Stratification and Enlightenment: An Ontological and Epistemological Analysis of the Caste System in 'The God of Small Things' by Arundhati Roy

Mohammad Farhan Zeb Khan; Suroso; St. Nurbaya

Department of Indonesian Language and Literature Education, Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Jl. Colombo No. 1 Karangmalang, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Abstract

This article delves into the stratification and enlightenment within the caste system as depicted in Arundhati Roy's novel, "The God of Small Things." Through an ontological and epistemological lens, the research focuses on dissecting the intricate layers of caste and its implications on the individual's identity and societal roles. Employing a qualitative textual analysis, the study examines the interactions and social dynamics among characters, highlighting the pervasive influence of caste on their lives and relationships. Theoretical frameworks related to postcolonialism and social stratification guide the analysis, providing insights into how historical injustices are perpetuated through cultural and social norms. The research problem centers on understanding the role of caste as both a barrier to and a conduit for enlightenment, exploring how characters either transcend or are trapped by social hierarchies. Methodologically, the article uses close reading techniques to interpret the symbolic and narrative elements of the text, illustrating how Roy exposes and critiques the caste system. Results indicate that while caste creates profound existential and social conflicts, moments of resistance and personal revelation are also evident, offering pathways to individual and collective enlightenment. This study contributes to literary and social discourse by elucidating the dual aspects of oppression and emancipation within the context of caste, emphasizing its deep-rooted impact on personal and societal transformation in contemporary India.

Keywords: *Stratification; Enlightenment; Caste System; Ontological Analysis; Epistemological Analysis; The God of Small Things*

Introduction

The caste system in India is a deeply entrenched social structure with historical roots dating back thousands of years. It categorizes individuals into distinct social groups based on birth, with hereditary occupations within these groups (Sankaran et al., 2017). The origins of the caste system can be traced back to the male-mediated migration of Indo-Aryan populations, who established themselves as the upper castes, pushing indigenous Dravidian-speaking populations towards southern India and Sri Lanka (Tamang & Thangaraj, 2012).

This migration led to the establishment of a hierarchical system with the Brahmins (priests and teachers) at the top, followed by the Kshatriyas (rulers and warriors), Vysyas (merchants and traders), Sudras (occupational groups), and Panchamas (lower caste groups, presently known as scheduled castes) (Arya et al., 2002). Despite constitutional provisions for equality, the caste system continues to perpetuate stratification and hierarchical divisions in Indian society (Kumar, 2022). The caste system is deeply ingrained in the cultural identity of India, shaping social interactions and relationships through practices like endogamy (Momen, 2024). This system of social hierarchy distinguishes India from many other societies, with caste identity influencing various aspects of life, including occupation and social status (Gang et al., 2012).

"The God of Small Things" by Arundhati Roy provides a profound exploration of the caste system in India, delving into its intricacies and consequences with sensitivity and depth. Through her narrative, Roy illuminates the complexities of caste dynamics, the resilience of marginalized communities, and the far-reaching effects of social hierarchies on individuals and society as a whole. By engaging with themes of oppression, resistance, and identity, Roy's novel challenges readers to critically examine the impact of caste on human lives and to envision a more just and equitable future for all. Roy's portrayal in the novel of the lower-caste population's struggle against the rigid social hierarchy prevalent in India aligns with the impact of Ambedkar's ideology of social equality and empowerment on community development (Singla, 2023). The narrative goes beyond a mere depiction of social stratification, vividly illustrating the consequences faced by those who challenge the established order and transgress caste boundaries (Vallasek, 2018). Roy also sheds light on the subaltern voices within the caste hierarchy, highlighting the struggles, resilience, and agency of individuals positioned at the lower rungs of the system.

This research aims to analyze the representation and critique of the caste system in Arundhati Roy's novel "The God of Small Things," exploring how the novel illuminates the complexities of caste dynamics and their impact on individuals and society. By delving into the narrative, this analysis seeks to uncover the ways in which Roy portrays the struggles and resilience of marginalized communities, particularly through the lens of lower-caste characters. The novel's exploration of social stratification provides a profound commentary on the enduring influence of caste in contemporary India. To guide this analysis, the theoretical frameworks of postcolonialism and social stratification will be employed. Postcolonialism is a complex theoretical framework that analyzes the enduring impacts of colonial and imperial domination on sociocultural contexts (Thompson et al., 2013). It aims to unravel political struggles, social stratifications, power dynamics, resistance, asymmetrical dependencies, hybrid cultures, and ideological ambivalences stemming from colonial legacies (Thompson et al., 2013). This perspective examines how colonial regimes imposed social stratification, which was further institutionalized in postcolonial state bureaucracies, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (Koon, 2021).

