginalization, while the family members enjoy privileges rooted in both tradition and colonial inheritance. Roy's portrayal of domestic spaces underscores the ways postcolonial identity is conditioned by social positioning and access to power, revealing how historical structures of oppression continue to shape interpersonal dynamics.

Roy also explores how these hierarchies affect gender and sexual identity. Ammu's struggles, for instance, are compounded by her gender and class. Her rebellion against caste rules is both a personal and political act, reflecting the broader limitations imposed on postcolonial subjects. By intertwining caste, class, and gender, Roy demonstrates that identity in postcolonial societies is multi-layered and deeply entangled with historical systems of power.

3. Language and Identity

Language in *The God of Small Things* is a powerful marker of postcolonial identity. Roy's narrative style, characterized by intricate syntax, non-linear temporality, and playful neologisms, reflects the hybrid linguistic reality of postcolonial India. The characters navigate multiple languages—Malayalam, English, and local dialects—reflecting the tension between indigenous culture and colonial influence. Language becomes both a tool of power and a means of resistance, shaping identity while highlighting the lingering effects of colonialism.

The dominance of English, often associated with education, modernity, and social mobility, creates a complex dynamic. Chacko, with his Oxford education, exemplifies the prestige and authority afforded to those fluent in the language of the colonizer. His linguistic ability grants him social and intellectual capital, illustrating how postcolonial identity can be mediated through mastery of the colonizer's language. Yet, Roy also critiques this dynamic, showing that linguistic fluency does not necessarily translate into ethical or emotional maturity. English, in this sense, both empowers and alienates, reflecting the ambivalent legacy of colonialism on identity formation. Conversely, the use of Malayalam and local dialects signifies authenticity and belonging. The intimate, everyday speech of Ammu, Estha, and Rahel underscores their connection to place, culture, and community. Roy's code-switching and linguistic experimentation reflect the hybridity of postcolonial identity—characters must navigate between languages to articulate themselves fully. This linguistic fluidity mirrors the broader negotiation between tradition and modernity that defines postcolonial subjectivity. Language thus becomes a site of identity formation, enabling resistance to colonial and patriarchal norms while also reflecting societal hierarchies.

Roy's innovative narrative style also emphasizes the psychological dimensions of postcolonial identity. The fragmented, nonlinear storytelling mimics the fractured experience of postcolonial subjects, who inherit a history marked by disruption and displacement. Memory, trauma, and linguistic play intersect to create a unique postcolonial consciousness, where identity is both fluid and contested. The novel's language embodies the tension between imposed colonial structures and indigenous cultural expression, highlighting how identity is inseparable from the medium through which it is articulated.

Furthermore, Roy uses language to critique social stratification. Velutha's dialogue and manner of speech, for example, reflect both his intelligence and his marginalization. The contrast between his articulate expressions and the dismissive attitudes of upper-caste characters underscores the ways linguistic competence interacts with caste and class, shaping perceptions of legitimacy, authority, and belonging. Postcolonial identity, therefore, is intricately tied to linguistic expression, revealing the interplay between power, culture, and selfhood.

4. Memory, Trauma, and Identity

Memory and trauma are essential to postcolonial identity in *The God of Small Things*. The novel portrays the personal and collective consequences of historical oppression, colonialism, and social injustice, suggesting that postcolonial identity is inseparable from the scars of the past. The twin protagonists, Estha and Rahel, serve as embodiments of this theme, their fragmented experiences and traumatic memories reflecting the ongoing effects of historical and familial legacies.

The trauma of the twins' childhood is directly linked to societal restrictions and family structures shaped by colonial and caste hierarchies. The death of Sophie Mol, the illicit relationship between Ammu and Velutha, and the resulting punishment inflicted on Velutha create lasting psychological wounds. Roy suggests that these traumas are not isolated incidents but consequences of a larger social order inherited from colonial and precolonial histories. The inability of the characters to fully articulate or process these experiences mirrors the silenced histories and unspoken tensions that continue to shape postcolonial societies.

Memory functions as both a narrative device and a means of identity construction. The non-linear structure of the novel, with frequent flashbacks and shifts in perspective, reflects the fragmented nature of postcolonial consciousness. Estha and Rahel's recollections reveal how personal identity is inseparable from historical memory. Their understanding of themselves and their place in the world is mediated by experiences of loss, injustice, and social constraint, highlighting the enduring impact of colonial legacies on the individual psyche.

The interplay between personal and collective trauma underscores the societal dimensions of postcolonial identity. Roy portrays the Ayemenem household and the larger community as sites of both memory and repression, where social norms, caste prejudices, and colonial legacies converge to produce emotional and psychological damage. The characters' struggles with guilt, shame, and loss exemplify the ways in which historical structures continue to influence postcolonial subjectivity, suggesting that identity is formed as much by inherited trauma as by personal choice.

Additionally, the theme of forbidden love—particularly the relationship between Ammu and Velutha—illustrates how trauma is intimately linked to social structures. Their love defies caste boundaries and patriarchal norms, yet it is violently punished, leaving lasting scars on the children. Roy emphasizes that the consequences of social transgression are shaped by historical inequalities, reinforcing the connection between trauma, memory, and identity in a postcolonial context.

