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An Anthropological Reading of Social Structures in The God of Small Things

Sima BarmanDOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19449950>**Abstract**

This paper examines *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy from an anthropological perspective, focusing on caste hierarchy, kinship systems, and cultural practices in postcolonial Kerala. The novel is interpreted as a cultural text that reflects the lived realities of Indian society, where social norms and taboos regulate individual identity and behaviour. Through close textual analysis, the study explores how “Love Laws,” caste-based exclusion, and family structures operate as mechanisms of social control. The paper argues that Roy’s narrative functions as an ethnographic representation of society, exposing the deeply embedded power structures that sustain inequality and marginalization.

Keywords

Anthropology; Caste System; Kinship; Cultural Taboo; Social Structure; Marginalization; Love Laws

Introduction

Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997) is a significant work of Indian English literature that offers a profound insight into the socio-cultural fabric of Kerala. Beyond its narrative complexity, the novel can be read as a cultural document that reflects the everyday realities of caste, family, and social norms. Anthropology, as the study of human societies and cultures, provides a useful framework to analyze such representations in literature.

From an anthropological perspective, literature becomes a site where cultural meanings are constructed and communicated. The novel portrays how individuals are shaped by social structures such as caste hierarchy, kinship systems, and cultural taboos. This paper argues that *The God of Small Things* functions as an anthropological text that reveals how social structures regulate human relationships and reinforce inequality.

Literature Review

Scholars have extensively analyzed Roy’s novel from various perspectives, including postcolonialism, feminism, and trauma studies. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s concept of subalternity has often been applied to understand the marginalization of Velutha, while feminist critics have focused on Ammu’s oppression within a patriarchal society.

From an anthropological standpoint, thinkers like Clifford Geertz emphasize culture as a “web of meanings,” which can be applied to Roy’s depiction of everyday life. Similarly, Louis Dumont’s analysis of caste as a hierarchical system provides a framework to understand the social divisions in the novel. However, there remains scope to integrate these ideas into a comprehensive anthropological reading of the text.

Objectives of the Study

To analyze caste as a cultural and social structure in the novel

To examine kinship and family dynamics from an anthropological perspective

To explore cultural taboos and “Love Laws” as mechanisms of social control

To understand marginalization and exclusion within the social system

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Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretative approach, focusing on close textual analysis of the novel. Anthropological concepts such as caste, kinship, and cultural norms are used as analytical tools. Secondary sources, including critical essays and theoretical works, support the interpretation. The method combines literary analysis with anthropological theory to provide a deeper understanding of the text.

Anthropology is the scientific and systematic study of human beings, focusing on their cultures, social practices, beliefs, institutions, and ways of life across time and space. The term is derived from the Greek words “anthropos” (human) and “logos” (study), meaning the study of humans. In academic research, anthropology goes beyond the biological understanding of humans and examines how people live within societies, how they create meaning, and how cultural systems shape their identities and behaviours. From a literary perspective, anthropology is used as a critical approach to interpret texts as cultural documents. It allows researchers to analyze how literature reflects real social practices such as caste systems, kinship relations, rituals, gender roles, and power hierarchies. For instance, in *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, an anthropological perspective helps in understanding how cultural norms and social rules regulate the lives of individuals. The novel can be seen as an ethnographic narrative that portrays the lived realities of a specific community. Thus, anthropology in literature emphasizes the relationship between culture and human behaviour, revealing how individuals are shaped by their social environment.

The anthropological perspective primarily focuses on key concepts such as culture, kinship, caste, ritual, and taboo. It studies how these elements function as systems of meaning that guide human actions. Culture is not viewed as abstract but as something lived and practiced in everyday life. Therefore, an anthropological reading of a text uncovers the deeper social meanings embedded within it and highlights how literature represents real-world cultural dynamics.

Closely related to anthropology is the concept of social structure. Social structure refers to the organized pattern of relationships, institutions, and roles that form the foundation of a society. It includes systems such as family, caste, class, gender roles, and economic organization. Social structure determines how individuals are positioned within society and how they interact with one another. It creates a framework of hierarchy, authority, and power, where some groups enjoy privilege while others face marginalization.

From an analytical perspective, social structure is not merely a fixed arrangement but a dynamic system maintained through cultural practices and social norms. It operates through both visible institutions, such as family and caste, and invisible forces, such as customs and taboos. In literature, examining social structure helps to understand how characters are influenced by their positions within society. In *The God of Small Things*, for example, caste hierarchy and family dynamics illustrate how social structure controls relationships and reinforces inequality. Anthropology and social structure together provide a powerful framework for analyzing literature. They enable researchers to interpret texts as reflections of real social systems and cultural practices. By applying these concepts, one can uncover how societies function, how power is distributed, and how individuals are shaped by the cultural and structural forces around them.

