

P.p1 love. the  
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s2 {font-kerning: none} IntroductionThe God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy is a controversial yet widely loved novel set in Ayemenem, Kerala and its monsoon palms. The constraints of a patriarchal and caste-led society are introduced early on in the novel and the relationships of the characters are intertwined in these complex structures. This brought the research question- how has Arundhati Roy treated the interrelation of societal norms and different forms of love in the god of small things? During the time period of the novel, the government of India had abolished the caste system and all things associated with it, however, the mental laws of the upper class and the followed oppression of the Paravans remained. The essay explores the various aspects of how society is portrayed in the novel through the actions and personalities of different characters and their opinion on love and relationships.

Each character represents a different facet of the Indian societal point of view and ties in their personal relationships to give a contextual

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understanding of what really shaped the Indian mindset in the mid 1900s. The novel resonates to larger concepts of politics and love. The reality of a patriarchal society is a major influence on the characters of this novel and shapes a huge part of the plot and character traits. The ascent of the lower classes and the toppling of the upper classes is an idea at the core of the political philosophies that are highlighted in the novel that makes some of the characters optimistic and fills the rest with fear.

Roy also uses the concept of nonlinear narratives and varying symbolism to drive the interrelations of love and societal norms forward. Amongst these small things, the characters are yearning for love; scared to be “loved a little less”; breaking the “love laws” which dictate who you can and can not love. The historical context used through this novel’s style of narration, gives the novel a facet of non-fiction and helps Roy address the issues related to the caste-system in India. The severity of the discrimination helps Indian readers connect and coupled with the narration which reflects the point of view of a child, almost sends this group of readers to their childhood.

One of the main reasons for this worldwide praise was the use of the common concept, love. The Love LawsThe novel is based around the theme of “love laws”. This refers to the societal rules where people from superior castes can not form any sort of relationship with the lower caste or literally even touch them in some cases.

“How could she stand the smell? Haven’t you noticed? They have a particular smell, these Paravans” (Roy 257), the use of such sentences is used in dialogue throughout the novel and highlights the prejudice against

lower caste, acting as one of the main turning points in the novel later on. Roy discusses the invisible barriers that people lived in for years as to not break the rules and commit “unlawful” crimes. She addresses this issue in a controversial manner as she forms a relationship between Ammu, an upper-class divorcee and Velutha, an Untouchable when she mentions “history was wrong-footed, caught off guard” (Roy 176). In her book review, Alice Truax stated that, “It gradually becomes clear to the reader that only Velutha, an Untouchable who serves as the family carpenter, is competent enough to transform life rather than simply endure it — but, of course, as he’s an Untouchable, endurance is supposed to be all he’s good for. He is both essential and taken for granted in the twins’ existence, like breathing. He is ‘the God of Small Things’” (1997). Love is portrayed as a strong force when it comes to shaping the characters in the novel. The idea of ‘love trumps all’ covers every positive turning point in the plot but is also a theme that leads to the eventual downfall of the characters.

The use of the short, blunt sentences such as, “he tried to hate her. She’s one of them, he told himself. Just another one of them” (Roy 214), helped highlight the frustration that Velutha felt and at the same time the ease of which he accepted this love. Another societal barrier for the relationships in this novel was religious conflict. The family of characters in the book are all Syrian Christians, and very proud ones.

Ammu marries a hindu man and therefore her children are born half-hindu and half-christian. This is considered atrocious and Roy highlights this disdain against the children by using Baby Kochamma, Ammu’s aunt, as a representative of society to shower the children with dislike and disapproval.

Roy reveals this detail early on in the novel by saying, “ they were half-hindu hybrids that no self-respecting Syrian Christian would ever marry. She (Baby Kochamma) was keen for them to realise that they (like herself) lived on sufferance in the Ayemenem house, their maternal grandmother’s house, where they really had no right to be” (Roy 45). This hatred towards the twins due to their circumstances shapes them to be used to being hated and being deprived of love through the story and portrays them as people who can not cope with love. The author portrays the power of this theme but also suggests that even such emotions are almost always beaten down by the constraints of society and the gaze of the laws. Roy uses Rahel’s character to highlight this struggle by introducing the reality that Rahel leaves her loving husband due to her confused state and inability to maintain the relationship.