5. Gender and Postcolonial Identity

Gender is a critical factor in shaping postcolonial identity in *The God of Small Things*. Roy portrays women's experiences as deeply intertwined with both colonial legacies and indigenous social hierarchies, demonstrating how postcolonial identity is gendered, constrained, and negotiated. Female characters navigate multiple forms of oppression, including patriarchy, caste, and class, highlighting the intersectional nature of postcolonial identity.

Ammu represents the struggle for autonomy within a restrictive society. Her rejection of patriarchal norms, insistence on personal freedom, and defiance of caste rules challenge both traditional and colonial social orders. Yet, her rebellion exposes her to social marginalization,

illustrating the limited options available to women in postcolonial contexts. Roy portrays Ammu's identity as both empowered and constrained, reflecting the tensions faced by postcolonial women who inherit a history of structural inequality.

Estha and Rahel's mother-daughter experiences further highlight the gendered dimensions of postcolonial identity. The consequences of Ammu's relationship with Velutha extend beyond personal tragedy, shaping the twins' understanding of love, justice, and social hierarchy. Roy suggests that postcolonial identity is not merely a product of cultural or historical forces but is deeply influenced by gendered experiences, as societal expectations impose distinct pressures on men and women.

Roy also critiques the intersection of gender and caste. Velutha's vulnerability is compounded by his caste, while Ammu's marginalization stems from both her gender and social defiance. The narrative exposes how postcolonial societies reproduce inequalities along multiple axes, shaping identities that are complex, contested, and constrained by overlapping systems of power. Gender, therefore, is central to understanding postcolonial subjectivity, highlighting the ways in which personal and social identity are mediated by historical and cultural forces.

Furthermore, Roy's depiction of women's sexuality challenges social norms, illustrating the tension between personal desire and societal expectation. The policing of female behavior, both within the family and the broader community, underscores the ways in which postcolonial identity is constrained by patriarchal structures inherited from both colonial and indigenous histories. By foregrounding these dynamics, Roy emphasizes that postcolonial identity cannot be fully understood without considering the gendered dimensions of social power.

6. Memory of Colonialism and National Identity

Roy also addresses postcolonial identity through the lens of national memory and the legacy of colonialism. India's recent independence forms the backdrop for the novel, yet the effects of British rule persist in social attitudes, political structures, and cultural practices. Characters navigate a landscape shaped by both precolonial hierarchies and colonial interventions, illustrating how national identity and personal identity are intertwined in postcolonial contexts.

The Ayemenem house and its surrounding environment serve as symbols of this lingering colonial influence. The architecture, social hierarchy, and even domestic customs reflect Western norms, while caste and gender hierarchies persist from precolonial times. This juxtaposition illustrates the hybrid nature of postcolonial identity, where the remnants of colonialism coexist with indigenous traditions, creating complex and sometimes contradictory social landscapes. Roy suggests that postcolonial identity is shaped not only by liberation from colonial rule but also by the unresolved tensions left in its wake.

Education, particularly Western education, further complicates identity formation. Characters such as Chacko and Margaret Kochamma embody the influence of colonial learning, adopting values and lifestyles associated with the West. Their experiences highlight the psychological and social implications of colonial legacies, including alienation from local traditions and a sense of cultural dislocation. The novel emphasizes that postcolonial identity involves negotiating these inherited cultural forms, balancing pride in national heritage with the allure and authority of colonial frameworks.

Roy also critiques the myth of a unified postcolonial nation. The narrative reveals persistent social inequalities, caste discrimination, and gender oppression, demonstrating that independence did not automatically produce social justice or cohesion. Through the lens of individual and collective memory, Roy highlights how historical legacies shape national consciousness and personal identity, suggesting that postcolonial identity is always in dialogue with the past.

CONCLUSION:

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* offers a compelling exploration of postcolonial identity, revealing how history, culture, and social hierarchies shape individual and collective consciousness. The novel illustrates the tension between tradition and modernity, caste constraints, gender expectations, and the lingering influence of colonialism. Through characters like Ammu, Velutha, and the twins, Roy demonstrates how postcolonial subjects navigate a world defined by hybridity, social marginalization, and cultural conflict. Language, memory, and trauma emerge as central mechanisms through which identity is both formed and contested. Roy's experimental narrative style and linguistic hybridity reflect the fractured realities of postcolonial life, while the characters' experiences of personal loss and social injustice underscore the enduring psychological impact of historical oppression. Gendered experiences further complicate identity formation, highlighting the intersection of patriarchy, caste, and colonial legacies.

The novel portrays postcolonial identity as fluid, multifaceted, and constantly negotiated. It is neither fixed nor monolithic but evolves through the interplay of personal experience, cultural heritage, and historical memory. Roy's work emphasizes that understanding postcolonial identity requires attention to the complex social, cultural, and political forces that continue to shape lives in post-independence India, making the novel a seminal study of the postcolonial human experience.

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