

The Personal and the Political: A Comparative Study of Namita Gokhale's *Paro* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract: This paper explores the complex interrelation of the personal and the political in Namita Gokhale's *Paro: Dreams of Passion* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. With the help of a comparative approach, the research investigates how the authors deal with the intersections of individual aspirations, identities, and political systems of the culture and history in which they are situated. Gokhale's satire on the urban elite of post-liberalization India and Roy's portrayal of the caste and family trauma and oppression in Kerala are both examples of the elite classes of India. The analysis shows how the characters are deeply political, located in structures of patriarchy, class, and colonialism. The study of these different political structures contrasts and highlights the different narrative techniques of the authors and the complex of themes in the novels and shows literature and the authors' culture as a repository of social order and power abuse. The personal-political interface forms the backdrop of the works and this interface, particularly in postcolonial feminist criticism, which attempts to construct a broad framework for the works, is what this study endeavors to address.

Keywords: political, particularly, postcolonial, feminist, criticism, trauma and oppression.

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Introduction

In the case of Indian English literature, the relationship between the personal and the political is complex. This relationship is particularly important, considering the postcolonial nature and the complexities of modernity, tradition, gender, class and caste of the nation. This interrelationship is evident within the works of Namita Gokhale and Arundhati Roy. Gokhale's work, *Paro: Dreams of Passion* (1984), and Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) explore the relationship between the personal and the political in different ways. The former employs satirical wit and prose in social criticism of the moral and intellectual vapidness of the urban Indian elite, while the latter uses prose in developing the rural political violence of Kerala and the caste and familial oppression of the characters within the novel, in the plot of the work. Although the works demonstrate different styles, themes and focuses, they explore the ensnarement of the personal life within the socio political sphere, and for this reason, they are worthy of comparative analysis.

Namita Gokhale's *Paro: Dreams of Passion* has earned positive acclaim due to her unapologetic critique of the upper classes of Indian society after political and economic liberalization. Specifically, she contrasts the life of *Paro*, a free-spirited and sexually liberated (and, to some people, problematic for her time) women) to the life and urban elite society of *Priya* (the friend and social narrator of *Paro*). In the characters of *Paro*, *Priya*, and the unapologetic Gokhale, the reader gains a multi-faceted view of the This is an open access article under the [CC BY-NC](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) license

urban elite's society's cruelties and dualities, keeping the reader reflective, critical, and socially conscious. Ultimately the characters and the narrator (and Gokhale) focus on the "personal" of desire, relationships and identities which further undercritique the political structures that promote patriarchal authority and privilege. Most importantly, the novel unapologetically uses satire to challenge (and critique) the intersecting systems of oppression (gender, class) and power (the political) that define Indian society.

The God of Small Things tackles the somber and lyrical tone concerning the personal and political of the way of life in Kerala. The author sets the story in the backdrop of the fragmentation of the Ipe family in the disintegrating political and social structure of the caste system in India with a special focus on the twins, Estha and Rahel, and their mother, Ammu. The author, Arundhati, invokes the trauma of losing a loved one in a system that encourages the disintegration of personal relationships in the name of social and political love. *The God of Small Things* tackles trauma, social and political corruption and the impact of systemic discrimination. The author tackles social and political issues through masterful and compelling prose. The author tackles the issues in a personal manner that displays the correlation of personal with the political in a masterful way.

To comprehend how Indian woman writers deal with the personal-political intersection in their writings, it's instructive to examine together the works of Gokhale and Roy. Both Gokhale

and Roy subvert the conventions of their times in regard to femininity and masculinity and the societal expectations attached to them, but do so in markedly different ways. Gokhale's *Paro* employs humor and satire to subvert patriarchal practices and critique the urban elite's vacuousness, while Roy's *The God of Small Things* uses tragedy and introspection more to uncover systemic inequalities of caste and gender. These differences in tone and narrative style show how they personally view the intersection of the personal and the political, and the different socio-cultural realities they seek to represent.

