



RESEARCH PAPER

Acts of Rebellion: The Subversion of Traditional Gender Roles and the Politics of Desire in Roy's '*The God of Small Things*'

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the ways in which Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* challenges and subverts traditional gender roles through subtle yet powerful acts of personal resistance. Set against the backdrop of a rigidly stratified South Indian society, the novel foregrounds characters—most notably Ammu, Rahel, and Velutha—whose lives and desires conflict with the dominant social order shaped by patriarchy, caste hierarchy, and cultural orthodoxy. Through Judith Butler's Theory of Gender Performativity (1990), the paper examines how personal desire becomes a form of political defiance. Ammu's transgressive love, Rahel's resistance to conventional femininity, and Velutha's socially forbidden relationship with an upper-caste woman all reflect an intimate rebellion against structures that seek to discipline gender, sexuality, and identity. Roy's narrative style—nonlinear, fragmented, and emotionally rich—further mirrors the thematic disruption of normative constructs. The research shows that '*The God of Small Things*' doesn't just tell a story about love, loss, and rebellion—it also critiques the rigid gender roles that dominate both family and society. Through the novel's fractured narrative and multi-layered storytelling, Roy makes it clear that the tension between personal desires and societal pressures is not only heartbreaking but dangerous. By subverting traditional gender binaries and showing the consequences of breaking these rules, Roy reveals the deep scars that these societal constraints leave behind. The findings here open up many exciting possibilities for future research, especially in exploring how other postcolonial works handle gender and sexuality. Future studies could look at how queer identities challenge the national and social boundaries often seen in postcolonial literature. Roy's portrayal of non-normative desires and rebellion invites ongoing conversations about gender fluidity and feminist movements, particularly in the Global South.

Keywords: Gender Subversion, Traditional, Norms, Gender Role, Societal Norms, Conventional, Cultural

Introduction

People are supposed to identify with a particular gender group and live their entire lives in accordance with its norms from the minute they are born. In every cultural setting, gaining acceptance and recognition, often requires real adherence to established norms. Cultural and societal institutions play a role in shaping and controlling gender identities through perceptions, definitions, and the legitimacy. Therefore, cultural norms dictate which identities are deemed acceptable, while others that deviate from these norms are marginalized.

Similarly, hegemonic institutions and power relations inside society sustain cultural arrangements that have the ability to alter how people see the true nature of gender. Therefore, the purported truth about gender identities is deeply rooted in consistent gender norms and cultural regulatory practices. However, contrary to the cultural gendered knowledge of the gender variances in the political construction, the

possibility of reverting the cultural dominance and oppressive gender rules that restrict the natural spirit of existence are re-considered.

Furthermore, (Ainsworth, 2015) maintained that gender subversion was the urge to go beyond predetermined borders and that gender was an artificial reality that could be re-examined. Social roles were truly overturned by the idea of gender subversion of rules, shedding light on the adaptability and fluidity of human socio-cultural performance and roles.

Thus, the gender roles that were defied brought to light the specific limitations that culture places on people's actions and behaviors (Giuliano, 2017). Gender roles are the ways that people act, behave, and think based on gender-based beliefs and societal norms.

A re-evaluation of gender could overthrow the societal predominance established in literature, the arts, and ultimately in daily life (Rahman, 2002; Bauwel, 2003). Therefore, gender is not innate, rather it can change when circumstances demand it, such as shown by different characters in the novel, Margaret's role as a single mother, questions the traditional family structure, especially in the cultural context of the novel. Chacko's peculiar pride in Margaret trading him for a "better man" subverts the typical male ego associated with such situations.

Literature review

Gender roles are the ways that people act, think, and behave based on cultural norms and gender-based beliefs. Furthermore, the idea of subversive gender looked to be expanding and leading the people to revolt against culturally prescribed roles in order to re-evaluate new interpretations and illustrate gender as an unstable form by emphasizing its unnaturalness.

Women are shown as proprietors, protectors, mothers, winners, and receivers. Men are portrayed as losers, slaves, victims. In a way Alderman shifts the conventional wisdom about women's identities in terms of politics, society, history, sexuality, and power. In order to establish their own social discourse, knowledge, identity, history, literature, and nation, powerful men and women always attempt to do so. It has to do with human psychology and nature (Mahat ,2019).

The studies by Riidiger Schnell, Waiter Haug, and Jan-Drik Miller center on normative gender relations and their subversion in poetic notions of marriage and sexuality in medieval ,and early modern literary texts (Brauner,1994).

