

## The God of Small Things as a Novel of Big Things

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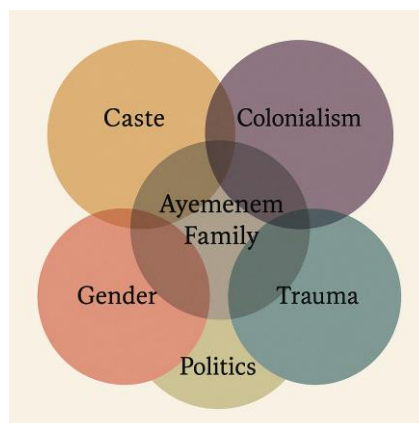
**Abstract** – This academic paper explores Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* as a complex literary canvas where intimate, familial moments are woven into the fabric of broader societal narratives. Set in Ayemenem, Kerala, the novel articulates issues such as caste-based oppression, colonial residues, gender roles, trauma, and political authoritarianism through a deeply lyrical style. This paper uses diagrams, thematic charts, and a chronological timeline to show how Roy magnifies social critique through the lens of everyday experiences. Humans often see themselves as the pinnacle of creation, ordained by God to rule over the earth. Yet, when measured against the quiet resilience of nature and the harmony of other life forms, human existence seems fleeting, fragile, and far less significant than we assume. The world around us doesn’t affirm our supremacy, it humbles us.

**Keywords:** The personal as Political, Caste, Trauma, Colonialism, Gender, *The God of Small Things*.

### 1. THE PERSONAL AS POLITICAL

Roy’s literary strength lies in her ability to translate personal tragedy into broader political discourse. The novel’s events Ammu’s forbidden love, Estha’s molestation and silencing, and the death of Sophie Mol are not isolated stories but political events shaped by caste, gender, and historical conditioning. Rahel and Estha’s psychological fragmentation underscores how children absorb and react to socio-political trauma. As LaCapra (2001) suggests, trauma narratives reflect the interplay between private pain and public memory.

#### Illustration 1:



**Fig -1:** Thematic Intersection Diagram

This above Venn diagram displays five overlapping circles labeled Caste, Gender, Colonialism, Trauma, and Politics. At their convergence is the Ayemenem Family, symbolizing how each personal moment is tethered to socio-political forces.



The love between Ammu and Velutha is not simply a personal or emotional choice, it becomes a defiant political act precisely because of the oppressive social structures that surround them. Their relationship cuts across rigid caste boundaries, gender expectations, and colonial hangovers embedded within the Ayemenem society. Ammu, a Syrian Christian woman, and Velutha, an untouchable Paravan, are bound by affection, but their union defies the invisible laws of caste purity, social order, and patriarchal control.

When examined through the overlapping lenses of **Caste**, **Gender**, **Colonialism**, **Trauma**, and **Politics**, their love exposes the deep violence hidden beneath cultural norms. **Caste** marks Velutha as socially impure, regardless of his skills or humanity. **Gender** renders Ammu powerless, a divorced woman with little voice in her own household. **Colonial influence** lingers in the hierarchical attitudes inherited from British rule, reinforcing ideas of superiority and shame. Their choices stir the collective discomfort of a society built on control and silence.

Therefore, their emotional intimacy becomes a revolt. In touching each other, they trespass ancient taboos. In seeking joy, they challenge a system designed to deny them agency. The state's brutal response Velutha's beating and death, Ammu's exile reveals that their punishment is not for love, but for breaking rules that protect the status quo.

In *The God of Small Things*, every personal act has political weight. Ammu and Velutha's love, tragic and tender, symbolizes how even the smallest gestures touch, trust, truth become dangerous when they confront the powerful machinery of social control. It is a love that exposes the cost of defying oppressive systems and the human cost of maintaining them.

## Timeline of Events



**Fig -2:** Chronological Timeline of Major Events

This timeline traces emotional and political consequences across decades. Trauma shapes the twins' psychological world, highlighting how private suffering stems from public injustice.

