

Writing the Margins: Caste, Class, and Gender as Sites of Resistance in Arundhati Roy's Novels

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Abstract: Arundhati Roy occupies a distinctive position in contemporary Indian English fiction as a writer whose literary imagination is inseparable from her political activism. Her two novels, *The God of Small Things* (1997) and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), separated by two decades, together constitute a sustained literary meditation on the structures of power that organise Indian society along the axes of caste, class, and gender. Rather than treating these categories as background social detail, Roy positions them as the central architecture of her narratives, using the intimate lives of her characters to expose how systemic hierarchies discipline desire, love, and belonging. This paper examines how Roy transforms marginality itself into a site of resistance, arguing that her fiction refuses the conventional realist strategy of representing the oppressed as passive victims and instead endows them with narrative agency, subversive desire, and quiet defiance. Drawing on postcolonial and feminist literary theory, along with concepts of subalternity, intersectionality, and heteronormativity, the paper analyses Roy's treatment of the "Love Laws" in *The God of Small Things* and the politics of embodiment and belonging in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. It further considers Roy's narrative techniques, particularly her fragmented chronology, her attention to the materiality of bodies, and her deployment of the small and the ordinary as instruments of political critique. The paper concludes that Roy's novels function as counter-hegemonic texts that write the margins not merely as spaces of suffering but as fertile ground for resistance, solidarity, and alternative forms of community.

Keywords: *Caste, class, gender, resistance, postcolonial literature, subalternity, intersectionality.*

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Introduction

The Indian English novel has long served as a site where questions of nation, identity, and social hierarchy are worked out in narrative form. Within this tradition, Arundhati Roy's fiction stands apart for the uncompromising manner in which it interrogates the structures of caste, class, and gender that continue to shape everyday life in India, despite the constitutional promise of equality. Roy's debut novel, *The God of Small Things*, won the Booker Prize in 1997 and announced a writer whose prose style was as unconventional as her subject matter was unflinching. Two decades later, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* extended this preoccupation with marginality to a wider canvas, moving from the domestic world of a Syrian Christian family in Kerala to the sprawling, fractured landscape of contemporary India, encompassing Kashmir, Delhi, and the lives of those who exist at the very edges of national belonging.

Both novels resist the temptation to romanticise suffering or to present the marginalised solely as objects of pity. Instead, Roy's fiction insists that those who are pushed to the periphery by caste prejudice, economic deprivation, or normative gender and sexual codes are also capable of resistance, however fragile, partial, or costly that resistance might be. This paper argues that Roy's novels can be read as sustained literary explorations of what it means to write from and about the margins, not as a gesture of charity toward the oppressed, but as a deliberate political and

aesthetic strategy that unsettles dominant narratives of nation, family, and progress.

The paper proceeds in several movements. It begins by situating Roy's work within the broader context of postcolonial and feminist literary theory, before turning to a detailed analysis of caste and the "Love Laws" in *The God of Small Things*. It then examines the intersections of class and gender in the same novel, before moving to a discussion of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* and its treatment of communal identity, gender non-conformity, and political violence. The paper closes with a discussion of Roy's narrative techniques and their relationship to her thematic concerns, before offering concluding reflections on the significance of her work within contemporary Indian literature.

Theoretical Framework

Any serious engagement with Roy's fiction must draw upon multiple theoretical vocabularies, since her novels resist containment within a single critical framework. Postcolonial theory offers useful tools for understanding how Roy's narratives negotiate the legacies of colonialism, particularly the ways in which colonial categories of race and civilisation were absorbed into indigenous hierarchies of caste and class. The work of thinkers associated with subaltern studies is especially relevant here, since Roy's fiction is preoccupied with those who fall outside the reach of elite nationalist and developmental narratives: the untouchable

carpenter, the hijra community of old Delhi, the Kashmiri insurgent, the abandoned infant. The subaltern, in this sense, is not simply the economically poor but anyone whose voice is structurally excluded from dominant discourse, and Roy's fiction can be read as an attempt to grant narrative space to precisely such figures.

