

## Shifting Paradigms: Postcolonialism and Contemporary Identity in Arundhati Roy's Works

<sup>1</sup>B.V.Gurulakshmi ✉ <sup>2</sup>S. Satyam ✉

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Dept. English, Annamacharya University, Annamaiah (Dt.), A.P, India.

<sup>2</sup>Department of English, Assistant Professor, Annamacharya University, Annamaiah (Dt.), A.P, India.

DOI:

This research delves into the complex interplay between postcolonialism and identity in Arundhati Roy's works, with a focus on her renowned novel, *The God of Small Things*, and her non-fiction writings. It examines how Roy portrays identity formation within a postcolonial framework, illustrating the influence of colonial legacies, social structures, and cultural intersections on both individual and collective identities in modern India. By analyzing her characters and their socio-political settings, the study reveals how Roy critiques the lingering impact of colonialism, especially concerning caste, gender, and family dynamics. Furthermore, it explores Roy's innovative use of language and narrative techniques to challenge dominant ideologies and give voice to marginalized perspectives. The research emphasizes Roy's significant role in postcolonial literature by showcasing how identity shifts and adapts amid historical and cultural transformations. Ultimately, it seeks to deepen the understanding of how colonialism continues to shape personal and political identities in contemporary Indian society.

**Keywords:** Hybridity, Immigration, Imperialism, Postcolonialism, Racial Discrimination, Subjugation, Ambivalence, Colonialism, Displacement, Globalization, Magical Realism, Marginalization.

### Introduction

Arundhati Roy, an Indian author and activist, has earned widespread recognition for her literary contributions, particularly with her novels *The God of Small Things* (1997) and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017). Her writings engage with themes such as postcolonialism, identity, gender, and power, while also addressing the enduring effects of British colonialism and the socio-political challenges facing contemporary India. This literature review explores academic perspectives on postcolonialism and identity within Roy's works, with a focus on how she interrogates issues related to race, gender, caste, and nationalism. Youngsuk Chae examines environmental and gender hierarchies in postcolonial India through Roy's ecofeminist lens [16]. Miriam Nandi unpacks conflicting representations of the subaltern in Roy's text—both idealized and feared [17,18]

### I. Historical Context

#### 1.1 Postcolonialism and the Legacies of British Colonialism

Many scholars analyze Roy's writings through a postcolonial framework, given that her novels are deeply entwined with India's legacy of British colonization and its repercussions. In *The God of Small Things*, Roy highlights how colonialism has shaped various aspects of Indian society, culture, and politics, particularly concerning social hierarchies and inequality. For example, Anne [6] McClintock (1995) and [1] Homi Bhabha (1994) contend that postcolonial literature often reflects the persistent influences of colonialism on identity and power relations. Roy's portrayal of Kerala society exemplifies this, illustrating how caste, class, and gender structures have been intensified by colonial remnants, even long after the nation achieved

independence. In a similar vein, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* illustrates a fractured postcolonial nation grappling with its internal contradictions, where marginalized groups—including the LGBTQ+ community, Dalits, and religious minorities—struggle against the vestiges of colonial power dynamics. Critics such as [2] Elleke Boehmer (1995) argue that postcolonial literature critically examines the promises of nationalism post-independence, a theme that Roy compellingly addresses through the dystopian settings and disillusioned characters in her work.

## 1.2 Identity Formation in the Postcolonial Context

A central theme in Roy's novels is the examination of fractured identities in the postcolonial context. Her characters frequently grapple with the limitations imposed by caste, religion, and gender. In *The God of Small Things*, the twin protagonists, Estha and Rahel, navigate their identities as individuals who experience both privilege and oppression within a complex socio-political environment. Scholars like Elleke Boehmer (1995) and [7] Spivak (1988) suggest that postcolonial identity emerges from a legacy of marginalization, compelling individuals to constantly negotiate between resistance and subjugation.

Roy's exploration of caste identity is particularly striking, as she illustrates the deep entrenchment of caste stratification in Indian society. The "Love Laws" depicted in *The God of Small Things*—which dictate who is permitted to love and how—serve as a direct critique of the ways in which caste and gender

restrict both personal and communal identities. This theme is poignantly exemplified in the tragic romance between Ammu, an upper-caste woman, and Velutha, a Dalit man, highlighting how oppressive caste boundaries shape individual subjectivity. A critical overview of Roy's political and symbolic strategies—fragmentation, memory, caste, and globalization [19]

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy further investigates non-binary and marginalized identities, especially through the character of Anjum, a hijra (transgender woman). In this narrative, Roy probes the identity of the "Other" in postcolonial India, illustrating how marginalized communities navigate acceptance and exclusion in a fragmented nation. Critical analyses of Anjum's character indicate that Roy engages with Judith [3] Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, emphasizing how gender and identity are constructed and contested within social and political contexts.