What this paper intends to accomplish is to answer how the political and the personal intersect in the protagonists' lives in both novels. In *Paro*, the personal is political. *Paro*'s societal norm defiance and pursuing sexual autonomy disrupt the politics of the patriarchal order. *Paro*'s character disrupts the bare status quo through her political desire and agency, performing a critical unmasking of the elite class's hypocrisy. So too does Priya's character, depicting the self-reflection of the patriarchal internalized limitations, and the quest for self-actualization repression of the social order. In a critique of the power dynamic structures of the Indian society, Gokhale parses the excess introspection by women in the social order.

Through the lens of class, gender, and familial oppression, the intertwining of the personal and political is examined in *The God of Small Things*. The critique of the caste system's inhumanity and discrimination is examined in-depth in the portrayal of Ammu and Velutha's affair. The discrimination of caste and hierarchical socio politics is explained in the tragedy of their love affair. The twins of the story also suffer trauma and loss due to the restrictions of the political system. The loss of personal has roots in political violence. The testimony of Roy shows the extreme intertwining of the personal and political, defining the borders of individual existence in the realm of politics.

The comparative study of these two novels also brings to light the important question of the contribution of tone and narrative style to the representation of the personal-political axis. In Gokhale's *Paro*, the satirical humor serves to emphasize the urban elite's contradiction and absurdity. However, because of this distance, the readers' critical engagement of the text is illustrative. In contrast, Roy's *The God of Small Things* is characterized by a peculiar style of prose that is both emotional and lyrical. It helps the readers of the text to relate intimately to the characters of the novel and the socio-political context of the characters. The difference in narrative style is a reflection of the two authors' differing and unique visions and also of their individual thematic pre-occupations with the personal-political.

The cultural and historical contexts of both novels are integral to their portrayal of the personal and the political. *Paro* is located in the multi-cultural, cosmopolitan backdrop of post-liberalization India, characterized by the rapid economic growth, globalization, and sociocultural changes of the liberalization period. Gokhale's critique of the urban elite is one of the various tensions and contradictions of this period in relation to gender and class. *The God of Small Things*, on the other hand, is located in the rural Kerala of the 1960s, an era of social and political turmoil. Roy's consideration of caste, Communism, and the silencing of the individual woman, are testimonies to the historical and cultural particularities of the period and province, providing a fine-grained critique of the socio-political realities.

This paper attempts to explain the different ways of tackling the personal-political discourse by Indian Women Writers with particular reference to two novels *Paro* and *The God of Small Things* and the thematic and stylistic disparities of both works to the richness of Indian English Literature and the ability to critique and reflect the socio-political milieu of modern India. From this comparative standpoint, the paper emphasizes the aforementioned novels to the socio-political milieu of modern India. The paper focuses to argue the movements of literature as a means to interrogate the socio-political continuum of that literature. The personal and the political are both central to the novels under discussion, *Paro: Dreams of Passion* and *The God of Small Things*, but the narrative and cultural contexts are different. India Gokhale's satirical critique of the urban elite is a testimony to the contraries that are produced in the aftermath of liberalization. In contrast, the pointed examination of the caste, gender, and trauma of the family in Roy's work is a testimony to the systemic injustices that render rural Kerala I. The novels are therefore a testimony of the individual and the socio-political in the world of literature to the world.

The author will synthesize feminist and postcolonial literature in these pieces with the concept of the personal-political to better understand how these Indian women authors represent this construct in their fiction.

Objectives

- To study the interconnections of the personal and political in Namita Gokhale's *Paro: Dreams of Passion* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*.
- To understand the intersection of individual agency and the socio-political apparatus of patriarchy and caste, class, and historical structures in one's desires, relationships, and identity.
- To analyze the common and varying themes, and different narrative and stylistic choices in the two texts.
- To analyze how Gokhale and Roy differ or align in their representation of the intricacies of the personal, with the political dimension.