Feminist literary theory provides a second, equally important lens. Roy's female characters, from Ammu in *The God of Small Things* to Anjum and Tilo in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, are shaped by patriarchal structures that regulate their sexuality, their labour, and their claims to selfhood. Yet Roy does not present her women as merely victimised. Ammu's transgressive desire, Anjum's refusal to be contained within binary categories of gender, and Tilo's rejection of conventional domesticity all suggest a feminist sensibility that values agency and defiance even when such defiance carries devastating consequences.

A third framework, intersectionality, allows for an understanding of how caste, class, and gender do not operate as separate systems of oppression but as interlocking structures that compound one another. Ammu's suffering in *The God of Small Things* cannot be understood through gender alone, since her vulnerability as a divorced woman is inseparable from the class anxieties of her natal family and the caste taboos that render her relationship with Velutha unthinkable within the social order of Ayemenem. Similarly, in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Anjum's marginalisation as a hijra intersects with her religious identity as a Muslim in a country increasingly hostile to Muslim citizens, producing a form of exclusion that cannot be reduced to any single axis of identity.

Caste and the "Love Laws" in *The God of Small Things*

At the heart of *The God of Small Things* lies what Roy calls the Love Laws, the unwritten but rigorously enforced rules that dictate who may be loved, and how, and how much. These laws are most starkly embodied in the relationship between Ammu, a divorced upper-caste Syrian Christian woman, and Velutha, a Paravan or untouchable carpenter employed at her family's pickle factory. The relationship between Ammu and Velutha represents the novel's most direct confrontation with the caste system, since it violates not only religious and familial expectations but the very foundation of caste hierarchy, which depends on the strict regulation of intimacy and touch between castes.

Roy's narrative technique in depicting this relationship is significant. Rather than presenting the love between Ammu and Velutha as scandalous or transgressive in a titillating sense, the novel treats their intimacy with tenderness, situating it as one of the few authentic connections in a world otherwise governed by hypocrisy, repression, and cruelty. The tragedy of the novel lies not in the relationship itself but in the violence that the social order unleashes to punish those who cross its boundaries. Velutha's brutal death at the hands of the police, sanctioned by the complicity of Ammu's own family, exposes the lethal force that underlies caste discipline. The novel makes clear that this violence is not an aberration but a structural feature of a society in which the touchable and untouchable are kept apart by threat of annihilation.

Importantly, Roy does not present Velutha merely as a victim. He is skilled, articulate, and politically aware, a member of the Marxist movement that briefly promises an alternative to caste hierarchy but ultimately fails to protect him. His participation in a workers' march, and his brief moment of political visibility,

suggests that Roy is interested in the possibilities and limits of collective resistance. The failure of the Communist Party functionaries to defend Velutha, despite his membership, is one of the novel's sharpest indictments, suggesting that even ostensibly progressive political movements in India have often failed to dismantle caste prejudice, subordinating it to class analysis or electoral pragmatism.

The character of Velutha's father, Vellya Paapen, who is prepared to sacrifice his own son to preserve the family's precarious position within the caste hierarchy, further complicates any simple narrative of resistance. His willingness to enforce the very laws that oppress him illustrates how thoroughly caste ideology can be internalised even by those it subordinates, a phenomenon that resonates with theoretical accounts of hegemony, in which dominated groups come to accept and even enforce the terms of their own domination. Roy's fiction thus resists any romantic notion that resistance is simply available to the oppressed; instead, it shows resistance as always partial, compromised, and dangerous.

Class, Family, and Gendered Vulnerability

Alongside its treatment of caste, *The God of Small Things* offers a searching critique of class and family structures, particularly as they bear upon the lives of women. Ammu's story cannot be separated from the economic precarity of her position as a divorced woman returning to her natal home. Having left an abusive marriage, she finds herself dependent on a family that regards her as a burden and a source of shame. Her brother Chacko, despite his own extramarital affairs being tacitly tolerated, exercises patriarchal authority over the household, reminding Ammu that the family's property and the factory belong to him, and that she and her children have no independent claim upon them. This asymmetry illustrates how inheritance customs and family structures in India have historically privileged sons over daughters, producing a class of women whose economic vulnerability compounds their social vulnerability.