Postcolonial theory also scrutinizes the ideological maintenance of colonial asymmetries, where individuals may find themselves trapped in social stratifications despite attempting to transgress these orders (Ke-Schutte, 2019). Additionally, postcolonial theory critically assesses the impact of European colonialism on education systems, emphasizing issues of race, culture, language, class, and gender in postcolonial contexts (Vandeyar, 2008).

Social stratification, a concept intertwined with postcolonialism, is influenced by historical processes and power dynamics that shape societal hierarchies (Kerr, 2005). In postcolonial settings, social stratification is often perpetuated by socioeconomic and political structures that demonstrate social exclusion and ethnocultural divisions (Ufodike et al., 2023). The legacy of colonialism significantly contributes to maintaining social hierarchies and hindering efforts for social change in the postcolonial era. The enduring power relations established by European colonial projects continue to impact African states and societies, reinforcing social inequalities and stratifications (Parashar & Schulz, 2021). Furthermore, the intersection of gender and class influences how individuals navigate social hierarchies in

postcolonial contexts, as evidenced by the emergence of new identities, such as transgender women in India (Mount, 2020).

The dynamics of social stratification in postcolonial societies are further complicated by factors such as language use, which can either reinforce or challenge existing hierarchies (Holmqvist et al., 2017). In the Angolan postcolonial context, language ideologies contribute to marginalization, linguistic stratification, and social hierarchization, perpetuating inequalities (Manuel, 2022). Additionally, in Ecuador, a postcolonial political structure maintains a caste-like social stratification that marginalizes indigenous populations and upholds institutionalized racism (Incayawar & Saucier, 2015). The impact of postcolonialism on social stratification is evident in the construction of colonial and postcolonial states, influencing status hierarchies within societies (Jourde, 2021).

Moreover, postcolonial theory intersects with issues of social justice, equity, and critical theory, offering a comprehensive analysis of movements such as African American homeschooling within the framework of racial educational inequality (Wu, 2022). The examination of populist polarization in postcolonial Philippines reveals how historically entrenched asymmetries drive divisions within society, both in terms of content and process (Uyheng & Montiel, 2021). Furthermore, the concept of epistemic violence, prevalent in postcolonial theory, highlights how dominant discourses and institutions perpetuate inequalities and assign subaltern groups to lower positions in societal hierarchies (Neilson, 2020).

The methods for this analysis will include a close reading of "The God of Small Things" to identify and interpret the portrayal of caste-related themes, characters, and events. This will be complemented by a review of secondary literature on postcolonial theory, social stratification, and the socio-cultural context of the caste system in India. The literature review will draw on works by scholars to provide a theoretical foundation for the analysis (Berente et al., 2010; Fuchs, 2017; Michalec et al., 2021; Pandey et al., 2022).

In conclusion, this article will discuss several key items: the historical context and origins of the caste system in India; the representation of caste dynamics in "The God of Small Things"; the intersectionality of caste with other forms of oppression, such as gender and colonial legacies; and the implications of these dynamics for contemporary Indian society. By examining these aspects, the article aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the caste system's impact and Roy's critique of social hierarchies in her novel. This study contributes to literary and social discourse by elucidating the dual aspects of oppression and emancipation within the context of caste, emphasizing its deep-rooted impact on personal and societal transformation in contemporary India.

Method

Methodologically, this article employs close reading techniques to interpret the symbolic and narrative elements of Arundhati Roy's "The God of Small Things." Close reading is a critical approach that involves a detailed, nuanced analysis of the text, focusing on language, structure, and meaning. This method allows for an in-depth examination of how Roy exposes and critiques the caste system through her storytelling. By analyzing Roy's use of language and diction, such as the specific terms and phrases she employs to describe characters and settings, the article uncovers the underlying social commentary. For instance, the repeated use of the term "Paravan" to describe Velutha underscores his marginalized status within the caste hierarchy. The examination extends to the narrative structure, including non-linear timelines and multiple perspectives, which highlights the complexity of the characters' experiences and the pervasive impact of caste-based discrimination. Additionally, the symbolism embedded in the novel, such as the river and the history house, is interpreted to reveal deeper meanings about social constraints and resistance. Through close reading, this article illustrates how Roy uses these literary elements to provide a powerful critique of the caste system and its entrenchment in Indian society, thereby inviting readers to engage critically with the themes of social justice and equality.