The role of women in society is widely explored in the novel. The different women in the novel are all portrayed as having a certain role in a patriarchal society and Roy uses the women to reflect real-life problems faced by women in India and around the world. Roy explores how the patriarchal society, decides a woman’s worth and awards her with love accordingly.

Ammu being a divorced woman with children is less respected than her brother Chako, who is a divorced man with a child. Ammu’s husband was an alcoholic man who was willing to give up his wife for prostitution just to save his job and she had to succumb to domestic abuse when she refused. When she decided to divorce her husband her parents hesitantly took her back as she brought shame upon the family name. Rather than escaping the turmoil that Ammu faced due to her husband, she was just thrown into the clutches of her father who abused his power over her, showing how the family and

the community still held onto the fact that a woman without a man is powerless and worthless is deserving of no respect or love in the future and should accept her fate.

Ammu is considered a burden to her family and her kids a shameful addition, especially as her husband did not belong to the same community as her. Roy perfectly sums up the pressured life of Ammu with details such as, “Ammu was considering reverting to her maiden name, though she said that choosing between her husband’s name and her father’s name didn’t give a woman much of a choice” (Roy 37). Due to Ammu’s status as a divorced woman, even her children are looked down upon and and Baby Kochamma, Ammu’s aunt, “considered them doomed, fatherless waifs”(Roy 45). At the same time Chako’s use of his female employees for his physical relationships is justified by his mother, Mammachi, by saying, “he can’t help having a Man’s Needs” (Roy 168). Whereas, just the fact that Ammu decided to leave her abusive husband is portrayed as enough to be undeserving of love and respect. Chako, as a man, is given all the love and privilege that Ammu is denied. Ammu’s image in society is inherited by her children as they’re considered “millstones” around their mother’s neck, less deserving of love and considered more susceptible to meet a similar fate.

Roy uses the character of Mammachi to portray the silence of domestic abuse and the love that makes it continue. Mammachi’s husband, Pappachi, is constantly shown as abusing her due to his own frustration at work and his unfulfilling life. However, the entire time she never speaks up or relents, she accepts her faith because that is what she is supposed to do. The author also highlights that even though Mammachi was the owner of a successful pickles

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and preserves business, essentially an independent woman, she always succumbed to her husband's violence because she loved him. Even after the death of her husband, Mammachi is described as being devastated and destroyed, yet Roy describes this emotion by saying that, "Mammachi was crying more because she was used to him than because she loved him. She was used to having him slouching around the pickle factory and was used to being beaten time to time" (Roy 50). This highlighted the fact that the women in this novel were so oppressed that even their idea of love was shaped in a destructive manner.

However, most of the relationships of love in the novel are based on abuse and violence. Another aspect that plays into the interrelation being discussed here is the Indian infatuation with whiter, fairer skin. Roy confronts the desire for white skin, which occurs in many Asian countries, from the point of view of the 'dark-skinned' twins who desire that kind of attention and adoration. The little English girl, Sophie Mol, who was "hatted, bell-bottomed, and loved from the beginning" (Roy 141), was used as the perfect opposite of the Indian-bred twins. Roy highlights how the family and also the surrounding community aspired to be like the English and how this reflected in their respect towards them and their disdain towards their own kind by using details such as, "They were all anglophiles. They were a family of anglophiles. Pointed in the wrong direction, trapped outside their own history, and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swept away" (Roy 52).

The twins were inherently jealous of the love that their English cousin received, never realizing that it was the color of her skin, but believing that

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she was just born loved unlike her. Rahel and Estha are constantly reminded that they must impress their cousin and behave more like her, even though they could never look like her. Sophie Mol is portrayed as guiding character and brings together the individuals of the novel. Sophie's death is revealed early on in the novel and the story that follows narrates how her death occurred in bits and pieces. This build up for the climax is foreshadowed constantly by the words " the loss of Sophie Mol" and suspense is created to a reveal a cataclysmic end.

