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Broken Clocks, Broken Laws: Caste, Trauma, and the Unmaking of Time in The God of Small Things

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Abstract- Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* occupies a central position in contemporary Indian English literature because of its radical engagement with caste oppression, trauma, memory, and temporality. This paper examines the relationship between caste violence and fragmented time in the novel, arguing that Roy's nonlinear narrative structure reflects the psychological disintegration produced by social oppression. Through the experiences of Ammu, Velutha, Estha, and Rahel, the novel exposes how caste regulations—described as the “Love Laws”—control intimacy, identity, and historical memory in postcolonial Kerala. Drawing upon trauma theory, postcolonial criticism, psychoanalytic approaches, and caste studies, the paper demonstrates that the novel transforms time into a fractured and unstable experience. The narrative's disrupted chronology, repetitive imagery, and fragmented language reproduce the cyclical return of traumatic memory. This study further argues that Roy uses childhood consciousness and linguistic experimentation to represent forms of suffering that exceed conventional language. Unlike realist narratives that move toward closure, *The God of Small Things* resists resolution and instead foregrounds emotional residue, silence, and historical continuity of violence. The paper also investigates how the body, space, and memory become politically charged sites within the novel. By linking caste-based violence with temporal dislocation, the study contributes to scholarship on trauma fiction and postcolonial literature. Ultimately, the paper argues that Roy's novel portrays trauma not as an isolated personal event but as an inherited social condition embedded in cultural systems and historical structures.

Keywords- Arundhati Roy, caste, trauma, temporality, memory, postcolonialism, narrative fragmentation, violence, childhood, identity.

I. Introduction

The publication of *The God of Small Things* in 1997 marked a defining moment in Indian English fiction. Written by Arundhati Roy, the novel received the Booker Prize and immediately attracted international scholarly attention for its poetic language, fragmented narrative structure, and sharp critique of Indian social hierarchies. Set in Ayemenem, Kerala, the novel explores the tragic consequences of forbidden love between Ammu, a Syrian Christian woman, and Velutha, an “Untouchable” Paravan. Through this relationship, Roy exposes the violence hidden beneath respectable social institutions such as family, religion, law, and caste.



The novel's emotional center lies not merely in the love story itself but in the traumatic aftermath experienced by Estha and Rahel, Ammu's twins. Their memories are fractured by the death of Sophie Mol, Velutha's murder, social humiliation, sexual violence, and forced separation. Roy refuses chronological narration and instead structures the novel around repetition, interruption, and delayed revelation. Time in the novel becomes unstable; the past repeatedly intrudes into the present, collapsing distinctions between memory and reality.

This paper argues that the fragmentation of time in *The God of Small Things* is deeply connected to caste trauma. Roy's nonlinear narrative does not function merely as stylistic experimentation; rather, it reproduces the disorientation of individuals whose lives have been shattered by social violence. The "broken clocks" in the title symbolize the collapse of temporal order caused by historical injustice, while the "broken laws" refer to the oppressive caste system regulating love, desire, and social mobility.

The novel also reveals the hypocrisy of postcolonial Indian society. Although India formally rejects caste discrimination through constitutional law, caste prejudice continues to operate through everyday social practices. Roy demonstrates that institutional modernity cannot easily erase deeply embedded systems of exclusion. Velutha's murder becomes evidence of how caste violence persists beneath the surface of democracy and legality.

The study employs trauma theory, postcolonial criticism, psychoanalytic approaches, and caste studies to examine how Roy links social oppression with temporal fragmentation. By analyzing memory, silence, narrative disruption, childhood consciousness, and linguistic experimentation, the paper explores how trauma transforms individual and collective experiences of time.

The discussion proceeds through several major sections: a review of existing scholarship; theoretical framework; caste and social law; trauma and memory; the politics of temporality; childhood consciousness; body and spatial violence; language and narrative resistance; and the politics of silence. Together, these sections demonstrate how Roy creates a literary universe where historical violence damages not only human relationships but also the structure of time itself.

II. Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with *The God of Small Things* has expanded significantly since the novel's publication. Critics have examined the text from feminist, psychoanalytic, postcolonial, ecological, Marxist, linguistic, and trauma-centered perspectives. Existing studies reveal the richness of Roy's narrative while also highlighting continuing debates regarding caste representation, temporality, and historical memory. One of the earliest critical discussions focused on Roy's innovative narrative style. Critics observed that the novel's fragmented chronology challenges traditional realist storytelling. Linda Hutcheon identifies postmodern narrative fragmentation as a strategy for destabilizing dominant historical narratives, and Roy's novel has often been interpreted within this framework. The novel refuses chronological order and instead presents memory as recursive and unstable.