According to Blackstone (2003), gender roles portray interactions between people and their surroundings, with proper behavior for each sex in a given cultural context. Consequently, the human body had been the site, where cultural norms determined gender composition. Culture plays a major role in human's beliefs, way of life, and behaviors , passed down from generation to generation as part of knowledge (Naz et al., 2018). In a thesis on challenging conventional norms, the author makes argument that gender is not innate. The author's main concern was that gender is socially constructed rather than biological. The thesis set out to analyze the conventional assessment of women (Bhandari, 2019).

Another researcher looked into specific fairy tale figures in "The Land of Stories; Beyond the Kingdom (2015). It was discovered that gender is a social construct that developed as a result of re- current and socially acceptable behaviors. By defying social expectations and gender norms, the characters subverted gender and made us re-think our gender roles (Akram, Imtiaz, &Shafiq, 2020).

The way people act, behave, and think based on cultural norms and gender-based beliefs. Furthermore, the idea of subversive gender looked to be expanding and leading the people to revolt against culturally prescribed roles in order to re-evaluate and reframe new interpretations and illustrate gender as an unstable form by emphasizing its unnaturalness (Abercrombie&Longhurst, 1998). Therefore, the subversive behaviors were the result of numerous limitations placed by society, within a particular culture, outside of the gender binary, and beneath the dominant social flow (Brickell, 2005).

Furthermore, Although subversive attempts could be prevented by the hegemony, but subversion was merely a bare minimum of re-arranging or improving the structures through promising innovative uniqueness and actions (Hyde, 2005). Hence, gender is not innate, rather it can change when circumstances demand it, such as when one's safety, respect or existence are under question. Subversion does not reverse the situation; rather it offers a platform for resistance, even in the face of disapproval.

Therefore, this study attempts to examine that how and under what situations the selected characters (within the novel), subverted gender and questioned the assigned identities, against the set norms through words, thoughts, and deeds. The investigation is directed by per formative Theory of Judith Butler's gender acts (1990). This research examines the subversion of socially constructed norms and values to re-organize and establish gender as an adaptable concept. It would also be interesting to examine the reaction that gender-subverted roles get, among established gender roles.

Material and Methods

This research explores the subversion of traditional gender roles and the politics of desire in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* using a qualitative approach that combines literary analysis, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. By closely examining key scenes and characters, particularly Ammu, Velutha, and Estha-Rahel, the study investigates how these characters perform gender in ways that resist societal expectations, drawing on Butler's notion that gender is not inherent but is enacted through repeated performances. The research, further, focuses on how these performances challenge normative gender roles, particularly through forbidden desires and defiant actions. Discourse analysis will also be used to explore how language reinforces or subverts these roles. The study contextualizes these gender performances within the historical and cultural backdrop of postcolonial Kerala, revealing the ways in which colonial histories, caste, and gender intersect in shaping the characters' desires and actions. Ultimately, the methodology aims to show how Roy's characters embody acts of rebellion against gendered expectations, demonstrating the fluidity and performative nature of gender.

The goal of textual analysis is to elucidate the message's structure, purpose, and substance inside a text (Frey& Kreps, 1999). Textual analysis is a transdisciplinary approach that is utilized extensively in the communication sector, but it is also prevalent in many other social sciences and humanities fields such as literature, history, sociology and psychology etc. Additionally, the approach of textual analysis might include variations that focus on more specific methodologies within these fields such as content analysis, semiotics, interactional analysis, and rhetorical (Smith, 2017).

Theoretical Framework

Judith Butler's theory of Gender Performativity (1990) is used as a theoretical framework in this research. The theory of gender Performativity was introduced by feminist philosopher Judith Butler in her text 'Gender Trouble'(1990). For Butler, gender is what you do, not who you are. Further, she argues that, idea of gender is an act or performance.

Gender is performed not through a single act but through ritualized repetition of behaviors. This type of repetition creates the illusion of stability in gender identity. Repeatedly performing gender roles based on societal expectations reinforces and perpetuates these norms, showing them as unchanging and legitimate (women ought to speak like this, dress like this, men ought to speak like this etc). Performing gender correctly provides us with an assigned role in society and permits us to be acknowledged as a complete authentic subject. Similarly, this performative nature of gender generates the concept of gender while veiling its own origin (Allen, 2022). Butler (1990), considers gender trouble as a means of subverting the western binary awareness of gender and sex. She talked about how societal norms create and reinforce gender acts. It is just an idea, a construct totally unoriginal.

