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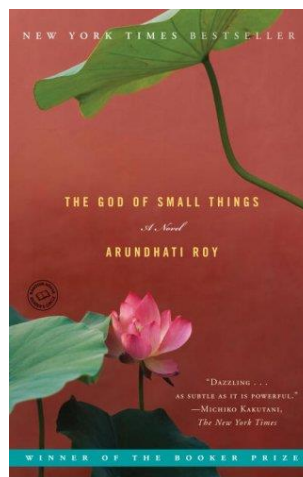
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*The God of Small Things: Representation of Violence*

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## Abstract

In her novel *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy represents violence as the problem in raising the voices of protest. She has written essays protesting against the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. She attacks the use of nuclear weapons, which could end in the dislocation of millions, through the *Narmada* dam project. Her novel is analyzed as the portrayal of violence against the weaker sections of Indian society such as women,

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children, lower-caste, the powerless and the poor. Roy has powerfully represented violence through the intelligent imitation of social happenings. The tragic murder of the male protagonist represents the prototype of the socio-political violence against the lower-caste. Ammu is rejected for her love affair with the lower caste. Her tragic death represents the suffering of women. In a nutshell, Roy raises the voice of protest against the domestic as well as the socio-political violence which in turn is universally appealing.

**Keywords:** representation, domestic violence and socio-political violence

## **Introduction**

Non-expatriate Indian woman writer and social activist Arundhati Roy was born on 24 November 1961, in Meghalaya, one of the states of North-East India and was educated in Kerala, a state of South India. She moved to Delhi for higher studies and joined the Delhi School of Architecture. She has worked as a film designer, actor and screen-play writer. Meanwhile, she wrote her first novel *The God of Small Things* which was first published in 1997 and became tremendously successful. She is the first Indian woman to win Britain's premier Booker Prize for it. In addition, she has also received the *Lannan Foundation Award 2002*, *Noam Chomsky Award 2003*, *Norman Mailer Prize 2011* for her literary works and *Sidney Peace Award 2004* for the promotion of human rights and non-violence.

## **2. Roy's Works**

### **2.1. Essays**

Arundhati Roy's major writing till date includes: *The End of Imagination*, *The Cost of Living*, *The Greater Common Good*, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, *Power Politics*, *War Talk*, *An Ordinary Person's Guide To Empire*, *Public Power in the Age of Empire*, *The Checkbook and the Cruise Missile: Conversations with Arundhati Roy*, *The Shape of the Beast: Conversations with Arundhati Roy*, *Listening to Grasshoppers: Field Notes on Democracy*, *Broken Republic: Three Essays*, *Walking with the Comrades*. Through these writings, she continuously opposes the *Narmada Dam* project, India's plan for nuclear weapons and the corrupted bureaucracy. She is an advocate of anti-globalization and alter-globalization and neo-imperialism.

## 2.2. Novel

Arundhati Roy has powerfully presented domestic and socio-political violence faced by all weaker sections of human society including women, children, the aged, the disabled, the poor, the powerless and the lower caste in her novel. Hence, the study title is chosen - *The God of Small Things*: Presentation of Violence.

### 3. *The God of Small Things*: Presentation of Domestic Violence

Ammu is the female protagonist and the daughter of a Syrian Christian family of Kerala. She marries Baba, a Bengali man and divorces him when he turns out to be a violent alcoholic and a brutal abuser. She returns to her parental home in Kerala, and undergoes beatings and violence from her maniacal father who is described as 'monstrous' and a 'suspicious bully' for his brutal beatings of his wife, as the narrator describes him: "But alone with his wife and children he turned into a monstrous, suspicious bully, with a streak of vicious cunning. They were beaten, humiliated and then made to suffer the envy of friends and relatives for having such a wonderful husband and father." (180)

In her childhood, Ammu has to run out of her home in the middle of the night in order to escape the beatings of her brutal father, "Ammu had endured cold winter nights in Delhi hiding in the *mehndi* hedge around their house (in case people from Good Families saw them) because Pappachi had come back." (180-81) He was an "ill-tempered father" (39) as the narrator reports, "When he finished beating her he made her bring him Mammachi's pinking shears from her sewing cupboard." (181) She suffers violence from her sadist father, "her father looked at her with cold, flat eyes, and rocked and rocked and rocked." (181)

Moreover, Ammu is deprived of education because, "Pappachi insisted that a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl [. . .]" (38), whereas, her brother Chacko is sent to Oxford University for higher education. She waits for redemption by means of marriage in the society that strictly observes dowry system. The narrator says, "Since her father did not have enough money to raise a suitable dowry, no proposals came Ammu's way. Two years went by. Her eighteenth birthday came and went. [. . .] She grew desperate." (38) She wants liberation from her father and, "All day she

dreamed of escaping from Ayemenem and the clutches of her ill-tempered father and bitter long-suffering mother.” (39)