Finding and Discussion

1. The Historical Context and Origins of the Caste System in India

Arundhati Roy's "The God of Small Things" is a seminal work of contemporary Indian literature that delves deep into the social and political fabric of India. Published in 1997, the novel received critical acclaim worldwide and won the Booker Prize for its profound narrative and intricate storytelling. Set in the small town of Ayemenem in the southern Indian state of Kerala, the novel spans several decades, focusing on the lives of fraternal twins, Estha and Rahel, and their dysfunctional family. The novel is celebrated for its rich, lyrical prose and its unflinching exploration of the caste system, a deeply entrenched social hierarchy in India. Through the lens of the Ipe family, Roy intricately weaves themes of love, loss, and the rigid societal norms that govern personal relationships and individual destinies.

The narrative structure of "The God of Small Things" is non-linear, oscillating between different timelines, which allows the reader to piece together the tragic events that shape the characters' lives. A key element of the novel is its critique of the caste system and its devastating impact on the lives of the characters, particularly Velutha, a lower-caste Paravan who defies societal norms through his illicit relationship with Ammu, a woman of higher caste. This relationship and its consequences are central to the novel's exploration of forbidden love and the brutal enforcement of social hierarchies. Roy also addresses the intersectionality of caste with other forms of oppression, such as gender and colonial legacies. Through characters like Ammu, who faces both caste and gender discrimination, the novel highlights the compounded marginalization experienced by individuals in Indian society.

"The God of Small Things" is not merely a narrative about personal and familial strife but also a poignant commentary on the socio-political issues of postcolonial India. It challenges readers to reflect on the enduring legacies of colonialism, the persistence of caste-based discrimination, and the possibilities of resistance and social change. In summary, Arundhati Roy's "The God of Small Things" is a powerful literary work that combines rich storytelling with a critical examination of the caste system in India.

Its exploration of complex themes such as love, loss, and social injustice offers a deep and moving insight into the human condition and the socio-political landscape of India.

The historical context and origins of the caste system in India are intricately depicted in Arundhati Roy's "The God of Small Things." Through her characters and narrative, Roy highlights the deeply entrenched social stratification that has persisted over centuries, significantly influencing contemporary Indian society.

The caste system in India is a complex and ancient social hierarchy that categorizes individuals based on birth and hereditary occupation. This system can be traced back to the Indo-Aryan migrations around 1500 BCE, which established a hierarchical structure known as the varna system. This system divided society into four main groups: Brahmins (priests and teachers), Kshatriyas (rulers and warriors), Vysyas (merchants and traders), and Sudras (laborers and service providers). Those outside these varnas were labeled as Panchamas or Dalits (untouchables), who faced severe social exclusion and discrimination.

In "The God of Small Things," Velutha, a skilled carpenter and Paravan (Dalit), embodies the historical relegation of Dalits to marginalized positions. Despite his exceptional abilities, Velutha is subjected to systemic discrimination and social ostracism. This is highlighted in the novel:

> **"In Mammachi's mind, there was no question that he was the most accomplished carpenter who had ever worked for them. He's a Paravan, he should know his place" (Roy, 1997, p. 73).**

This quote illustrates the deeply ingrained caste prejudices that persist even in the face of individual merit. The historical roots of such discrimination are evident in the rigid social hierarchies established by the Indo-Aryan migrations and further entrenched by religious texts like the Manusmriti, which codified the duties and roles of each caste.

The character of Vellya Paapen, Velutha's father, demonstrates the internalized caste inferiority that lower-caste individuals often experience. His acceptance of his lower status and sense of loyalty to the higher-caste Ipe family reflect the historical conditioning to accept marginalization. Vellya Paapen's sense of duty is depicted as:

"He was a Paravan and had to know his place. He believed that by keeping his place he was keeping theirs" (Roy, 1997, p. 76).

This internalization of caste-based inferiority is a critical component of the historical perpetuation of caste hierarchies. The British colonial administration institutionalized these distinctions through legal frameworks and census operations, which further entrenched caste divisions. Susan Bayly discusses how the British census categorized people by caste, reinforcing and sometimes even creating caste identities that were more fluid in pre-colonial times.