Results and Discussion

'*God of Small Things*' by Arundhati Roy examines gender subversion with the help of characters like Ammu and Velutha, challenging traditional societal norms. Ammu's resistance to conventional roles and her relationship with Velutha, who is a lower-caste man, flout societal expectations, highlighting the subversion of gender and caste norms in the novel. The story illustrates the consequences of such subversion, revealing the repressive systems that oppose nonconformity. In the novel, Ammu is portrayed as a mother and wife from a conservative Indian society who goes against the expected social norms. She has an affair with Velutha who is a man from the untouchable, lower caste challenges both caste and gender norms. Through these characters and their experiences, Arundhati Roy painted a clear picture of a society where breaking caste and gender laws is met with intense consequences, showcasing the common influence of social constructs on characters' lives.

The novel offers a powerful examination of the intricacy of love, identity, and social expectations in a setting with intense social norms. In the novel there is an incident where Estha, a male character defies norms by singing outside the cinema and breaks the expected social behavior. This action goes against the social norms and expectations of how men are supposed to behave especially in public places. In cinema Hall traditional norms might include expectations of quiet and reserved behavior. It is the place where audience is expected to stay quiet. Estha by singing outside the cinema goes against this expected behavior. Audience wants Estha to stop singing and they react negatively.

Text

"She climbs a tree and scrapes her knee
The nuns sneaked musically.
Her dress has got a tear
She waltzes on her way to Mass
And whistles on the stair...
People in the audience were turning around.
"Shhh!" they said.
Shh! Shh! Shh!
And underneath her wimple
She has curlers in her hair"

Discussion

The scene described—of a girl climbing a tree, scraping her knee, whistling on the stairs, and hiding curlers beneath her wimple—is more than just a playful image. It's a quiet but powerful moment of rebellion. She isn't shouting or protesting; she's simply *being herself* in ways that those around her deem inappropriate. These simple actions, however, disrupt the image of what a "proper girl" or a "good woman" is supposed to look and act like.

Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity helps us understand what's happening here. According to Butler, gender isn't something we are, it's something we repeatedly *do*—through the way we dress, speak, move, and behave. Society teaches us these roles, and we perform them, often without even realizing it. A girl is expected to be quiet, obedient, neat, and modest. In this moment, the girl in Roy's story does the opposite—she climbs trees, tears her dress, whistles, and lets a bit of vanity peek out from under her religious costume. Each of these things may seem small, but together they form a gentle defiance of everything she's been taught about how to be a "girl."

The people around her react with disapproval—"Shh! Shh! Shh!"—trying to silence her back into place. This is society at work, reinforcing the rules, reminding her (and us) that deviation will not go unnoticed. But the girl's behavior also shows how those rules are not natural or fixed. They have to be constantly repeated, enforced, and policed. And the moment someone breaks them, even slightly, the illusion of stability starts to crack.

What Roy captures so beautifully in this scene is how acts of rebellion don't always look like protests or speeches. Sometimes they're quiet, even joyful—a girl whistling on the stairs, carefree and full of life. In Butler's terms, she is performing gender differently, making room for other ways of being a girl that aren't about obedience and suppression. And in the world of *The God of Small Things*, where the cost of rebellion is often heartbreak or loss, these early moments of nonconformity remind us that resistance can begin with the smallest, most ordinary gestures.

Text

Ammu held out the crisp matching knickers for her. Rahel, with her hands on Ammu's shoulders, climbed into her new knickers (left leg, right leg).

This interaction subverts the traditional or typical portrayal of how a mother and daughter might interact with each other.

Text

Two-egg Twin Ambassadors. Their Excellencies Ambassador E(lvis). Pelvis, and Ambassador S(tick). Insect

Discussion

In the novel Rahel and Estha are referred as "Ambassadors" it is a term usually linked with authority and statesmanship which is unconventional and challenges the conventional norms assigned to children especially girls. In the closing chapter of the novel Ammu wearing one of Chacko's shirt, it challenges the traditional societal norms of girls dressing and traditional gender norms by portraying her in men's clothing which depart from the socially expected feminine outfit.

Text

He took her face in his hands and drew it towards his. He closed his eyes and smelled her skin. Ammu laughed.

Discussion

In the above paragraph the initiation of physical intimacy by a female character Ammu challenges traditional gender-roles where males are mostly expected to take the initiative and her laughter further indicates her comfort in expressing her desires.

Text

By the time Sophie Mol was born, Margaret Kochamma realized that for herself and her daughter's sake, she had to leave Chacko. She asked him for a divorce.

