



ICHSECMICE -2025 11-12th October 2025

Sardar Patel Institute of Higher Education, Kurukshetra

Conflicts in Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things*

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Abstract

The paper examines conflicts in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and reads them through frameworks offered by Fredric Jameson and Robert Scholes. Jameson's call to always historicize reveals how class, caste, and ideology shape literary narrative. Scholes adds that conflict operates within disciplines too, in the struggle between knowledge systems. Patriarchy is the central conflict the paper traces in the novel. Pappachi's domestic violence hides behind upper-class respectability. His abuse intensifies when Mammachi's pickle business earns public recognition, rooted in male jealousy and contempt for women's labour. Chacko reproduces the same patriarchy through legal language, reducing Mammachi to a "Sleeping Partner." Ammu is denied education, property rights, and any real choice in marriage. Her return to Ayemenem after leaving an abusive husband meets social hypocrisy, not support. Caste intersects with gender in Velutha's fate, a skilled Dalit man destroyed by institutional power that cannot tolerate his full humanity.

Keywords: Arundhati Roy, *God of Small Things*, Conflict, Patriarchy,

Introduction

Conflict is one of the most important aspects in the lives of human beings, various literary works, and different cultures in the world. This conflict arises when two opposite ideas or values clash against each other. These ideas or values may be social or political in nature. They also may be psychological as in guilt, ambition or divided loyalty. It is also possible that they may be cultural as in the conflict between tradition and change or between different types of knowledge systems. Fredric Jameson has provided one of the most appropriate accounts of conflict in the context of literature. In his work titled *The Political Unconscious*, he argues that all literature must be read in the context of history evolving over the years. He directly instructs, "Always historicize!" (ix). His instruction to always historicize is not just a suggestion to study background information of literary works. It is certainly a demand to identify and recognize the existence of historical conflict in each and every literary work. Whether it is class struggle, institutional power, socio-cultural issues and ideological skirmishes, they significantly influence what and how the stories are to be written and told. According to Jameson, the interpretation of literature through the political lens is not the sole way of interpretation among others. It is "the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation" (1). Robert Scholes has addressed the concept of conflict from a different but complementary perspective. In his book titled *The Rise and Fall of English*, he has examined the conflicts that are core to academic disciplines like English studies. He has observed that the rise of English as a subject at the university level was accompanied by the decline of classical language and learning and the "near obliteration of rhetoric as a college subject" (2). The quote shows the existence of knowledge itself within a field of conflict. Various disciplines compete for their dominance in the field of academics. Methods gain and lose their prestige according to the passage of time. Scholes has given the example of the decline of the Greek language at Yale as a historical example. He has cited George Wilson Pierson to point out the "decreasing number of students in Yale University with a knowledge of Greek between 1907 and 1914" (qtd. in Scholes 2). The afore-mentioned example of decreasing influence of Greek at Yale University is an epitome of declining influence of a culture once dominant in the world. As far as the field of education or literature is concerned, conflict is not only personal but also historical in nature.



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In the novel, the patriarchy is witnessed and felt for the first time in the Ipe family and the violence is concrete in this family. Pappachi is a retired government officer and portrays himself as an educated and sophisticated person in public life but he is completely different in his personal and familial life. He regularly beats Mammachi for trivial reasons. Roy criticizes that this violence meted out to Mammachi is not a sudden explosion of temper but it is an established domestic pattern that has continued over the years. This habitual cruelty of Pappachi is hidden behind the wall of upper-class respectability in the society. The sufferings of Mammachi at the home hide what Pappachi's public image denies in the social milieu. Kumar notes that the patriarchy is "enforced and acutely felt" primarily in family (230). The Ipe family is the perfect example of this patriarchal dominance and violence meted out against the women.

As a researcher, it is my duty to examine the particular trigger point for intensified violence of Pappachi at home. His abuse of Mammachi does not worsen during a financial crisis or at the time of family issues but it worsens when Mammachi's skill of pickle-making begins to receive wider public attention and praise among the people in society they live in. She develops and identifies her talent of pickle-making. "Mammachi had started making pickles commercially soon after Pappachi retired from Government service..." (Roy, *The God of Small Things* 43). Now, she is popular outside the home. Mammachi's growing popularity deeply hurts Pappachi's male ego that he cannot even ready to tolerate his own wife's growth and self-reliance. The quote says, "He had always been a jealous man, so he greatly resented the attention his wife was suddenly getting" (44). He refuses to let Mammachi help her in the pickle-making because he considers this work doesn't suit to the dignity of a high-ranking officer (44). His contempt is not merely for the pickle jars themselves. It is for the idea that his wife could succeed and be recognised without his involvement or approval. Patriarchy here is not only a matter of physical violence. It is also male jealousy, a bruised ego, and systematic contempt for women's productive labour. The following quote proves it: "Every night he beat her with a brass flower vase...The beatings weren't new. What was new was only the frequency with which they took place" (44). According to the quote, the home is a place of the violence and the reason for it.