Ammu gets married hoping for the liberation from her father; but, her married life turns out to be an extremely unpleasant as, “Her husband turned out to be not just a heavy drinker, but a full-blown alcoholic with all of an alcoholic’s deviousness and tragic charm.” (40)

Ammu’s husband Baba works under Mr. Hollick, the English Manager who is upset about his carelessness, and hence, cunningly intends to exploit his wife Ammu sexually: “Mr. Hollick suggested that Ammu be sent to his bungalow to be ‘looked after’.” (41-42) She is forced to go to Hollick’s bungalow, but she is reluctant. The narrator says:

He grew uncomfortable and then infuriated by her silence. Suddenly he lunged at her, grabbed her hair, punched her and then passed out from the effort. [. . .] immediately began to badger her about helping with his transfer. This fell into a pattern. Drunken violence followed by post-drunken badgering. (42)

Ammu has “returned, unwelcomed, to her parents in Ayemenem.” (42) She is not given proper education, yet she is not dependent on others. She does much work in her mother’s pickle factory, nevertheless, “as a daughter, had no claim to the property.” (57) She was tortured, tormented and abused verbally by her aunt Baby Kochamma for her inter-caste marriage.

In an extreme loneliness, Ammu falls in love with Velutha but for her brother and aunt, “She was just that sort of animal” (180), and her brother Chacko expells her from her parental home saying, “Get out of my house before I break every bone in your body!” (225). According to critic K. V. Surendran, “Ammu’s is more than a tragedy” (65). Once she is pushed out, she is left with nothing. She has no recognition, no family and no love. She becomes jobless, penniless and sick. Her existence becomes meaningless. Her hope turns to hopelessness. The narrator states:

Ammu died in a grimy room in the Bharat Lodge in Alleppey, where she had gone for a job interview as someone's secretary. She died alone. With a noisy ceiling fan for company and no Estha to lie at the back of her and talk to her. She was thirty-one. Not old, not young, but a viable, die-able age. (161)

Ammu's mother Mammachi spends her life in persistent physical abuse, interruption, destruction, disturbance, beating, devastation, torture, torment and criticism. Consequences of her husband's beatings are illustrated as, "On her scalp, carefully hidden by her scanty hair, Mammchi has raised, crescent-shaped ridges. Scars of old beatings from an old marriage. Her brass vase scars." (166) Her skull is permanently damaged and deeply marked by physical injury through beatings. It is stated, "Every night he beat her with a brass flower vase. The beatings weren't new. What was new was only the frequency with which they took place. One night Pappachi broke the bow of Mammachi's violin and threw it in the river." (47-48) Critic C. Gopinatha Pillai's comments about Pappachi as, "In him, Patriarchal authoritarianism coincides with misogynistic misdemeanours manifest in his violence towards his wife Mammachi, and daughter, Ammu" (88). Mammachi is characterized as a "bitter long-suffering mother" (39), who represents all Indian mothers suffering from domestic violence under gender discrimination in the Indian patriarchal homes. Her son Chacko suppresses his mother Mammachi in all decision making. Kundu opines about Roy's depiction: "She also shows how women and the untouchable are both treated as impersonal and subjugative objects [. . .]." (96)

Child characters, the twins Estha and Rahel are victims of vicious domestic violence, perpetrated on them by their father, and Ammu had left her husband only for this reason. They suffer domestic violence together with their mother in Ayemenem house also. They were prohibited from having friendship with the untouchable Velutha. The narrator states, "They were forbidden from visiting his house, but they did" (78). Their mother Ammu scolded them and Chacko spoke against her, "'It's fascist, the way you deal with them,' Chacko said. 'Even children have some rights, for God's sake!'" (85). They felt unwanted. K. V. Surendran says, "Barring a few golden moments like the ones they spent with Velutha, they were failing, failing miserably to live like the other

children. In this sense the whole novel tells about their tragedy, the tragedy of Estha and Rahel.” (68) The words generate extreme pathos and they were tragic characters.