## 1.3. Hybridity and Nationalism

Roy's exploration of identity is also shaped by the notion of hybridity, a crucial element of postcolonial theory articulated by Homi Bhabha. In *The God of Small Things*, the postcolonial individual often represents a hybrid entity, navigating the competing pressures of Western influences and indigenous cultural traditions. The character of Baby Kochamma exemplifies this concept of colonial mimicry that Bhabha discusses, as she seeks to align herself with European ideals, even at the cost of her own cultural heritage. This internalized colonial mindset highlights

the identity crisis experienced by many in postcolonial contexts, where the conflict between tradition and modernity is particularly pronounced. In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy critiques the emergence of Hindu nationalism, exploring how national identity is frequently shaped through the marginalization of minority groups, including Muslims and Dalits. Scholars like Partha [4] Chatterjee (1993) have observed that postcolonial nationalism often perpetuates the exclusionary tactics reminiscent of colonial governance. Roy's characters, especially Anjum and others who face marginalization due to their religion and caste, symbolize those left out of the national narrative, providing a critique of the homogenization of identity in postcolonial India.

#### 1.4 Gender and Resistance

Roy's writings are rich with feminist critiques, often examining the intersections of gender, caste, and colonialism. In *The God of Small Things*, Ammu's defiance against patriarchal standards, illustrated through her relationship with Velutha and her struggles within her family, highlights the connection between gender oppression and caste hierarchies in shaping postcolonial identity. Feminist theorists like Gayatri Spivak (1988) have explored how subaltern women in postcolonial narratives resist the dual forces of imperialism and patriarchy, and Ammu can be interpreted as a symbol of resistance, even though she ultimately succumbs to the societal pressures surrounding her. Similarly, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* critiques

gender norms through characters like Anjum, whose identity as a hijra challenges the rigid binaries of gender enforced by both colonial and postcolonial systems of power. Roy's work resonates with intersectional feminist theories that highlight the ways marginalized identities—especially those connected to gender and sexuality—are contested in postcolonial contexts. The overarching theme of resistance in the novel is embodied by characters who challenge the gender norms imposed on them, suggesting that identity is fluid and continuously negotiated within oppressive social frameworks

#### 1.5 Spatial and Environmental Identity

Another significant aspect of postcolonial identity in Roy's work is her focus on spatial and environmental issues. In *The God of Small Things*, the Ayemenem House and its deteriorating surroundings symbolize the decline of postcolonial India, illustrating the instability of both personal and national identities. Scholars like [5] Ghosh (2007) have noted how Roy employs the physical environment to mirror the psychological and political fragmentation experienced by her characters.

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy broadens this ecological critique by examining urban spaces, graveyards, and eco-political conflicts that reflect the fragmented identity of postcolonial India. The displacement of marginalized groups, as highlighted by the Kashmir conflict and the challenges faced by slum residents in Delhi, represents the contested nature of identity in Roy's narratives, where the distinctions

between human and non-human, as well as individual and collective identities, are perpetually blurred.

A paper focusing on the historical dynamics of postcolonialism and contemporary identity in Arundhati Roy's selected works would investigate how her novels depict the lasting effects of colonialism on modern Indian society and the processes of identity formation. The central themes would encompass cultural hybridity, marginalization, and resistance to both colonial and postcolonial systems of oppression.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Colonial Legacies and Cultural Hybridity:

The paper will investigate the enduring influence of colonial ideologies in shaping Indian identity, particularly through cultural and political frameworks that still exhibit Western influences. For instance, *The God of Small Things* can be examined for its depiction of caste oppression and gender dynamics, both of which are deeply entrenched in the hierarchical systems established during the colonial period. The historical context of Kerala and the Syrian Christian community in the novel illustrates the tension between indigenous and colonial identities, a defining feature of postcolonial hybridity.

### 2.2 Marginalization and "Otherness":

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy critiques the marginalization of minority groups, including Muslims and the hijra community. The paper will explore how Roy

employs postcolonial theory to highlight the construction of modern Indian identities through the lens of "otherness," which is rooted in colonial practices of exclusion and exploitation. This examination will connect historical injustices to the ongoing socio-political marginalization observed in contemporary India.