Chacko tries to mediate and the beatings finally stop. She warns, "I never want this to happen again" (44). We come to know about another dimension of patriarchy's control through the response of Pappachi. He never touches Mammachi again and he also never speaks to her again. It is best explained in the following words: "...never touched Mammachi again...never spoke to her...Pappachi communicates only through Kochu Maria or Baby Kochamma as intermediaries...Plymouth was Pappachi's revenge" (44). In this quote, silence is used as a type of violence as the medium to dominate women. This is Pappachi's punishment that uses withdrawal of recognition and affection towards Mammachi in patriarchy. Patriarchy can operate through 'denial' just as effectively as through violence or force against women. Pappachi cannot destroy Mammachi through 'blows' so he tries to destroy her through 'erasure' of her identity.

Chacko is a more modern and intelligent version of the above-discussed system of patriarchy. He has studied at Oxford. He is so confident while speaking on the subjects like politics and various social issues prevalent in the contemporary society. He proposes himself as a progressive man before people yet he follows the same gender hierarchies that Pappachi maintained through violence inside the family. Before Chacko's return to Ayemenem, Mammachi runs "a small but profitable pickle enterprise" with her own relentless efforts (53). After Chacko's arrival, he "registers the business as a partnership" and gives Mammachi the

International Advance Journal of Engineering, Science and Management (IAJESM)

Multidisciplinary, Multilingual, Indexed, Double-Blind, Open Access, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed-

International Journal, Impact factor (SJIF) = 8.152



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designation of the "Sleeping Partner" as a formality (Roy 53). The designation of "sleeping partner" can be looked at from many perspectives. By doing so, it directly converts active and real labour of Mammachi into a passive legal term that is very downgrading to a woman in nature. The word "sleeping" renames and shows Mammachi's actual and genuine work as inactive. Her significant contribution in creating her own empire of pickle-making industry is made officially invisible through the polite and sophisticated language of business registration. Ammu is completely excluded from the pickle-making factory. She honestly works in the factory with Chacko in every task but she has "no legal claim to the family property" because she is a daughter not a son (Roy 53). Chacko arrogantly speaks about the family's economic arrangement and his sole ownership of the factory when he says "my Factory, my pineapples, my pickles" (53). He never says "our factory" or "Mammachi's factory". Kumar observes, "The society condones male economic power while denying women their fair share in the novel" (232). Chacko denies the rights of women through a pointed joke that mirrors patriarchal dominance rooted in his blood: "...what's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine" (53). The joke passed by Chacko is the symbol of rejection of the rights of women on property in the contemporary era.

Ammu stands against the patriarchy but this resistance does not come from nowhere. It is formed by a long series of incidents of deliberate exclusions from woman's right on the property. Ammu's father refuses to give financial support to her for college level education and dismisses it as "an unnecessary expense for a daughter" (36). These words impose restrictions on her and reject the possibility to grow in her own life. Ammu is left at home "waiting for marriage proposals and helping with housework" while watching her brother to prepare for the study in Oxford. The gender discrimination and disparity are glaring and structurally rooted in patriarchy. There are no marriage proposals without a college level education and with insufficient amount of dowry. Marriage is not a romantic escape for her when it finally comes in her life. Her marriage is the only available route for her out of a family home that hasn't given her anything and it is "better than returning" to her (36). Roy criticizes that she marries because patriarchy leaves her "no better alternative" than marriage in her life (36).

Ammu is not happy in her marital life because Baba, her husband, controls her as her father tried to do before her marriage. Baba is alcoholic, aggressive, irresponsible, careless and cruel: "eight large pegs of whiskey...Drunken violence followed by postdrunken badgering" (36, 39). When Mr Hollick, his English employer, expresses interest in Ammu, Baba uses her as a medium to safeguard his own job but Ammu refuses to do so. Ammu's refusal is her first and most clearly defiant and a rational and conscious choice of her dignity over her domestic survival. She leaves her husband for his cruelties and returns to Ayemenem with her children Estha and Rahel at her father's home but the society she returns to fails to understand her mental state and also does not respond to her positively. Female relatives visit her to give sympathy but they were never truly sympathetic toward her condition and she calls it "ugly face of sympathy" as most of the women pretend to be sympathetic toward her failed marriage (40). Ammu is clever enough to understand women's or female relatives' hypocrisy and hates their pretending nature. Pity is a social weapon in her social milieu.

Caste in *The God of Small Things* operates through every institution at once. The family controls honour, the factory controls labour, the police control legal truth, and the party controls solidarity. Each appears to operate independently; together they function as one machine. Velutha is killed not because of a misunderstanding but because a society cannot tolerate an Untouchable man who is skilled, loved, and loving. Roy's answer to the erasure is to remember him anyway, and to leave on record that a different world was, for a time, possible.



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Conclusion:

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* presents conflict not as isolated incidents but as an interlocking system. Patriarchy runs through every generation in the Ipe family. Pappachi enforces it through direct physical violence. Chacko reproduces it through legal registration and the language of business. Ammu resists it repeatedly but finds no real escape. Each form of control feeds the others: physical, economic, and legal. Gender and caste converge in the novel's most destructive episode. Velutha, a Dalit carpenter, is killed by a coalition of institutions that refuse to see him as fully human. Roy does not let these conflicts settle into abstractions. She writes them in specific, repeated detail through particular lives and intimate moments. The analysis shows that conflict in Roy's fiction is always historical, always layered, and rarely resolved neatly. What remains is the record of a love that existed, and of the forces that destroyed it.

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