Methodology

This research will engage in comparative literary analysis while taking a qualitative approach that examines the texts of *Paro: Dreams of Passion* by Namita Gokhale and *A God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy. Using close readings of the texts through feminist and postcolonial lenses focusing on the intertwining of the personal with the political. This research situates these texts in the appropriate cultural and historical contexts and interacts with existing scholarship to demonstrate some of the thematic and stylistic variations to critique of the societal constructs of both writers.

The political and personal in *Paro: Dreams of Passion* and *A God of Small Things* by Namita Gokhale and Arundhati Roy demonstrate the ways in which the individual interacts and responds to the larger political and social structures of the time. Although the novels are dissimilar and diverse in atmosphere, style, and tone, they both focus on the relationships and the intertwining of the identity in the political belonging and structures that are a part of the social hierarchy which include gender, class, and caste.

In 'Paro: Dreams of Passion', Namita Gokhale presents a satire of the post-liberalization Indian urban elite, laying bare the moral disintegration, superficiality, the nature of human connection, and the gendered relationships of power. She depicts Paro as a woman tricking the system as she overtly refuses to abide by the internalized accepted codes of conduct as she seeks to attain personal freedom and sexual liberty. However, the system is a 'spectacle' of a cultural prison, unafraid to police women's bodies and lives as they seek the freedom Paro does. Gokhale uses Gokhale to argue that women's personal freedom of choice is, in fact, a myth as it is determined by the intersecting and oppressive socioeconomic system of patriarchy. Paro's the narrator, Priya, who serves as a foil to Paro by embodying the dilemma of Gokhale, a woman who contains a personal desire and is forced to reside dormant due to the bounds of social regulation. Hence, Paro holds the paradox of the individual, 'free' woman and the socio-political order that functions to control the order of society in its distribution of gender and class.

Conversely, Arundhati Roy in *The God of Small Things* takes a tragic and poetic approach to the personal-political nexus with a focus on the Ipe family in rural Kerala. The novel explores how relationships and choices are shaped and constrained by the intersections of caste, class and politics. One of the central characters in this examination is Ammu, the mother of the twin protagonists Estha and Rahel. The affair with Velutha, a Dalit, is a personal act of defiance but also a breach of the inter-caste relationships that cross the lines of rigid caste barriers. This affair also leads to a series of events that reveal the violent and oppressive nature of caste politics, resulting in Velutha's murder and the ostracization of Ammu. The novel also examines the political ideologies like Communism and how personal lives are subsumed in the service of such political movements, which, under the guise of promoting equality, reinforce systemic inequalities. Roy shows the intimate pain of her characters alongside the political pain of caste discrimination, colonialism, and social hypocrisy to demonstrate that the personal is indeed political.

Both novels emphasize the connection between individual experience and the configuration of political order, yet address the matter differently. Namita Gokhale's *Paro* focuses on the critique of the frivolousness, inner workings, and the gendered hierarchy of the slice of the elite fashionable urban society, drawing from the satire. In contrast, Roy's *The God of Small Things* employs a multifaceted and tragic narrative to depict the caste and political repression. Together the two illustrate the literature's capacity to critique and reflect on the personal and political, particularly in the Indian context.

Both Namita Gokhale's *Paro: Dreams of Passion* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* center around the theme of individual wishes, encounters, and identities being molded by political and social systems such as patriarchy, caste, class and the subsequent history. These novels demonstrate the connection of personal lives to larger social systems, showcasing the personal and the political.

In her *Paro: Dreams of Passion*, Gokhale discusses the urban elite in post-liberalization India, delving into the critique of the patriarchal systems that delineate and limit women's identities. Paro's pursuit of the freedom and sexual agency that women are normatively expected to conform to and submit to makes her stand in direct opposition to the customs of the time. Women in the relationships Paro engages in are simultaneously rebellious and

defiant, but also are able to shed light on the relationships that are primarily transactional and are steeped in power dynamics with regard to class and gender. Yet, the ultimate defiance of social customs results in judgment and exclusion, demonstrating how patriarchy criminalizes and shuns women who overstep the arbitrary social boundaries. Priya, the narrator, represents the struggles of women in trying to find the balance between personal wishes and social standards, demonstrating how deeply social customs and patriarchy govern women's identities and freedoms.