Trauma theorists have contributed substantially to scholarship on the novel. Cathy Caruth argues that trauma is experienced belatedly because the mind cannot fully process violent events at the moment they occur. This concept strongly aligns with Roy's representation of memory. Estha and Rahel repeatedly revisit traumatic experiences that resist closure or coherent narration.

Anne Whitehead's theory of trauma fiction further illuminates Roy's narrative method. Whitehead explains that trauma fiction often imitates psychological fragmentation through disrupted chronology, repetition, and silence. Roy employs all these techniques throughout the novel. The constant repetition of words, images, and scenes reproduces the compulsive return associated with traumatic memory.

Anja Mrak examines violence and victimhood in the novel and argues that Roy's fragmented structure reflects the emotional disorientation caused by caste oppression. According to Mrak, the novel's narrative instability enables Roy to represent suffering without simplifying it into moral certainty. The nonlinear structure forces readers to participate actively in reconstructing traumatic history.

Margaret Herrick extends trauma theory into the South Asian context by arguing that Western trauma models alone are insufficient for understanding caste-based suffering. Herrick contends that trauma in Roy's novel emerges from collective social structures rather than isolated personal experiences. Caste violence is inherited across generations and embedded within cultural systems.

Joanne Lipson Freed focuses on the ethics of witnessing in traumatic narratives. She argues that Roy's novel complicates the relationship between reader and victim by refusing sentimental closure. Instead of offering redemption, the narrative confronts readers with unresolved suffering and moral ambiguity.

Several scholars have explored caste directly. Mukta Bahadur Nepali compares Roy's novel with Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and examines the representation of Dalit suffering in Indian English fiction. Nepali questions whether upper-caste authors can adequately represent caste trauma while acknowledging Roy's political critique of social oppression.

B. R. Ambedkar's theories remain central to interpretations of caste in the novel. Ambedkar identified caste as a system sustained through endogamy, purity rituals, and social exclusion. Roy's "Love Laws" clearly reflect Ambedkar's understanding of caste as a regulation of intimacy and reproduction.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the "subaltern" also informs scholarship on Velutha. Critics often interpret Velutha as a silenced figure whose voice is mediated through dominant social structures. Although he is central to the narrative's tragedy, he rarely controls narration directly. His body becomes the primary site through which caste violence is communicated.

Postcolonial scholars such as Homi K. Bhabha and Edward Said have influenced readings of the novel's colonial legacy. Bhabha's concept of hybridity helps explain



the cultural anxieties within the Syrian Christian family, while Said's discussions of colonial power illuminate the lingering effects of imperial hierarchy in postcolonial India.

Feminist criticism has focused extensively on Ammu's oppression. Scholars argue that gender and caste intersect within the novel to produce layered forms of vulnerability. Ammu's status as a divorced woman makes her economically and socially dependent upon patriarchal family structures. Her relationship with Velutha threatens not only caste order but also gendered expectations of female sexuality.

Narinder K. Sharma studies childhood trauma and argues that Estha and Rahel's fragmented identities emerge from emotional abandonment and social violence. According to Sharma, the twins' damaged relationship with language reflects their inability to process traumatic memory fully.

Prem Bahadur Dhama explores childhood perception in the novel and suggests that Roy uses child consciousness to expose the irrationality of adult social systems. The children perceive emotional truths that adults refuse to acknowledge openly.

Research on language and form has also become increasingly important. Critics have noted Roy's experimentation with capitalization, repetition, broken syntax, and multilingual phrasing. These linguistic disruptions mirror the instability of memory and identity. Roy's mixing of English and Malayalam further destabilizes colonial linguistic hierarchy.

Environmental and spatial approaches have interpreted *Ayemenem* as a symbolic landscape shaped by decay, memory, and political tension. Scholars argue that the river, house, and History House function as repositories of trauma. Physical spaces preserve emotional residue and historical violence.

Medical humanities scholars Rahman and Hossain interpret the novel through embodiment and psychological suffering. They argue that caste oppression manifests physically through bodily vulnerability, illness, fear, and emotional fragmentation.

Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasized temporality. Critics observe that Roy's manipulation of chronology destabilizes conventional historical progression. However, relatively few studies directly connect fractured temporality with caste violence itself. Most analyses discuss narrative experimentation as a literary technique rather than a political consequence of social oppression.

This paper seeks to address that gap. It argues that the disruption of time in *The God of Small Things* emerges directly from traumatic caste violence. Roy transforms temporality into a political category, demonstrating how oppressive systems fracture memory, identity, and historical continuity.