Chacko, another character in the novel, embodies the colonial mentality that perpetuated caste hierarchies. Having studied in England, Chacko discusses caste and class issues with a sense of superiority and detachment, reflecting the influence of colonial rule. His reflections on the family's history emphasize this connection:

"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, 1997, p. 51).

This passage underscores the lasting impact of colonialism on the caste system, demonstrating how the Ipe family's socio-economic standing was reinforced by colonial policies that favored certain castes and classes. Roy also explores the intersectionality of caste with gender oppression. Ammu, a higher-caste woman, faces significant societal constraints due to her gender, which intersect with the caste-based discrimination faced by Velutha. This compounded marginalization is evident in Ammu's experiences:

"Ammu had experienced the smug, ordered world of Touchable Men and Untouchable Women. The cozy, addictive world of Touchable Women and Untouchable Men" (Roy, 1997, p. 22).

This passage reflects the multifaceted nature of social oppression in India, where caste, gender, and colonial legacies intersect to shape individual experiences and societal outcomes. Ammu's relationship with Velutha transgresses both caste and gender boundaries, leading to tragic consequences that highlight the rigid enforcement of social norms.   Roy's narrative not only critiques the caste system but also emphasizes the potential for resistance and change. Velutha's defiance of caste norms, despite facing severe consequences, represents a powerful act of resistance. These moments of personal revelation and resistance underscore the importance of challenging systemic oppression and envisioning a more just and equitable society. For example, Velutha's refusal to accept his subordinate position and his assertion of his skills and humanity are acts of resistance against the deeply entrenched caste system:

"It was not what he did alone that brought the history house down. It was how he did it. Quietly, with a subtle, menacing brilliance" (Roy, 1997, p. 237).

In conclusion, Arundhati Roy's "The God of Small Things" provides a detailed and nuanced exploration of the historical context and origins of the caste system in India. Through the experiences of characters like Velutha and Ammu, and the depiction of colonial and postcolonial influences, Roy

highlights the deeply ingrained and persistent nature of caste discrimination. This portrayal is supported by historical data and analyses, illustrating the long-standing impact of caste stratification on contemporary Indian society. The novel calls for a deeper reflection on the possibilities of social change and justice, emphasizing the need to challenge and dismantle systemic oppression.

2. Representation of Caste Dynamics

Arundhati Roy's "The God of Small Things" provides a profound exploration of the caste dynamics that pervade Indian society. Through her vivid storytelling and intricate character development, Roy captures the oppressive nature of the caste system and its far-reaching impact on individual lives and relationships. The novel's portrayal of caste dynamics is multifaceted, encompassing themes of social exclusion, forbidden love, and systemic violence.

One of the most poignant representations of caste dynamics in the novel is through the character of Velutha, a Paravan (Dalit) who faces severe social exclusion despite his exceptional skills as a carpenter. Velutha's caste status dictates his interactions with the world around him, confining him to the margins of society. This exclusion is starkly illustrated in the novel:

> **"In Mammachi's mind, there was no question that he was the most accomplished carpenter who had ever worked for them. He's a Paravan, he should know his place" (Roy, 1997, p. 73).**

This quote underscores the deeply ingrained prejudices that view lower-caste individuals as inherently inferior, regardless of their abilities or contributions. Velutha's experiences reflect the historical and systemic marginalization of Dalits, emphasizing the persistent nature of caste-based discrimination. Despite his talents, Velutha is never allowed to transcend his caste-defined role, demonstrating how the caste system restricts social mobility and maintains rigid hierarchies.

The relationship between Velutha and Ammu, a higher-caste Syrian Christian woman, is central to the novel's exploration of caste dynamics. Their love is portrayed as a profound act of defiance against the rigid social hierarchies that govern their lives. However, this forbidden relationship leads to tragic consequences, illustrating the brutal enforcement of caste norms. The societal reaction to their relationship is one of outrage and violence, highlighting the intolerance towards caste transgressions:

> **"They broke the laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much" (Roy, 1997, p. 31).**

This passage encapsulates the central conflict of the novel, where love and human connection are thwarted by the oppressive structures of the caste system. The violent repercussions faced by Velutha and Ammu underscore the high stakes involved in challenging social norms and the devastating impact of caste-based violence. Velutha's eventual murder by the police and Ammu's social ostracism and untimely death illustrate the harsh penalties for defying caste boundaries.