In the book *'God of Small Things'*, Roy examines the complex and oppressive impact of caste, class, and history on individuals and their relationships. The love affair between Ammu and Velutha, a Dalit man, on the one hand, constitutes personal defiance against the caste system, and on the other hand, illustrates the socio-political consequences of such defiance. The violent reactions towards Ammu and Velutha's love affair cannot be understood without a sheer appreciation of the power of the caste system and the societal willingness to oppress love. The societal oppression and trauma the twins, Estha and Rahel, face demonstrates how history, oppression, and societal systems manipulate relationships and identities. The impact of societal structures on personal relationships and identities is a paradox, Roy illustrates through loss and tragedy.

Both novels show that personal aspirations, connections, and selfhood cannot be disentangled from the socio-political order. Gokhale takes on the urban privilege and its surfaces, as well as the power structures around the feminine. Roy reveals the dire implications of the caste and systemic oppression around the countryside of India. These works, along with the personal freedom and selfhood, demonstrate the socio-political order of the patriarchy, caste, class, history structures, and the relevance of freedom, illustrating literature's importance persisting relevance on the oppression at hand.

Namita Gokhale and Arundhati Roy *Paro: Dreams of Passion* and *The God of Small Things* respectively examine the relationship between the personal and the socio-political, albeit in distinctly different ways. With Gokhale's *Paro*, it is the critique of the urban elite's gendered gaze and the patriarchal control over the identity and citizenship of women, whereas, Paro's defiance of the social order pertains to the control of the power of her class and the gender of her class. The critique of the Delhi elite received in satire by Gokhale is much in the style of Desai. On the other hand, Roy is more concerned with the caste and class system, especially in the context of taboo love and the socio-historical constructs that shape personal relationships. Critics note that the love story of Ammu and Velutha takes a stand on the issue of caste by chronicling its burden, as noted by Roy, who "captures the oppressive weight of caste and history on individual destinies."

The different narration is a reflection of their thematic concerns. To Gokhale, the satire of the urban elite, in a personal account by Priya, is much in the voice of a social critique, as it is to society, humorous satire.

Increasingly Structuralism has emerged as a key aspect of character engagement, while satirical elements in the story aid in the understanding of the sketches of Paro. Conversely, while incorporating the elements of time through a triple, non-linear composition, Roy reflects upon the intertwining of the personal with the public. The story is constructed with multiple characters enabling a broad scope of analysis of the story. The fragmented

composition of the themes is in line with the complexity of the subjects in the story, as evidenced by the quotations of the so-called "Love Laws," who, as Aijaz Ahmad notes, is a highly praised character of the novel.

Humor and Absurdity to Restructure Social Norms, a Wil Satirical tone, painted with Absurd Exaggerations, while Embodying the Social Milieu Structural satire of the elite, Laughing on the Absurdity of Paro Women. Criteria Roys, on the Other Hand, in The God of Small Things, Creates a Brave Prosaic Style, free in the Field of Imagination. The characters she creates are a paradox with multiple hypothetical outcomes with intricate inner connections to the flowing socio-political scenario.

The novel's description of the Kerala landscape and the depth of the main characters' emotions serves as an example of the book's heightened stylistic variation and depth. It is also worth noting that the two novels examine the relationship between the personal and the political, albeit through different themes, narrative techniques, and styles. Whereas Gokhale's *Paro* is a satire on the urban elite and the gender and class imbalances of the society, Roy's *The God of Small Things* is a narrative on the lives that the caste system and its history in India intertwine and the legacies that they affect. The examples reflect how Indian English literature offers varied means and methods on the same societal themes, thus providing an image rich in history, literature and society.