Roy is also attentive to the ways in which class shapes access to education, mobility, and voice within the family. Chacko's Oxford education grants him an authority and worldliness that is denied to Ammu, whose intelligence and ambition are never allowed the same avenues for expression. The character of Baby Kochamma, Ammu's aunt, further complicates the novel's treatment of gender, since her own thwarted romantic desires curdle into a bitterness that she directs at Ammu, becoming complicit in the destruction of Ammu's relationship with Velutha and in the fabrication of the story that leads to his death. Baby Kochamma's trajectory suggests that patriarchal structures do not simply oppress women from without but can also produce forms of intra-gender policing, in which women become instruments of the very system that constrains them.

The twins, Estha and Rahel, occupy an ambiguous position within this class and gender order, since as children they possess neither the authority of adults nor the innocence that might protect them from the violence surrounding them. Their eventual estrangement, and the disturbing reunion depicted at the novel's end, can be read as the long-term psychological cost exacted by a social order that punishes desire and destroys the possibility of authentic human connection. Roy's narrative suggests that the damage inflicted by caste and class hierarchies does not remain contained within a single generation but reverberates across time,

shaping the emotional and psychological lives of those who inherit its consequences.

Gender, Sexuality, and the Body in the Ministry of Utmost Happiness

If *The God of Small Things* concentrates its critique within the domestic space of a single family, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* widens the lens considerably, situating its exploration of marginality within the broader political geography of contemporary India. The novel's most striking achievement is its portrayal of Anjum, a hijra who lives for years within the Khwabgah, a community of transgender and intersex people in old Delhi, before eventually establishing her own home in a graveyard. Through Anjum, Roy interrogates the rigid binary structures of gender that dominate mainstream Indian society, presenting the hijra community not as a marginal curiosity but as a fully realised social world with its own rituals, hierarchies, and forms of kinship.

Anjum's decision to make her home among the dead, in a graveyard that gradually becomes a guesthouse for society's other outcasts, is one of the novel's most powerful images of resistance through reconstitution. Rather than seeking assimilation into normative structures of family and gender, Anjum builds an alternative community composed of those whom mainstream society has discarded: a Dalit man who has taken on a Muslim identity, an activist mother, a former intelligence officer, and eventually an abandoned baby girl. This graveyard community can be read as Roy's vision of resistance not as direct confrontation with power but as the patient construction of alternative kinship structures outside the reach of dominant norms.

The novel's other major female figure, Tilo, offers a different register of gendered resistance. An architecture student who becomes entangled with three men, including a Kashmiri militant, Tilo refuses the conventional trajectories available to women of her background, remaining unmarried, itinerant, and emotionally guarded. Her eventual decision to adopt the abandoned infant found on a Delhi pavement, and to raise the child within Anjum's graveyard community, further destabilises normative ideas of family, suggesting that meaningful kinship can be forged outside biological and marital ties.

Roy's treatment of gender in this novel is inseparable from her treatment of communal and political violence, particularly the Gujarat riots of 2002 and the ongoing conflict in Kashmir. The bodies of women and gender-nonconforming people in the novel are repeatedly shown to bear the marks of political violence, whether through sexual assault during communal riots or through the surveillance and persecution inflicted upon those associated with the Kashmiri resistance. In this way, Roy insists that gender cannot be understood in isolation from the wider structures of religious and political power that determine whose bodies are protected and whose are rendered disposable.

Caste, Religion, and the Politics of Belonging

While caste is less foregrounded in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* than in Roy's earlier novel, the later work extends its analysis of hierarchy to encompass religious identity and the politics of national belonging. The character of Saddam Hussain, a Dalit man who witnesses his father's killing by a cow-vigilante mob and subsequently takes on a Muslim name and identity, illustrates how caste violence in contemporary India has become entangled with religious politics, as Dalit and Muslim identities are

increasingly targeted by similar forms of majoritarian violence. Through Saddam's story, Roy suggests that the mechanisms of exclusion that once operated primarily through caste have found new expression through communal and religious targeting, without displacing the underlying logic of hierarchy and dehumanisation.

The novel's extended sections on Kashmir further extend this analysis of marginality to the question of contested nationhood. Roy portrays Kashmir not merely as a geopolitical dispute but as a space in which an entire population has been rendered subaltern within the Indian nation-state, subjected to military occupation, surveillance, and violence, while being denied genuine political voice. The character of Musa, Tilo's Kashmiri lover who becomes a militant, embodies the costs of this occupation, while the novel's unflinching depiction of state repression insists on bearing witness to forms of violence that are often erased from mainstream national narratives.