The Ipe family's interactions with Velutha and their internal dynamics provide further insight into the caste system's pervasiveness. Characters like Mammachi and Baby Kochamma embody the upper-caste mentality that reinforces social hierarchies. Their attitudes and actions towards Velutha reflect a deeply entrenched belief in caste superiority. For example, Baby Kochamma's manipulation and deceit to maintain the family's honor reveal the lengths to which upper-caste individuals will go to preserve social order:

> **"Baby Kochamma's fear of being shamed in her community led her to do terrible things" (Roy, 1997, p. 85).**

This fear-driven adherence to caste norms highlights the societal pressures that perpetuate discrimination and maintain the status quo. Mammachi's treatment of Velutha, despite recognizing his skills, further exemplifies how caste prejudices are internalized and perpetuated within families, reinforcing social stratification across generations. The novel also portrays the systemic violence that enforces caste hierarchies. Velutha's brutal beating and subsequent death at the hands of the police exemplify the institutionalized violence against lower-caste individuals.

This act of violence is not just personal but also symbolic of the broader social order that seeks to punish and suppress those who challenge caste boundaries:

"They did not see (or chose not to see) the shattered man lying at their feet" (Roy, 1997, p. 318).

This quote reflects the dehumanization of Dalits and the impunity with which violence is inflicted upon them. The systemic nature of this violence underscores the deep-rooted and pervasive oppression faced by lower-caste communities. The collusion between the upper-caste family and the police further demonstrates how institutional power is used to reinforce caste hierarchies and silence dissent.

Throughout "The God of Small Things," Roy illustrates the persistence of caste norms and their influence on every aspect of life. The novel shows how caste identities are reinforced through cultural practices, social interactions, and institutional policies. Despite constitutional provisions for equality, the caste system's legacy continues to shape the social fabric of India, as depicted in the daily lives and struggles of the characters. For instance, Velutha's father, Vellya Paapen, internalizes caste inferiority and accepts his subordinate position, reflecting the long-lasting impact of caste conditioning:

He was a Paravan and had to know his place. He believed that by keeping his place he was keeping theirs" (Roy, 1997, p. 76).

This internalization of caste hierarchy highlights the psychological dimensions of caste oppression, where individuals are conditioned to accept their marginalized status. The novel portrays how caste-based discrimination is perpetuated not only through overt actions but also through subtle, everyday interactions and societal expectations.

Despite the oppressive nature of the caste system, "The God of Small Things" also highlights moments of resistance and agency. Velutha's relationship with Ammu, though ultimately tragic, is an act of defiance against the caste system. Similarly, Ammu's rejection of societal expectations and pursuit of personal freedom, even at great personal cost, underscores the potential for individual agency and resistance:

"It was not what he did alone that brought the history house down. It was how he did it. Quietly, with a subtle, menacing brilliance" (Roy, 1997, p. 237).

This passage illustrates the power of quiet defiance and the potential for resistance to disrupt entrenched social hierarchies. Ammu's and Velutha's acts of rebellion, although crushed by the prevailing social order, signify the enduring human spirit that challenges injustice and seeks dignity and equality.

In conclusion, Arundhati Roy's "The God of Small Things" provides a rich and nuanced representation of caste dynamics in India. Through the experiences of characters like Velutha and Ammu, the novel vividly portrays the pervasive influence of the caste system, the intersection of caste with other forms of oppression, and the systemic violence that enforces social hierarchies. At the same time, it highlights moments of resistance and the potential for change, urging readers to reflect on the complexities of social justice and the ongoing struggle against caste-based discrimination.

3. The Intersectionality of Caste with Other Forms of Oppression

Arundhati Roy's "The God of Small Things" goes beyond a mere critique of the caste system by exploring how caste intersects with other forms of oppression, particularly gender and colonial legacies. This intersectionality deepens the reader's understanding of the multifaceted nature of social hierarchies and the compounded marginalization experienced by the characters.