While Namita Gokhale and Arundhati Roy both explore the intertwining of the personal and political in Gokhale's *Paro: Dreams of Passion* and Roy's *The God of Small Things*, they do so in quite different ways. For Gokhale, the political realities are the microcosmic slice of the urban elite in whom the power, the gender, the class, and the relational hierarchies are focal across the (intimate) relationships. The social critique of the patriarchal structures in the society where *Paro* lives is captured in her unapologetic defiance of social expectation and her pursuit of self-rule. In Desai's words, Gokhale's satire, "in the personal, lays bare the social," and so she uses her characters to reveal the personal of the privileged class. Conversely, in Roy's work, the integration of the personal with the political in the microcosmic lives of the characters is geared to the systemic oppression of the caste and the colonial and postcolonial histories. In the tragic love story where Ammu, a privileged woman, loves and politically violates the social order by entering a marriage with Velutha, an untouchable (i.e. sub-caste of the caste hierarchy) man, the novel depicts the social order in the *Love Laws*: "who should be loved, and how," political desire and social systems.

While both authors indicate how social power and social order subsume the private sphere, the articulation is different. Gokhale captures the essence of the Delhi elite through a satirical presentation focusing on the superficial characteristics of the members of that social strata. Focused on the ambition, the betrayal, and the relentless pursuit of social status, *Paro's* life, in particular, embodies a critique of the reduction of women, in the power struggles, to mere objects of desire and rebellion. In contrast, the portrayal of women by Roy, although depicting tragedy, intertwines this tragic dimension with the deeply rooted systemic injustice. In *The God of Small Things*, the political realities of caste oppression, of communal violence, and of the colonial legacies that Roy painfully depicts, shape the destinies and the lives of her characters. The prominence of integrating the personal and the political, with the characters in the stories, into the wider political and social realities of the world, has been captured

by Pankaj Mishra and many other critics who appreciate Roy's approach to entreatment as a masterclass.

It is in the approach and the style in which Gokhale and Roy balance the personal and political that the two writers diverge the most. Gokhale employs a satirical and humorous approach while integrating society's criticism. Her characters, with *Paro* being the prime example, are intentionally and comically exaggerated, especially when depicting the elite class's absurd actions, to bring forth the humor. In her characters' personal lives and interactions, the political realities are embedded, although in a less evident manner, and this is what, in the satirical approach, is most pronounced.

Contrasting Roy's poetic style and fragmented timeline with the way she intertwines the implications and consequences of politics within the mourning lives of people, the author paints a nostalgic, politically-altered portrait of Estha and Rahel's lives and the consciousness of the people of Kerala. Aijaz Ahmad and others commend Roy for her exceptional ability to uncover the politics of lived experience and the texture of oppression. This is a common theme in the works of Roy and Gokhal, though both approach the theme from different angles and with different techniques. While Gokhale uses satire and humor to navigate the oppression of the feminization of the urban elite's class, Roy uses a heartfelt and poetic style to analyze the tragedies caused by the historical oppression of the lower classes and the caste system. This divergence, while not outlining the paradoxical lenses through which each author is viewing the subject, shows the paradox of the critique of the personal and the political in the English literature of modern India.

Conclusion

The ways that Namita Gokhale's *Paro: Dreams of Passion* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* intertwine the personal and the political differ, but both do so wonderfully and effectively. Gokhale's use of satire and lighthearted humor provide criticism of the gender and class structures, and the shallow nature of the urban elite, and of the political realities through the personal choices and dealings of her characters. Conversely, Roy employs a steeply lyrical, grand and nonchronological style of poetry in order to reveal and critique the systemic injustices of the caste system, history, and the social order, and their complex interweaving - the ultimate architecture of so many destinies. Gokhale's critique focuses on the more immediate, yet visibly hypocritical aspects of modern Indian society. Roy's, on the contrary, addresses the more tragic, more deeply layered structural and ethnocentric roots of oppression. In the aggregate, Gokhale and Roy enrich the Indian, English, and literary-world canons by illustrating, in fictional narrative, the intersection of the personal and political.

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