III. Theoretical Framework

This study combines trauma theory, postcolonial criticism, psychoanalysis, and caste studies to examine the relationship between violence and temporality in *The God of Small Things*.

Trauma theory provides the primary analytical framework. Cathy Caruth argues that trauma is characterized by delayed understanding. Traumatic events are not fully comprehended when they occur; instead, they return repeatedly through memory, dreams, and compulsive repetition. This theory explains the novel's recursive structure and fragmented chronology.

Sigmund Freud's concept of repetition compulsion also informs the analysis. Freud suggests that traumatized individuals unconsciously repeat painful experiences because the mind struggles to master overwhelming events. Roy's repeated phrases and recurring scenes reflect this psychological pattern.

Postcolonial criticism helps situate the novel within broader historical contexts. Colonialism reshaped social hierarchies, linguistic systems, and cultural identities in India. Roy's narrative reveals how colonial legacies intersect with indigenous caste structures. The Syrian Christian family imitates colonial values while simultaneously enforcing caste discrimination.

Bhabha's concept of hybridity is particularly relevant because the novel portrays identities shaped by conflicting cultural influences. Characters move between English and Malayalam, tradition and modernity, socialism and caste prejudice.

Caste studies provide another essential framework. Ambedkar identified caste as a system maintained through social segregation and control over marriage and sexuality. Roy's "Love Laws" embody these mechanisms precisely. The punishment inflicted upon Ammu and Velutha demonstrates how caste operates through emotional regulation and institutional violence.

Psychoanalytic approaches illuminate the role of repression, silence, and childhood memory. Estha's muteness after trauma represents the collapse of symbolic language under emotional pressure. Rahel's fragmented memories similarly reveal the persistence of unresolved psychic wounds.

By integrating these theoretical perspectives, the paper argues that Roy's fragmented temporality reflects both psychological trauma and structural social violence.

IV. Caste and the Architecture of Violence

Caste operates in the novel as a deeply embedded social system regulating identity, intimacy, labor, and mobility. Although characters claim modernity and progressiveness, caste remains omnipresent within daily interactions.

Velutha embodies the contradictions of caste society. He is talented, intelligent, and politically aware, yet his Paravan identity permanently marks him as socially inferior.



Roy repeatedly emphasizes the irony that Velutha is more humane than many upper-caste characters, yet he remains vulnerable to brutal violence.

The relationship between Ammu and Velutha destabilizes caste order because it violates endogamous expectations. Their intimacy threatens the symbolic purity of the Syrian Christian family. The resulting violence demonstrates that caste is maintained through fear and punishment.

Roy exposes the hypocrisy of social morality through Baby Kochamma and Chacko. Baby Kochamma manipulates religious and legal institutions to preserve family reputation, while Chacko enjoys sexual freedom unavailable to Ammu. Patriarchy and caste intersect to produce gendered double standards.

Velutha's death represents the state's participation in caste violence. The police do not investigate truth or justice; instead, they protect dominant social interests. Velutha's body becomes a site upon which social order reasserts itself violently.

The novel further reveals how caste ideology is internalized psychologically. Characters reproduce discriminatory attitudes even when they intellectually oppose caste hierarchy. This internalization demonstrates the durability of oppressive systems.

V. Trauma and Fragmented Consciousness

Trauma shapes nearly every major character in the novel. However, Roy avoids representing trauma as a singular catastrophic moment. Instead, trauma accumulates gradually through humiliation, fear, abandonment, and social exclusion.

Estha experiences sexual abuse at the hands of the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man. This event introduces the theme of bodily violation early in the novel. Estha cannot fully articulate his experience, and the trauma returns repeatedly through fragmented memory.

Sophie Mol's death intensifies the twins' psychological disintegration. The adults' responses transform grief into guilt, forcing Estha and Rahel to internalize responsibility for events beyond their control.

Ammu experiences trauma through patriarchal confinement and social rejection. Her family treats her as economically burdensome and morally suspect because of her divorce. Her relationship with Velutha offers temporary emotional liberation but ultimately leads to destruction.

Roy's narrative structure mirrors traumatic consciousness through repetition and interruption. Readers encounter fragments of traumatic events long before full explanations emerge. This delayed revelation reproduces the uncertainty and incompleteness of traumatic memory.

Silence becomes central to the representation of trauma. Estha's muteness symbolizes the inadequacy of language after violence. Silence in the novel is not emptiness but emotional overload.



VI. The Unmaking of Time

Time in *The God of Small Things* does not move linearly. Instead, it collapses, repeats, and fragments. Roy dismantles chronological progression because trauma itself disrupts ordinary temporal experience.