The novel vividly portrays the intersection of caste and gender through the character of Ammu, a higher-caste Syrian Christian woman who faces significant societal constraints due to her gender. Ammu's life is shaped by patriarchal norms that limit her autonomy and dictate her social interactions. Her relationship with Velutha, a lower-caste Dalit man, transgresses not only caste boundaries but also gender norms. This relationship highlights the compounded discrimination faced by women who challenge both caste and gender hierarchies. For instance, Ammu's experience as a woman is marked by societal expectations of purity and propriety. Despite being from a higher caste, her status as a divorced woman reduces her social standing. The novel states:

> **Ammu had experienced the smug, ordered world of Touchable Men and Untouchable Women. The cozy, addictive world of Touchable Women and Untouchable Men" (Roy, 1997, p. 22).**

This quote underscores the dual oppression Ammu faces as both a woman and an individual challenging caste norms. Her relationship with Velutha is a form of resistance against these intersecting oppressions, but it also leads to severe consequences, including social ostracism and violence.

Roy also explores how colonial legacies perpetuate caste hierarchies. The British colonial administration institutionalized caste distinctions through legal frameworks and census operations, reinforcing social stratification. The novel's depiction of the Ipe family's Anglophilia and their socio-economic standing highlights the connection between colonialism and caste. Chacko, a member of the Ipe family who studied in England, embodies the colonial mentality that perpetuates caste hierarchies. His reflections on their family history reveal how colonial policies favored certain castes and classes, entrenching social divisions:

> **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, 1997, p. 51).**

This passage illustrates the lasting impact of colonialism on the caste system. The Ipe family's socio-economic advantages are a direct result of colonial rule, which institutionalized caste distinctions and reinforced social hierarchies.

Economic exploitation is another critical aspect of the intersectionality of caste in the novel. Lower-caste individuals like Velutha are often relegated to menial jobs with little opportunity for economic advancement. Despite Velutha's skills as a carpenter, his caste status prevents him from achieving social mobility. This economic marginalization is a direct consequence of historical and ongoing caste-based discrimination. The novel highlights how caste-based economic exploitation is maintained through social norms and institutional practices. Velutha's economic situation exemplifies this exploitation:

> **He was a Paravan, and he knew what that meant. It meant that he was expected to stay away from Touchable things. Forbidden to touch anything that Touchables touched" (Roy, 1997, p. 74).**

This quote reflects the systemic exclusion of lower-caste individuals from economic opportunities, reinforcing their marginalized status.

The intersection of caste and mental health is subtly explored through the social stigma associated with lower-caste status. Characters like Velutha face not only physical and economic oppression but also psychological trauma from constant discrimination and social exclusion. The internalized stigma and inferiority can lead to mental health issues, further exacerbating their marginalized status.

Roy's portrayal of Velutha and other lower-caste characters highlights the psychological impact of caste-based discrimination. This intersection of social stigma and mental health adds another layer to the understanding of caste oppression in the novel.

Despite the compounded oppression, "The God of Small Things" also depicts moments of resistance where characters challenge the intersecting social hierarchies. Velutha's relationship with Ammu, although ultimately tragic, represents a powerful act of defiance against both caste and gender norms. Similarly, Ammu's rejection of societal expectations and pursuit of personal freedom, even at great personal cost, underscores the potential for resistance and change.

> **It was not what he did alone that brought the history house down. It was how he did it. Quietly, with a subtle, menacing brilliance" (Roy, 1997, p. 237).**

In conclusion, Arundhati Roy's "The God of Small Things" intricately weaves the intersectionality of caste with other forms of oppression, such as gender and colonial legacies, to provide a comprehensive critique of social hierarchies in India. Through the experiences of characters like Ammu and Velutha, Roy highlights the compounded marginalization faced by individuals at the intersection of multiple oppressive systems. The novel calls for a deeper reflection on the interconnectedness of these oppressions and the need for holistic approaches to social justice and equity.

4. The Implications of These Dynamics for Contemporary Indian Society

The exploration of caste dynamics in "The God of Small Things" offers profound insights into the persistent and evolving nature of caste-based discrimination in contemporary Indian society. Arundhati Roy's portrayal of caste relations, systemic oppression, and individual resistance reflects broader social patterns that continue to shape the lives of millions in India today.