Estha has been characterized as “quietness”, whereas, Rahel has been characterized as “emptiness”. They lived utterly lonely and meaningless lives. When their best friend Velutha is arrested and taken into police custody, Baby Kochamma forces them to speak falsely against him by threatening to imprison them. When Sophie Mol was drowned, Estha and Rahel desperately tried to save her, but it was all in vain. Yet their aunt Margaret thought that they killed her, “She said nothing, but slapped Estha whenever she could in the days she was there before she returned to England” (31). Baby Kochamma blamed them as murderers “‘It’s a terrible thing to take a person’s life,’ Baby Kochamma said, ‘You know that I know that it wasn’t an accident. I know how jealous of her you were’.” (316) They were harassed, abused and intimidated by her as, “How you forced her to go with you although you knew that she couldn’t swim. How you pushed her out of the boat in the middle of the river. It wasn’t accident, was it?” (316-17).

By harassing the twins Baby Kochamma wants them to confess the lie to the police. That is why she hurts, intimidates and tortures them. The narrator speaks about their broken experience: “By then Esthappen and Rahel learned that the world had other ways of breaking men.” (6) Estha is forced to return to his father as words go, “That Estha be Returned”. (322) The narrator comments on Estha, “His expulsion from Ayemenem had been so sudden and unceremonious, and so very long ago.” (14)

Rahel remains in the Ayemenem house and suffers, drifting from one school to another, and spends eight years in college, in Delhi, without getting a degree. Her meaningless life under the ruggedly patriarchal society has been intensified: “Without anybody to arrange a marriage for her, without anybody who would pay her a dowry and therefore, without an obligatory husband looming on her horizon” (17). Rahel marries an American, and goes to the United States with her husband. But her frustrating conjugal life makes her a divorcee just like her mother and then she returns to Ayemenem to meet her twin brother Estha.

#### 4. *The God of Small Things*: Representation of Socio-political Violence

J. P. Tripathi writes that, “we note that the brightest part of the novel is the social criticism that Arundhati Roy presents through it and her exposures of the hypocrisies, envies and secret jealousies of the people by means of satire, irony and sarcasm” (42). Roy presents the cruel consequences of the caste system of India and explicitly acknowledges the continuing untouchability. K. M. Pandey wrote a paper on this novel, and stated about such presentation: “The present paper aims at studying the novel as a love story whose dimensions touch and are touched by caste, creed and other socio-political realities existing in the regionally contextualized boundaries of the South Indian State of Kerala.” (47) Mallikarjun Patil comments that, “Arundhati Roy has criticized both casteism of Hindu society and male superiority in different walks of Indian life” (57).

M. Dasan says that all the protest movements of the untouchable people of Kerala have been the result of the continual practices of the caste system that Roy has depicted: “Contemporary political polarisation in Kerala and India - the assertion of Dalit identity and consolidation of Dalit political power, the emergence of Dalit Bahujan forces as the fourth national party - makes it difficult to dismiss Arundhati’s observation.” (27)

Ammu suffers socio-political rejection as she speaks, “There was much trauma for me in the 60s as Kottayam did not accept me as I was a woman separated from my husband.” (5) She is not allowed to take part in the public ceremony with others. In Sophie Mol’s funeral ceremony, she is separated from the rest of her Syrian Christian community members. The narrator says, “Though Ammu, Estha and Rahel were allowed to attend the funeral, they were made to stand separately, not with the rest of the family. Nobody would look at them.” (5) They suffer public humiliation. Mohit K. Roy’s comments about Ammu: “At her home and in her family and the society she became virtually ‘untouchable’.” (67) When her lower caste lover Velutha is beaten severely by the policemen, she went to the police station to save him, by revealing the truth to the police inspector Thomas Mathew. In contrast, the inspector Mathew attempts to terrorize her so that she would be afraid to reveal the truth. He considers her a prostitute (*or veshya*), and “[. . .] his eyes were sly and greedy” (7).



Ammu's aunt Baby Kochamma says to the police that she is a prostitute and Estha and Rachel are illegitimate children. This is a false statement to put her to shame and humiliation. When Inspector Mathew realises that innocent Velutha was killed by mistake, his reaction is terrible: "Then he tapped her breasts with his baton. Gently. Tap, Tap. As though he was choosing mangoes from a basket. Pointing out the ones that he wanted packed and delivered." (8) "It was a premeditated gesture, calculated to humiliate and terrorize her. An attempt to instil order into a world gone wrong" (260). J. P. Tripathi writes, "Naturally enough, her own mother, aunt, brother and society in general impose punishment" (33). The narrator states, "The church refused to bury Ammu on several counts. So Chacko hired a van to transport the body to the electric crematorium" (162). Further, it is written, "Nobody except beggars, derelicts, and the police-custody dead were cremated there, people who died with nobody to lie at the back of them and talk to them" (162). Dushyant B. Nimavat comments, "She became the victim of the male dominated society" (143).