The infatuation with Sophie Mol's beautiful skin and cultural background causes a ripple effect on how the darker skinned individuals are treated and what their fate holds for them. Narrative and SymbolismThe author introduces the reader to multiple symbols as the plot progresses and two of the prominent symbols are Pappachi's moth and the history house. Both these symbols are recurring facets of the novel which lead to the recurring theme or motif of love. Pappachi, the twins' grandfather, is described as an abusive imperial entomologist but it is the moth that he discovered that plays a huge part in explaining the love-deprived emotions that young Rahel feels. The moth is derived from Pappachi himself and how his abusive and oppressive behaviour haunted the family, all because of the upper class and patriarchal society they lived in. A society where even the smallest mistake that caused harm to their values and the image of their The moth in a way represented punishment and the lack of love, as it touched someone and they were instantly frozen out of the warmth of adoration. The author uses the moth as a way to show the shame brought upon a character due to their inability to be loved and unworthiness of any kind of affection.



The reader is introduced to this when Roy states, “ A cold moth with unusually dense dorsal tufts landed lightly on Rahel’s heart. Where its icy legs touched her, she got goosebumps. Six goosebumps on her careless heart. A little less her Ammu loved her” (Roy 112). At the same time when Rahel is opened up to love and affection, the icy moth lifts its wings and flutters away to let Rahel feel that warmth again. “ On Rahel’s heart Pappachi’s moth snapped open its somber wings. Out.

In. And lifted its legs. Up. Down” (Roy 293). In this case, the moth shapes up to be a symbolic representation of the heavy burden and the cold hatred that comes with ‘ unlawful’ actions.

Amar Nath Prasad stated in his book ‘ Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things: A Critical Appraisal’ that, “ it is the psychology of a child that he always wants to get tender love and care from the grown-up people. But if by some reasons, he is devoid of all those childhood affections; he is seen haunted by all those unfulfilled desires” (Roy 163). The weight of the consequences of Rahel’s actions, weigh her down emotionally and deprive her of the love a 5 year old child deserves. This signified the ruthlessness of the society the characters lived in which even children were robbed off of affection.

The symbolism of the history house, apart from being a facet of personal history for most characters, this house acts as a place of seclusion from society. A grand monument with invisible barriers that blocked out the gaze of the rich and poor alike, free of any judgement and open to all types of love. Roy makes the house represent a state of solitude, where the

constraints of the world the characters were living in didn't apply and they were allowed to love whoever they wanted and be with whoever they pleased. The house is a tangible structure used to portray a place of solitude from the intangible gaze of society. It acts as a place of nonjudgmental love and security; a place where the characters were truly free. Arundhati Roy uses a non-linear style of narration throughout the novel.

The lack of a chronological order in the storytelling helps in understanding the progression of the characters and why they behave the way they do. In his book 'Writing the Breakout Novel', Donald Maass wrote, "The guiding principle of any nonlinear plot is that the story is not organized in terms of chronological time but according to some other logical progression," this applies to Roy's novel as well. The logical progression in this novel is the growth of the twins' emotional understanding. The events are placed in such a way that they reveal how the twins are introduced to the different realities of life from divorce and the ending of love to sexual abuse. As the twins face this reality, they also understand the consequences of these actions in bits and pieces. The treatment of these actions by the surrounding characters who represent the Indian society is exposed to the twins at the same time as the reader.

In her book review, Alice Truax stated that, " "The God of Small Things" is an anti-Bildungsroman, for Estha and Rahel have never properly grown up" (1997), which sums up why the non-linear narrative ties effectively into the story of Estha and Rahel. The twins and the reader are slowly and progressively introduced to the invisible laws that maintain order in the lives of the rest of the characters and how these characters react to love.

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Sexuality and Society When it comes to the portrayal of sexuality in the novel, the author does not shy away from challenging societal norms and what is considered acceptable. Towards the end of the novel, Roy describes the incestuous incident between Estha and Rahel and a series of sexual encounters between Ammu and Velutha.