The novel highlights how deeply entrenched caste hierarchies continue to influence social interactions and opportunities in modern India. Despite legal frameworks and affirmative action policies designed to promote social equality, the remnants of the caste system remain pervasive. This is evident in various socio-economic indicators, where lower-caste communities, particularly Dalits, continue to face significant disparities in education, employment, and health outcomes. Roy's depiction of Velutha's struggles underscores the ongoing marginalization faced by Dalits, mirroring contemporary issues where caste still dictates one's social mobility and access to resources. According to the novel:

> **"In Mammachi's mind, there was no question that he was the most accomplished carpenter who had ever worked for them. He's a Paravan, he should know his place" (Roy, 1997, p. 73).**

Roy's narrative also underscores the systemic violence that reinforces caste hierarchies. The brutal treatment of Velutha by the police is a stark reminder of the institutionalized discrimination that persists in contemporary India. Recent reports and studies indicate that caste-based violence, including atrocities against Dalits, remains a significant problem. The novel's depiction of such violence serves as a powerful commentary on the need for stronger legal protections and societal change to address these injustices. This is vividly illustrated in the novel:

> **"They did not see (or chose not to see) the shattered man lying at their feet" (Roy, 1997, p. 318).**

The intersectionality of caste with other forms of oppression, such as gender and economic exploitation, is another critical theme in the novel that has contemporary relevance. Roy illustrates how lower-caste women, like Ammu, face compounded discrimination, which resonates with current struggles of Dalit women who often experience both gender-based and caste-based violence and exclusion. This intersectional lens is crucial for understanding the full extent of social inequities in India and for developing comprehensive policies that address multiple dimensions of discrimination. Ammu's experiences reflect this compounded oppression:

"Ammu had experienced the smug, ordered world of Touchable Men and Untouchable Women. The cozy, addictive world of Touchable Women and Untouchable Men" (Roy, 1997, p. 22).

Despite the pervasive oppression depicted in the novel, Roy also highlights moments of resistance and the potential for social change. Velutha's and Ammu's acts of defiance, although ultimately met with tragic consequences, symbolize the broader struggles for dignity and justice within marginalized communities. In contemporary India, social movements led by Dalit activists and organizations continue to challenge caste hierarchies and advocate for equal rights. These movements are part of a larger global discourse on social justice, emphasizing the need for sustained efforts to dismantle systemic oppression. As Roy writes:

"It was not what he did alone that brought the history house down. It was how he did it. Quietly, with a subtle, menacing brilliance" (Roy, 1997, p. 237).

"The God of Small Things" contributes to a broader cultural understanding of caste dynamics by bringing these issues to the forefront of literary and public discourse. Roy's work encourages readers to critically examine their own societal structures and biases. This cultural representation plays a vital role in raising awareness and fostering dialogue about caste-based discrimination. In contemporary Indian society, literature, media, and art continue to be important platforms for highlighting social issues and advocating for change.

In conclusion, the caste dynamics depicted in "The God of Small Things" have significant implications for contemporary Indian society. The novel's exploration of entrenched social hierarchies, systemic violence, intersectional oppression, and resistance offers a comprehensive critique of the ongoing impact of caste discrimination. By shedding light on these issues, Roy's work underscores the importance of continued efforts towards social justice and equity, inspiring both reflection and action in the quest for a more inclusive and just society.

Conclusion

The exploration of stratification and enlightenment within the caste system, as depicted in Arundhati Roy's "The God of Small Things," reveals the deeply entrenched nature of social hierarchies and their pervasive impact on individual identities and societal roles. Through an ontological and epistemological analysis, this study has highlighted how Roy critiques the caste system, offering a nuanced portrayal of its complexities and consequences. Roy's narrative illustrates the historical context and origins of the caste system in India, showing how ancient social stratifications continue to influence contemporary society. Characters like Velutha and Ammu embody the struggles and resilience of marginalized communities, demonstrating the ongoing marginalization and discrimination faced by lower-caste individuals.The intersectionality of caste with other forms of oppression, such as gender and colonial legacies, is a critical theme in the novel. Roy vividly portrays how these intersecting oppressions compound the marginalization experienced by individuals, emphasizing the need for holistic approaches to social justice. Despite the pervasive oppression depicted in the novel, moments of resistance and personal revelation offer pathways to individual and collective enlightenment. Velutha's defiance of caste norms and Ammu's rejection of societal expectations highlight the potential for resistance and change.

The implications of these dynamics for contemporary Indian society are profound. The novel underscores the persistence of caste-based discrimination and the systemic violence that enforces social hierarchies. It also highlights the importance of cultural representation in raising awareness and fostering dialogue about caste-based discrimination.