The narrative constantly shifts between past and present. Readers learn consequences before causes, creating emotional anticipation and inevitability. This structure mirrors the psychological reality of trauma, where painful memories continually intrude upon present consciousness.

The metaphor of “broken clocks” symbolizes the destruction of temporal stability. Traumatized individuals cannot experience time as orderly progression because the past remains psychologically active.

Roy also critiques official history through temporal disruption. Dominant narratives often erase marginalized suffering in favor of national progress and social respectability. By fragmenting chronology, Roy resists simplified historical narratives. Moments of happiness are haunted by future catastrophe. Childhood games contain hidden signs of tragedy, creating an atmosphere where innocence is always temporary. The final chapter exemplifies this temporal collapse. Although chronologically earlier than many preceding scenes, it appears at the novel’s end. Ammu and Velutha’s moment of intimacy becomes suspended outside ordinary historical time.

VII. Childhood Consciousness and Emotional Perception

Childhood perception plays a crucial role in the novel’s emotional structure. Roy frequently filters events through Estha and Rahel’s perspectives, enabling indirect representation of violence.

Children misunderstand many adult realities, yet they perceive emotional tensions with extraordinary sensitivity. Their fragmented understanding reflects the incompleteness of traumatic knowledge.

Roy’s playful manipulation of language reproduces child consciousness. Words are broken apart, repeated, and transformed into sounds. These linguistic experiments simultaneously express innocence and psychological fragmentation.

The twins’ emotional bond further complicates identity. Their shared trauma blurs boundaries between self and other, suggesting collective rather than individual suffering.

Childhood in the novel is not romanticized. Instead, Roy portrays childhood as vulnerable to social violence and emotional manipulation.



VIII. Space, Body, and Memory

Physical spaces in the novel function as repositories of trauma. Ayemenem itself appears haunted by memory and decay. The landscape preserves traces of historical violence.

The river symbolizes both freedom and danger. It becomes associated with escape, death, and forbidden desire. Similarly, the History House represents repressed colonial and caste histories.

Bodies also become politically charged sites. Velutha's tortured body reflects caste violence physically. Ammu's body becomes socially regulated through patriarchal morality.

Roy repeatedly links emotional suffering with bodily sensation. Smells, textures, and sounds trigger traumatic memory, collapsing distinctions between physical and psychological experience.

IX. Language and Narrative Resistance

Roy's linguistic experimentation constitutes political resistance against dominant literary forms. Standard realism often depends upon chronological order and narrative closure, but Roy rejects these conventions.

The novel mixes Malayalam rhythms with English prose, destabilizing colonial linguistic authority. Language becomes hybrid, fluid, and resistant to fixed meaning.

Repetition plays a crucial stylistic role. Phrases recur with altered emotional significance, mirroring the repetitive structure of traumatic memory.

Roy's fragmented syntax and unusual capitalization further disrupt narrative stability. Language itself appears wounded by violence.

The novel also resists moral simplification. Characters are emotionally complex rather than purely heroic or villainous. This ambiguity prevents readers from consuming trauma as sentimental spectacle.

X. Silence, Memory, and the Ethics of Witnessing

Silence occupies a paradoxical position within the novel. It functions simultaneously as repression and testimony. Characters remain silent because trauma exceeds ordinary language, yet silence itself communicates emotional truth.

Estha's muteness represents withdrawal from social communication after unbearable experience. However, silence also protects memory from distortion by dominant narratives.

Roy challenges readers ethically by refusing narrative closure. The novel does not provide redemption or justice because caste violence continues historically beyond the text itself.

Readers become witnesses rather than passive observers. The fragmented narrative demands emotional participation in reconstructing traumatic history.



XI. Conclusion

The God of Small Things transforms caste violence into a narrative of fractured temporality and psychological disintegration. Through nonlinear structure, repetitive language, and traumatic memory, Roy demonstrates how oppressive social systems damage not only individuals but also the experience of time itself.

The novel's "broken clocks" symbolize the collapse of historical continuity under caste oppression, while its "broken laws" expose the violence underlying social morality. Estha, Rahel, Ammu, and Velutha exist within a world where trauma continually returns, preventing closure and emotional stability.

Roy's fragmented narrative structure functions politically by resisting official histories that erase marginalized suffering. The novel insists that trauma cannot remain confined to the past because caste violence continues through institutions, memory, and social relationships.

Ultimately, *The God of Small Things* reveals that time itself becomes wounded under oppressive systems. Trauma transforms chronology into repetition, memory into haunting, and history into unfinished pain. Roy's achievement lies in representing this emotional and historical fragmentation with extraordinary linguistic and structural innovation.

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