## 2. CASTE AND UNTOUCHABILITY

Roy brings into sharp focus the enduring brutality of caste discrimination through Velutha, a Paravan by birth but an artisan by skill. His love for Ammu, a woman of higher caste, becomes a transgression punishable by death. This relationship mirrors Ambedkar's (1936) warnings about caste as a system that dehumanizes.

### Caste-Based Hierarchies in the Novel (Table 1)

Caste/Ethnic Group	Characters	Social Role/ Power Dynamics
British Colonial Elite	Referenced Past	Origin of inherited institutional power
Syrian Christians (Upper)	Ammu, Chacko	Educated, socially privileged
Servant Class	Kochu Maria	Domestic labor, marginalized
Dalits	Velutha	Skilled, vital, yet socially ostracized

Chart -1: Caste-Based Hierarchies in the Novel (Table 1)

This chart outlines Roy’s critique of the rigid caste system. Even talented and essential individuals like Velutha are destroyed by caste hierarchies. His skill, kindness, and humanity cannot shield him from the violence of being born into a marginalized identity. Roy portrays caste not as an abstract concept but as a daily, lived reality one that determines where a person can walk, whom they can love, and whether their pain will be acknowledged. Velutha’s fate is not accidental; it is the logical outcome of a society built on purity, control, and exclusion. Through his tragic arc, Roy exposes how caste devalues human life and justifies cruelty in the name of tradition. The novel’s emotional force lies in showing that oppression is not just institutional, it is deeply personal, tearing apart families, futures, and the very possibility of justice.

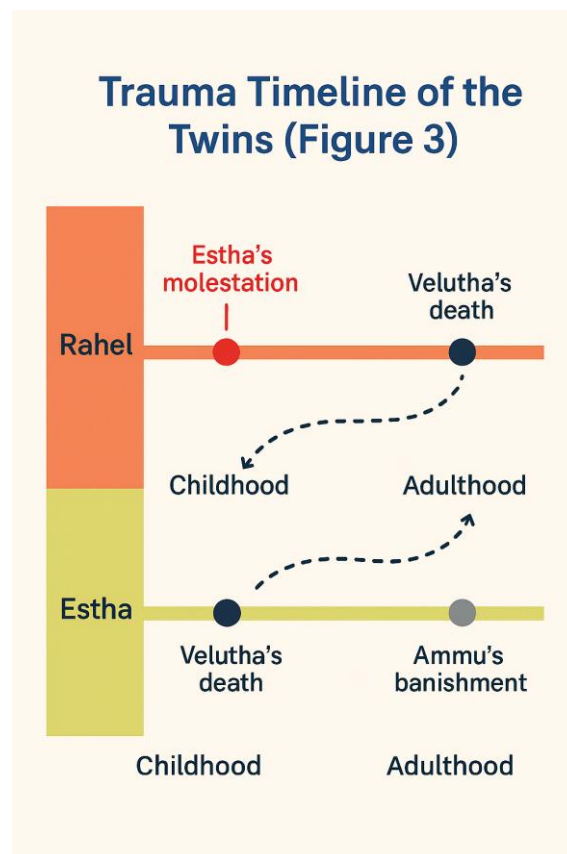
**Recommendation:** Comparative literary analysis with Dalit autobiographies such as Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan* or Bama’s *Karukku* can deepen classroom engagement.

### 3. MEMORY, TRAUMA, AND NARRATIVE DISRUPTION

Arundhati Roy’s use of a nonlinear narrative in *The God of Small Things* powerfully mirrors the fractured mental states of her characters, particularly the twins Estha and Rahel. Rather than unfolding events in a

straightforward timeline, Roy weaves past and present together, showing how traumatic memories resurface in sudden, jarring ways. This storytelling method reflects how trauma operates not as a memory that is processed and stored, but as a wound that reopens unexpectedly. Fragmented images, like the scent of pickles or the sound of a train, carry emotional weight far greater than words can express. These recurring symbols disrupt the narrative flow, just as traumatic experiences disrupt the continuity of life. The structure itself embodies disorientation, forcing the reader to experience the confusion and pain that the characters cannot articulate. In doing so, Roy shows that trauma is not remembered it is relived.