The portrayal of incest between the twins is played down with a choice of words by the author by using phrases such as, “ she moved her mouth, her beautiful mother’s mouth”(Roy 327). The author does not explicitly state the occurrence of the incident but simply says, “ there is very little that anyone could say to clarify what happened next. Nothing that (in Mammachi’s book) would separate sex from love. Or needs from feelings.” (Roy 328).

By avoiding the details of the act, the writer almost censors herself from delving into the details of an incident that is taboo in more than just one culture. By employing phrases such as, “ together like stacked spoons” (Roy 328); “(sharing) not happiness but hideous grief” (Roy 328), the author downplays the effect and gravity of the incident that was taking place, almost making it a beautiful scene of two twins uniting to share grief and sorrow, instead of labelling it as incest. However, when it comes to the end of the novel when Ammu and Velutha are making love, the author intricately describes each moment and movement and brings it to life with intimate details. At the same time, she reminds the reader of the repercussions these character would have to face by using words such as, “ they knew already that for each tremor of pleasure the would pay with an equal measure of pain”(Roy 335); “ how far they went would be measure against how far they would be taken” (Roy 335). In this scene, the writer also personifies the

natural surroundings to emphasise how natural this act was. The uses of the phrases, “ yellow bamboo wept” (Roy 335); “ night’s elbows rested on the water and watched them” (Roy 335) and “ the river pulsed through the darkness” (Roy 335) adds to the effect of the natural quality of this entire act, whilst emphasising the subtlety of the way its described. As the novel constantly highlights the breaking down of barriers in society through love, the detail driven climax of the novel plays as a cataclysmic factor in demolishing these invisible walls and bringing out the power of affection and love. ConclusionThe way Indian society looks upon the immorality stemming from breaking the love laws is reflected in Roy’s representation of the repercussions for her characters.

The infringement of these social norms is integral to the unwinding of the apparently decent, straightforward life that Estha and Rahel encounter as kids and has a key part in framing the situations that pave the way to Sophie Mol’s demise. Ammu being banished by the family to live on her own without her two children; Velutha being accused of rape and beaten to death for his so-called sins; Estha is sent away from his Ammu to live with his alcoholic father and Rahel is left on her own without any real love. Roy shapes these four characters as a representation of real-life people who are just craving for love but in the real world, Indian society does not allow for this overstepping of boundaries and punishes them accordingly.

Each punishment relates to being deprived of love and any sort of healthy relationship. Love is used as a theme against the backdrop of violence and an unjust rulebook, always highlighting the stark contrast that characters live through. The climax of the book is the most suitable example for this facet

as after revealing all the repercussions of the sinful actions, Roy reveals the incestuous reunion between the twins and the sexual encounter between Ammu and Velutha. At the end of the novel, while describing the relationship between Ammu and Velutha, Roy mentions that, “ each time they parted, they extracted only one small promise from each other. ‘ Tomorrow?’, ‘ Tomorrow’ (Roy 340).

This showed how love cut through the fear of breaking the law and getting caught. Roy shows that in that moment they only believed that they would see each other the next day and again become oblivious to the fact that the society they lived would banish them from the community, and the world. The God of Small Things is a novel about love, but its also about all the surrounding archaic rules that turn it into a novel about grief and heartbreak.

Arundhati Roy effectively showcases a time period in India in relation with a theme that is common around the world and gives the readers a thoughtful insight as to how a certain society treats it. Roy’s novel acts as a social commentary on the world she grew up in and that point of view make the twins, Estha and Rahel, feel so real and memorable. Their constant yearning for love due to their innocence brings the readers on a journey with them that slowly washes out the innocence and sets in the harsh reality of what life treats sinners with. The language used by Roy acts as a powerful tool to bring in subtlety when circumstances get intense and vice versa. It places a new outlook on what loves looks like from child’s perspective but at the same time what violence looks like as well. The term ‘ love laws’ takes on a different meaning by the end of the novel as it doesn’t just mean the set

rules of who and how someone can be loved; but more importantly how they will be treated if they break the laws.

The interrelation that is established by Roy between love and societal norms is that of a destructive and toxic nature. The author highlights the consequences of breaking norms due to the force of love and they are almost always fatal; metaphorically and literally.