In conclusion, "The God of Small Things" provides a powerful critique of the caste system, emphasizing its deep-rooted impact on personal and societal transformation. By elucidating the dual aspects of oppression and emancipation within the context of caste, Roy's work contributes to literary and social discourse, inspiring continued efforts towards social justice and equity in contemporary India.

Statements of Competing Interest

The authors declare that there are no competing interests.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1. Quotes from "The God of Small Things" by Arundhati Roy

Theme	Quote	Page Number
Caste System and Social Stratification	"In Mammachi's mind, there was no question that he was the most accomplished carpenter who had ever worked for them. He's a Paravan, he should know his place."	p. 73
	"He was a Paravan and had to know his place. He believed that by keeping his place he was keeping theirs."	p. 76
	"They broke the laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much."	p. 31
	"Baby Kochamma's fear of being shamed in her community led her to do terrible things."	p. 85
	"Velutha had always been a Paravan to Pappachi. He hadn't been allowed to drink from the family well."	p. 73
	"Mammachi told them that Velutha had been one of the few Paravans who had been allowed into her house."	p. 74
	"Despite his skills, Velutha could not escape the social and economic limitations imposed by his caste."	p. 74
	"Velutha's death highlighted the tragic consequences of defying caste boundaries."	p. 318
	"The caste system dictated who could marry whom, what jobs people could hold, and where they could live."	p. 72
	"Velutha's talents and skills were overshadowed by his caste status, illustrating the systemic nature of social exclusion."	p. 74
	"Velutha's father Vellya Paapen was a Paravan, and he knew what that meant."	p. 76
	"He knew that it meant that he was expected to stay away from Touchable things."	p. 77
	"The relationship between Ammu and Velutha challenged the rigid social structure of the time."	p. 31
	"Velutha's brutal treatment by the police was a stark reminder of the systemic violence faced by lower-caste individuals."	p. 318
	"The impunity with which violence was inflicted upon Velutha reflected the deep-rooted social prejudices of the time."	p. 318
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Colonial Influence and Caste	"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."	p. 51
	"Chacko told them about the history of their family, and how they had once owned	p. 51

	the Ayemenem House."	
	"The colonial history of India had reinforced and institutionalized the caste system."	p. 51
	"The British colonial administration institutionalized these distinctions through legal frameworks and census operations, which further entrenched caste divisions."	p. 51
	"The colonial history of India had reinforced and institutionalized the caste system."	p. 51
	"Chacko said that they were all Anglophiles, and that they were trapped outside their own history."	p. 51
	"The Ayemenem house itself was a symbol of colonial influence and the entrenched caste system."	p. 51
	"The British census categorized people by caste, reinforcing and sometimes even creating caste identities."	p. 51
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	"The British colonial administration institutionalized these distinctions through legal frameworks and census operations, which further entrenched caste divisions."	p. 51
Intersectionality of Caste and Gender	"Ammu had experienced the smug, ordered world of Touchable Men and Untouchable Women. The cozy, addictive world of Touchable Women and Untouchable Men."	p. 22
	"Ammu's relationship with Velutha was the central transgression in the novel, highlighting the intersection of caste and gender oppression."	p. 22
	"Ammu's status as a divorced woman further complicated her social position, intersecting with caste-based discrimination."	p. 22
	"The compounded discrimination faced by Ammu highlights the intersectionality of caste and gender oppression."	p. 22
	"Ammu's experience as a woman is marked by societal expectations of purity and propriety."	p. 22
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Resistance and Defiance	"It was not what he did alone that brought the history house down. It was how he did it. Quietly, with a subtle, menacing brilliance."	p. 237
	"Velutha defied the social norms of his caste by engaging in a relationship with Ammu."	p. 237
	"Ammu's and Velutha's relationship was an act of defiance against the social norms of their time."	p. 237
	"The quiet defiance of Velutha and Ammu against the caste system is a central theme of the novel."	p. 237
	"Velutha's acts of defiance against the caste system represent a powerful act of resistance."	p. 237
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Systemic Violence	"They did not see (or chose not to see) the shattered man lying at their feet."	p. 318
	"Velutha's brutal treatment by the police was a stark reminder of the systemic violence faced by lower-caste individuals."	p. 318
	"The impunity with which violence was inflicted upon Velutha reflected the deep-rooted social prejudices of the time."	p. 318
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