**Illustration 2:**



**Fig -3:** Trauma Timeline of the Twins

A two-lane chart visualizes Rahel and Estha's timelines. Key events are marked: Estha's molestation (red), Velutha's death (black), and Ammu's banishment (grey). Dotted arrows connect childhood and adult recollections, demonstrating how trauma recurs through memory.

**Recommendation:** Trauma mapping is useful in literature pedagogy to help students track complex, non-chronological narratives.

#### 4. COLONIAL HANGOVER AND IDENTITY CRISIS

Despite political independence, the Ayemenem family remains mentally colonized. Chacko and Baby Kochamma embrace English habits, reflecting Bhabha's (1994) concept of mimicry.

Chart 2: Colonial Traits and Psychological Conflicts (Table 2)

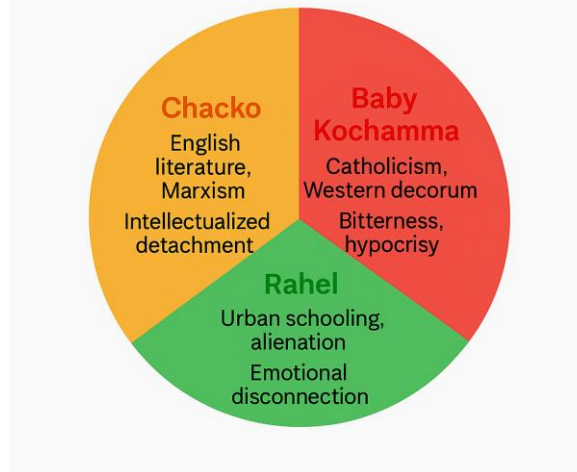


Chart -2: Colonial Traits and Psychological Conflicts (Table 2)

The characters remain psychologically tied to their colonial past, unable to fully adopt or reject it. This tension is most visible in characters like Chacko and Baby Kochamma, who cling to the remnants of British influence through language, education, and lifestyle. Chacko, with his Oxford degree and Marxist ideals, struggles to reconcile his Western learning with his Indian identity, often using intellectualism as a shield from emotional engagement. Baby Kochamma mimics British decorum and religious conservatism, masking her bitterness beneath a façade of propriety. Even the children absorb this fractured legacy Rahel and Estha grow up in a world where English is both a tool of access and alienation. The Ayemenem House itself, with its colonial architecture and decaying grandeur, becomes a symbol of a nation still haunted by imperial control. In Roy's world, colonialism is not a distant history it is a lingering presence that shapes thought, behavior, and belonging in the most intimate ways.