Taken together, these elements suggest that Roy's later novel understands marginality as a condition that cuts across multiple registers of identity, encompassing caste, gender, religion, and national belonging simultaneously. The graveyard community that Anjum builds becomes, in this light, a microcosm of an alternative India, one in which those excluded by the dominant nationalist narrative might nonetheless find solidarity and a form of collective life.

Narrative Strategy as Political Resistance

Roy's political vision in both novels is inseparable from her narrative technique. In *The God of Small Things*, the fragmented, non-linear structure of the narrative, which moves backward and forward across more than two decades, mirrors the fractured psychological lives of the twins and refuses the reader the comfort of straightforward chronological resolution. This structural choice enacts at the level of form the very disruption that caste violence inflicts upon linear notions of progress and reconciliation. Similarly, Roy's celebrated attention to small, seemingly trivial details, from the precise description of a moth's wings to the particular way a character folds a piece of clothing, functions as a deliberate counter-strategy to the abstractions of official history and grand nationalist narrative. By dwelling on the small, Roy insists that the lives of ordinary and marginalised people are worthy of the same literary attention traditionally reserved for the deeds of the powerful.

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness extends this technique through its polyphonic structure, weaving together multiple narrators, documents, and even a fictional magazine of complaints, to create a text that resists any single authoritative perspective. This formal heterogeneity mirrors the novel's thematic insistence on plurality and coexistence, suggesting that the graveyard community's patchwork assembly of outcasts is reflected in the patchwork structure of the narrative itself. Roy's prose style, marked by lyrical excess, wordplay, and an insistence on the materiality of bodies and objects, further reinforces her political commitments, since it refuses the detached, ironic register often associated with literary realism in favour of a style that remains emotionally and politically engaged with its subjects.

Discussion: Resistance beyond Victimhood

A central argument of this paper is that Roy's fiction refuses to reduce its marginalised characters to mere victims of caste, class, or gender oppression. Velutha's political

consciousness, Anjum's construction of an alternative community, Tilo's refusal of conventional domesticity, and Saddam's reclamation of dignity through performance and self-fashioning all suggest that Roy is interested in the creative and often costly ways in which the marginalised assert agency within structures designed to deny them voice. This is not to suggest that Roy's novels offer easy narratives of triumph. Velutha is killed, Ammu dies alone and unmourned, and the Kashmir sections of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* are saturated with loss and unresolved grief. Yet even within these tragic trajectories, Roy insists on moments of dignity, tenderness, and solidarity that exceed the logic of victimhood.

This approach resonates with broader currents in postcolonial and feminist scholarship that seek to move beyond a purely victim-centred analysis of oppression, attending instead to the resourcefulness and creativity with which marginalised communities construct meaning and solidarity even under conditions of extreme constraint. Roy's fiction, in this sense, can be understood as participating in a wider literary and critical project that seeks to write the margins not as spaces of lack but as spaces of alternative possibility, where new forms of kinship, desire, and community might be imagined even as the dominant social order works to foreclose them.

Conclusion

Arundhati Roy's two novels, though separated by twenty years and differing considerably in scale and structure, share a common commitment to exposing the violence embedded within India's hierarchies of caste, class, and gender, while simultaneously insisting on the capacity of the marginalised to resist, however partially or at whatever cost. *The God of Small Things* locates this struggle within the intimate world of a single family in Kerala, using the tragic love between Ammu and Velutha to expose the lethal force that sustains caste boundaries. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* widens this exploration to encompass the hijra community of Delhi, the contested territory of Kashmir, and the rising tide of religious majoritarianism, suggesting that the mechanisms of exclusion first identified in Roy's earlier novel have only multiplied and intensified in the intervening decades. Across both works, Roy demonstrates a sustained commitment to writing the margins, not as a gesture of literary charity toward the oppressed, but as a deliberate aesthetic and political strategy that unsettles the comfortable narratives of national progress and social harmony that dominant discourse prefers to tell. In doing so, her fiction makes a significant contribution to postcolonial and feminist literary studies, offering a model for how the novel form might continue to serve as a space of witness, critique, and imaginative resistance in societies still structured by deep and often violent inequalities.

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