### 2.3 Nationalism and Religious Identity:

The resurgence of nationalist rhetoric, linked to Hindu majoritarianism, can also be analyzed through a postcolonial perspective. Roy's novels frequently critique the imposition of a singular national identity over India's rich, pluralistic reality. This discussion will address how colonial divisions have evolved into communalism in postcolonial India, particularly as illustrated in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*.

### 2.4 Environmental and Ecofeminist Concerns :

Another perspective could involve exploring Roy's engagement with postcolonial ecofeminism, as demonstrated in *The God of Small Things*. The paper will discuss how ecological degradation in postcolonial India reflects capitalist exploitation rooted in colonial resource extraction, while also connecting this to feminist issues, such as the exploitation of women and marginalized communities.

This paper will underscore the continuity of colonial power dynamics in shaping modern identities, utilizing Roy's complex characters and settings to illustrate

how these dynamics are manifested in contemporary India.

### 3. Globalization:

Globalization is often viewed as a continuation of postcolonialism, given its role in perpetuating many of the economic, cultural, and political inequalities established during the colonial era. Although colonial powers may have withdrawn in the mid-20th century, the systems of dominance and exploitation set in place during colonial rule continue to operate in more subtle forms, frequently through the mechanisms of globalization.

### 3. Key Aspects of Globalization as a Continuation of Postcolonialism:

#### 3.1 Economic Exploitation and Dependency

A prominent aspect of the continuation of colonialism through globalization is economic dependency. During colonial times, the wealth and resources of colonies were extracted to benefit imperial powers. In the contemporary global landscape, this pattern persists through neo-colonial economic practices, wherein multinational corporations exploit cheap labor and resources from developing nations. Institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank often impose neoliberal policies on postcolonial countries, which can foster dependency rather than genuine development, a phenomenon explored by theorists such as Samir Amin and Kwame Nkrumah.

The global trade system, motivated by capitalist interests, ensures that many former colonies remain as suppliers of raw materials

or labour markets for the industrialized nations of the West. This ongoing dynamic reflects the continuity of economic imperialism in the contemporary era [8].

#### 3.2 Cultural Imperialism and Identity Erosion

Globalization also functions as a vehicle for cultural imperialism, wherein Western norms, values, and lifestyles are disseminated worldwide, often overshadowing local cultures. Postcolonial theorists like Edward Said and Frantz Fanon have posited that colonialism constituted not only a system of political control but also one of cultural dominance [9,10,11]. Through globalization, Western media, fashion, language, and educational frameworks are often promoted as superior, perpetuating the erasure of indigenous and local cultures in postcolonial societies.

Arundhati Roy critiques the ramifications of this global cultural imperialism in her work, particularly regarding its effects on local traditions and marginalized identities, as exemplified by her depiction of Kerala in *The God of Small Things*. Khattak, Ali & Khattak offer a feminist reading of the novel through Spivak, Trinh, and Loomba's frameworks [20]

### 4. Political and Social Inequalities

The global political landscape, dominated by Western powers, continues to mirror the power imbalances established during colonial times. In postcolonial theory, globalization is perceived as a new form of imperialism, wherein the West retains control



over global decision-making bodies, from the United Nations to international trade organizations. This often sidelines the voices of postcolonial nations, ensuring their subordination within the global order.

Moreover, in a globalized context, the legacy of colonial boundaries and identities remains, contributing to conflict and social divisions, particularly in countries where colonial powers imposed arbitrary borders. This is illustrated in Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, where the Kashmir conflict is portrayed as deeply rooted in colonial-era politics and is exacerbated by contemporary global power dynamics. Slavica Troskot discusses how "O/others" in Roy's novel navigate identity through caste, gender, religion [19,22,23].