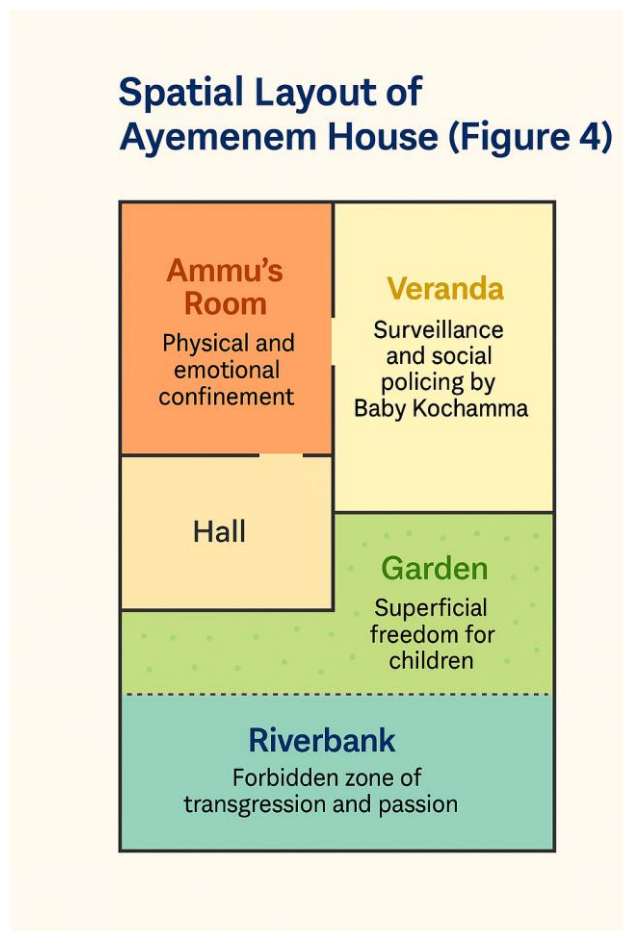
**Recommendation:** Compare these conflicts with similar issues in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* or Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*.

## 5. GENDER AND SPATIAL POLITICS

Arundhati Roy masterfully employs spatial metaphors in *The God of Small Things* to expose the workings of patriarchy. The Ayemenem House stands as a symbolic structure where physical spaces reflect gendered power dynamics. Ammu's confinement to her room represents the suppression of female autonomy and desire. The veranda, dominated by Baby Kochamma's watchful presence, becomes a place of surveillance and moral judgment. In contrast, the outdoor spaces like the river and garden offer fleeting moments of freedom, especially to the children, yet remain inaccessible for women seeking real liberation. Each doorway, corridor, and locked room signifies the limits placed on women within a rigid patriarchal order. Through the very architecture of the home, Roy shows how patriarchy is not only enforced socially but also etched into the spaces people inhabit.

### Illustration 3:

The labeled house plan acts as a visual metaphor, revealing how physical spaces within the Ayemenem House are deeply connected to the social, emotional, and political structures of the characters' lives. Each labeled area such as Ammu's room, the veranda, the garden, and the riverbank symbolizes a larger theme in the novel. **Ammu's room**, for example, represents both literal and emotional confinement, underscoring how women are restricted in patriarchal spaces. The **veranda**, often occupied by Baby Kochamma, reflects surveillance and judgment, showing how society polices women's behavior. The **garden** seems like a space of freedom for the children, but even that is temporary and superficial. Finally, the **riverbank** becomes a forbidden zone a place of both passion and punishment, where boundaries are crossed and consequences are severe. Together, these labeled areas illustrate how architecture in the novel serves not just as a setting, but as a tool to map power, restriction, and rebellion.



**Fig -4:** Spatial Layout of Ayemenem House

**Recommendation:** Teaching students to map physical spaces in literature can illuminate gender dynamics.

## 6. CONCLUSION AND SCHOLARLY RELEVANCE

Arundhati Roy crafts a narrative where the personal is inseparable from the political, and every small heartbreak echoes larger historical wounds. The novel blurs boundaries between love and law, memory and history, innocence, and guilt revealing how deeply power shapes everyday life. Through the fragmented



experiences of the twins, she captures how generational trauma festers beneath silence. Symbols like the river, the moth, and the History House become vessels of memory, resistance, and decay. Her lyrical prose does not soften the impact of oppression but rather illuminates it with devastating clarity. In Ayemenem's humid air and hushed conversations, Roy unearths the violence of caste, patriarchy, and postcolonial disillusionment. *The God of Small Things* is not only a story it is a mirror held up to a society too willing to forget the cost of its obedience.

### Suggestions for Further Research and Pedagogy:

- Apply trauma theory to silent characters (e.g., Estha)
- Develop digital 3D models of literary spaces
- Create thematic trauma charts across postcolonial texts
- Analyze metaphoric ecosystems (e.g., insects, river, rain)

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