Discussion

Our society often supports the idea that wives should endure and sustain marriages, no matter how miserable their married life is. Women are supposed to stay in marital relationship even if they are unhappy. But in the novel this convention is challenged by the character Margaret Kochamma who decides to file for divorce. She prioritizes her independence and the happiness of her daughter. This act of getting divorce defies the traditional norm that expects wife to suffer quietly through challenging marriage. This example shows a break from gender norms and it supports one's autonomy and freedom in married life.

Text

He spoke of her often and with a peculiar pride. As though he admired her for divorce him. 'She traded me in for a better man,' he would say to Mammachi...

Discussion

In traditional societal standards, divorce is stigmatized and society expects an individual to feel hurt by such experience. But in novel Roy portrayed it differently. Chacko feels pride of getting divorce which is against societal expectations. His nonconformist pride challenges the traditional male ego associated with divorce. So, it shows an alternative perspective on divorce. Chacko's pride in Margaret divorcing him challenges conventional gender norms related to male ego in such incidents. Chacko expresses a unique pride rather than reacting with expected resentment. In the novel he admires Margaret for selecting what he thinks as a "better man"

Text

"His special targets were Baby Kochamma guests—Catholic bishops or visiting clergy who often dropped by for a snack. In their presence Chacko would take off his sandals and air a revolting, pus-filled diabetic boil on his foot."

Discussion

In the novel Chacko humiliates himself in front of guests. This intentional self humiliation at the dining table breaks the expected traditional norms of dignity and decorum of family gatherings. In the text it is shown that how he explicitly targets the guests. He removes his sandals to show an ugly and puss filled diabetic boil on his foot is an example of breaking traditional norms. This act is against the societal standards and norms which is decorum and formality should be maintained in social gatherings. This action adds a nonconformist point to his character by challenging accepted norms that how people or an individual should behave in social gatherings.

To conclude we can say that in the novel '*The God of Small Things*' by Arundhati Roy there are many characters challenging traditional gender norms such as Velutha, Ammu, Margaret, Estha. Ammu's resistance to conventional roles and her affair with Velutha, who is a lower-caste man, deconstructs societal expectations highlighting the subversion of gender and caste norms in the novel. Ammu has an affair with Velutha who is a man from untouchable lower caste, it challenges both gender and caste norms. We can find many instances of subverting traditional gender norms in this novel through various

characters, such as unconventional behavior of Chacko in front of Baby Kochamma guests, Margaret's role as a single motherhood and her decision to take divorce, Ammu's affair with Velutha and Chacko's pride in Margaret trading him for a better man. Consequently, We find that, these unconventional relationships, divorces, and Chacko's pride in Margaret's decision to divorce him challenge conventional gender norms and values.

Conclusion

At its heart, *The God of Small Things* tells the story of people who refuse to be boxed in by the roles society assigns them—especially when it comes to gender. Ammu dares to love outside the boundaries set for her as a woman, a daughter, and a mother in a conservative, patriarchal world. Velutha, too, crosses lines he's not supposed to—those of caste, class, and masculinity. Even Estha and Rahel, in the quiet, complex ways they navigate identity, grief, and connection, push back against the idea that gender or love must follow strict rules. When we look at these characters through Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity—the notion that gender isn't something we *are*, but something we *do*, over and over—it becomes clear that their acts of defiance are more than just personal choices. They're acts that reveal how fragile and constructed our ideas of gender really are. Roy's novel shows us what happens when people stop performing the roles expected of them: the world around them resists, punishes, but also—momentarily—makes room for something more honest. In doing so, the story reminds us that real change often starts with small acts of rebellion, with choosing truth over tradition, even when the cost is high.

Recommendation

One important takeaway from this research is the need to bring more attention to voices from postcolonial and non-Western contexts when we talk about gender, identity, and resistance. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* powerfully shows how deeply gender roles are tied to social structures like caste, family, and colonial history—and how acts of desire and defiance can become forms of rebellion. Future studies should explore similar themes in other postcolonial works to better understand how gender is experienced and challenged across different cultures. It's also important for schools and universities to include these kinds of stories in their literature and gender studies courses, so students can see how gender isn't just about identity but also about power, history, and the right to love and live freely. Beyond the classroom, these insights can help shape real-world conversations and advocacy around gender equality, especially in places where tradition still heavily influences personal freedom. Literature, in this way, becomes more than just storytelling—it becomes a mirror and a tool for change.

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