#### 4.1 Environmental Degradation and Resource Extraction

Globalization has exacerbated the exploitation of natural resources in postcolonial countries. Under colonialism, resources were extracted to fuel Europe's industrial revolution; today, similar processes are perpetuated under globalization, as developing nations are pressured to export their resources to satisfy global market demands. This exploitation results in environmental degradation and social displacement—issues that Roy addresses in both *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. [12,13,14]. Kalgudi & Pandey (2025) reflect on Roy's narrative style blending fiction and nonfiction, reshaping postcolonial realism and identity [21]

#### Conclusion

Arundhati Roy's works present a rich and nuanced exploration of postcolonial identity, emphasizing how historical, social, and political forces influence both individual and collective subjectivities. Through her sharp critique of caste, gender, nationalism, and environmental concerns, Roy sheds light on the fragmented identities that arise in postcolonial India. Her characters, frequently marginalized or oppressed, navigate the complexities of a society still dealing with the remnants of its colonial past. [16,26,27]

Roy's talent for intertwining postcolonial critique with deeply personal narratives positions her as one of the most vital voices in contemporary Indian literature, inspiring ongoing critical dialogues about identity and resistance. The economic disparities, cultural dominance, and political marginalization rooted in the colonial era have been reconfigured within the global capitalist framework, resulting in persistent power imbalances between the Global North and Global South. Through her novels, Roy delivers a compelling critique of these dynamics, illustrating how postcolonial nations continue to confront the legacies of colonialism in an increasingly globalized context.

#### References:

- Bhabha, Homi. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. Routledge.
- Boehmer, Elleke. (1995). *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*. Oxford University Press.
- Butler, Judith. (1990). *Gender Trouble*. Routledge.

- Chatterjee, Partha. (1993). *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton University Press.
- Ghosh, Bishnupriya. (2007). "An Inordinate Desire for Authorship: *The God of Small Things* in a Transnational Marketplace." *Journal of Contemporary Literature*.
- McClintock, Anne. (1995). *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. Routledge.
- Spivak, Gayatri. (1988). "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg.
- Roy, Arundhati. *The God of Small Things*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1997
- Fhlathuin, Maire ni. "The British Empire". *The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Studies*. Ed. John McLeod. London and New York: Routledge, 2007. (21-32) Print
- International Dalit Solidarity Network ,web [www.idsn.org](http://www.idsn.org), 26 Feb 2011, I am Dalit, how are you. Web. [www.idsn.org](http://www.idsn.org) you, 26 Feb 2011
- "Kathakali." Microsoft® Student 2009 [DVD]. Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation, 2008.
- Loomba Ania. *Colonialism / Postcolonialism*. London, New York: Routledge, 2000. Print
- Mondal, Anshuman. "South and East Asia". *The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Studies*. Ed. John McLeod. London and New York: Routledge, 2007. (139-151) Print.
- Morton, Stephen. "Poststructuralist formulations". *The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Studies*. Ed. John McLeod. London and New York: Routledge, 2007. (161-173) Print
- Chae, Youngsuk. "Postcolonial Ecofeminism in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing\**, vol. 51, no. 5, 2015, pp. 519–30
- Nandi, Miriam. "Longing for the Lost (M)other – Postcolonial Ambivalences in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing\**, vol. 46, no. 2, 2010, pp. 175–86
- Troskot, Slavica. "The Resistant and Resilient Web of O/others in Arundhati Roy's Novel *The God of Small Things*." *SIC Journal: Literature and Culture\**, no. 2, Year 1 (2011)
- Khattak, Zahir Jang, Hira Ali, and Shehrzad Ameena Khattak. "Post-Colonial Feminist Critique of Roy's *The God of Small Things*." *Global Social Sciences Review\**, vol. \[IV–II], no. 44, June 2019.
- Kalgudi, Sunena, and Ratna Pandey. "Unraveling Post-Colonial Identity in Arundhati Roy's Fiction: A Critical Analysis." *International Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Studies\**, vol. 7, no. 2, Part A, 2025, pp. 44–49
- Chae, Youngsuk. "Postcolonial Ecofeminism in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing\**, vol. 51, no. 5, 2015, pp. 519–3
- Nandi, Miriam. "Longing for the Lost (M)other – Postcolonial Ambivalences in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing\**, vol. 46, no. 2, 2010, pp. 175–86.
- Troskot, Slavica. "The Resistant and Resilient Web of O/others in Arundhati Roy's Novel *The God of Small Things*." *SIC Journal: Literature and Culture\**, no. 2, Year 1 (2011).
- Khattak, Zahir Jang, Hira Ali, and Shehrzad Ameena Khattak. "Post-Colonial Feminist

Critique of Roy's *The God of Small Things*." \*Global Social Sciences Review\*, vol. [IV–II], no. 44, June 2019.

Kalgudi, Sunena, and Ratna Pandey. "Unraveling Post-Colonial Identity in Arundhati Roy's Fiction: A Critical Analysis." \*International Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Studies\*, vol. 7, no. 2, Part A, 2025, pp. 44–49.