Analysis / Discussion

Caste as Social Structure

The novel presents caste as a deeply embedded cultural system that governs social interaction. Velutha, an “Untouchable,” represents the marginalized section of society. The narrative highlights how caste operates through the logic of purity and pollution, restricting physical and emotional relationships.

The line, “the Love Laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much,” reveals how caste functions as an invisible yet powerful system of control. This law prohibits the relationship between Ammu and Velutha, ultimately leading to tragic consequences. Anthropologically, this reflects how social norms are internalized and enforced within a community.

A significant anthropological insight in *The God of Small Things* lies in the internalization of social structures by individuals. Social systems such as caste and kinship are not sustained merely through external authority but through the unconscious acceptance of cultural norms by members of society. This process reflects cultural conditioning, where individuals begin to perceive socially constructed rules as natural and inevitable.

The concept of “Love Laws”—“that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much”—demonstrates how deeply these norms are embedded within personal consciousness. These laws do not operate only as external restrictions but shape emotions, desires, and moral judgments. The relationship between Ammu and Velutha, though a personal act of defiance, ultimately reveals the power of internalized social codes, as it leads to guilt, fear, and tragic consequences.

Anthropologically, this suggests that social structure is reproduced through everyday practices and belief systems

rather than coercion alone. The family becomes a crucial site of such reproduction, where hierarchical values are normalized and transmitted across generations. Even marginalized individuals, like Velutha, are constrained by these internalized boundaries, which limit resistance.

Thus, the novel reveals that the most effective form of social control operates invisibly—through normalization and internal acceptance. By exposing this process, Arundhati Roy highlights how cultural systems sustain inequality not only through force but through deeply rooted psychological and social conditioning.

Kinship and Family Power

The Ipe family reflects a structured kinship system characterized by patriarchy and inequality. Chacko's authority as a male member contrasts sharply with Ammu's lack of agency. Despite belonging to the same family, their social positions differ significantly. Kinship, in this context, functions as a mechanism of social control. It determines inheritance, gender roles, and authority. The family thus becomes a site where cultural norms are reproduced and reinforced.

Cultural Taboos and Regulation of Desire

The concept of "Love Laws" illustrates how culture regulates even the most personal aspects of life. The forbidden relationship between Ammu and Velutha represents a violation of these taboos. Anthropologically, taboos serve to maintain social order by preventing actions that could disrupt the system. The punishment of transgression in the novel demonstrates the rigidity of these cultural codes.

Marginalization and Social Exclusion

Velutha's character embodies the experience of marginalization. As an Untouchable, he is excluded from social and cultural participation. His voice is suppressed, and his existence is controlled by dominant social groups. This reflects the anthropological concept of social exclusion, where certain groups are systematically denied power and representation. The novel exposes how such exclusion is normalized within society.

Culture as Everyday Practice

The novel portrays culture through everyday practices, rituals, and social behaviour. These elements define identity and shape human interaction. From an anthropological perspective, culture is not abstract but lived and experienced in daily life.

Roy's detailed depiction of these practices turns the novel into a cultural narrative that documents the complexities of Indian society.

The social structures depicted in *The God of Small Things* are not confined to the historical context of the narrative alone. Many of these elements, particularly caste hierarchy, cultural taboos, and social control over

relationships, continue to resonate in contemporary Indian society. This continuity highlights the enduring influence of cultural systems, even in the face of modernization and social change.

Thus, reading *The God of Small Things* in today's context reveals that the cultural systems depicted in the novel are not entirely obsolete. Instead, they have adapted to new socio-economic conditions while retaining their core influence. The novel, therefore, remains relevant as it helps us understand the continuity and transformation of social structures in modern society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *The God of Small Things* can be read as an anthropological text that reveals the intricate workings of social structures in Indian society. Through its portrayal of caste, kinship, and cultural taboos, the novel demonstrates how individuals are shaped and constrained by their social environment.

The narrative exposes the power of cultural systems in maintaining hierarchy and inequality. By presenting the lived experiences of marginalized individuals, Roy highlights the human cost of these structures. Thus, the novel serves as both a literary and cultural document, offering deep insights into the nature of society.

Scope for Further Research

The present study has focused on an anthropological reading of the novel, but future research can expand this approach by integrating interdisciplinary perspectives. A comparative study with other Indian English novels could provide broader insights into regional cultural variations. Additionally, combining anthropology with postcolonial or feminist theory may offer a more nuanced understanding of power and identity. Ethnographic approaches could also be explored to connect the fictional representation with real-life cultural practices.

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