Christians are not supposed to practice caste system; ironically, the *Brahmin* Syrian Christians of Kerala have been continuously practicing it and it is apparent from the narrator's comments, "Pappachi would not allow Paravans into the house" (73). The term 'paravan' refers to the people of lower caste. Mammachi exploits, discriminates, dominates, pressurizes, and hates the lower-caste people. She pays less to Velutha as he was an untouchable man; every other touchable betrays him.

Velutha fixes everything around Ayemenem House, from the factory's canning machine to the cherub fountain in Baby Kochamma's garden. He proves himself as an essential worker for each one's existence. He becomes substitute to Ammu's husband and the twins' father. Therefore, he is referred to by the title of the novel, *The God of Small Things* (330). A. N. Dwivedi says, "Thus, 'the small things' in the title of the novel suggests the fulfilment of sexual hunger, the satiety of physical desires. Hence the title is a pointer to the unrequited love of Ammu and Velutha. It is Velutha who is 'the God of Small Things' for Ammu" (9). J. P. Tripathi also opines the similar idea about him as, "Velutha is the giver, the god of these small things to the children of Ammu. He is the



alter-ego of a husband to Ammu and that of a father to her children, without formalization of relations.” (29)

Nevertheless, the higher caste factory workers become jealous of him and compel their leader K. N. M. Pillai to terminate his job contract. The touchables resent and wish ill for him. The leader Pillai plays the double role, both as the protagonist and the antagonist. He says to Chacko at his meeting with him, ““That Paravan is going to be trouble for you’ he said. ‘Take it from me ... get him a job somewhere else. Send him off’.” (278)

Communism, as a principle, does not discriminate the people on the basis of caste, colour, creed, religion, and ethnicity. Nevertheless, Pillai discriminates against Velutha for the political gain from the higher caste factory workers and says to Chacko, “Send him away? But why? I have no objections to him being a card-holder.” (278) Although he is the only card-holding member among all factory workers, he is the one denied of all his rights and privileges.

Although Baby Kochamma appreciates Velutha’s hard work, sincerity and honesty, yet “She began to hate him” (82), as she realizes that he loves Ammu and she seeks an opportunity to destroy him. Thereafter, she speaks a lie against him at every twist and turn. She blames him as the kidnapper of three children; she tells lies that he had threatened women of the house. She fabricates details to turn a simple case of accident into a murder. The narrator states: “Baby Kochamma misrepresented the relationship between Ammu and Velutha, not for Ammu’s sake, but to contain the scandal and salvage the family reputation in Inspector Thomas Mathew’s eyes” (259).

Ammu visits the police station with the intention of revealing the truth. Baby Kochamma hears about it and is terrified. Hence, she forms a plot against her: “she had to get Ammu out of Ayemenem as soon as possible” (321).

Even though Velutha has gotten political protection, Pillai denies it. Although Pillai knows that Velutha has been falsely blamed, he refuses to speak on behalf of him. Pillai betrays Velutha completely in order to please the fellows of his caste. Critic Vinita

Bhatnagar writes about Velutha: “His tragedy is representative of the fate of the untouchables” (95). Twinkle B. Manavar writes, “Velutha stands out as the representative of the untouchables in the novel. They were a class of people who were not allowed to walk on the public roads, not allowed to cover their upper bodies and not allowed to carry umbrellas.” (124) Velutha, the lover of Ammu and her twins, is severely beaten and destroyed. The narrator says, “In the back verandah of the History House, as the man they loved was smashed and broken” (309).

Roy uses certain terms to intensify the violence against the lower caste Velutha - “brutality”, “urge to destroy” (308), “complete monopoly”, “damaged him”, and “smashed and broken” (309). The brutality is more accurately stated in the following lines:

Four of his ribs were splintered, one had pierced his left lung, which was what made him bleed from his mouth. The blood on his breath bright red. Fresh. Frothy. His lower intestine was ruptured and haemorrhaged, the blood collected in his abdominal cavity. His spine was damaged in two places, the concussion had paralysed his right arm and resulted in a loss of control over his bladder and rectum. Both his knee caps were shattered. (310)

The senselessness of the police is depicted as, “One of them flicked at his penis with his stick. ‘Come on, show us your special secret. Show us how big it gets when you blow it up.’ Then he lifted his boot (with millipedes curled into its sole) and brought it down with a soft thud.” (311) Velutha’s situation worsens: “And the God of Loss. He couldn’t walk. So they dragged him” (312).

Because he is from an untouchable community as defined by the Hindu religion, Velutha is betrayed by his master and mistress, by his leader and colleagues. In a desperate situation, his own father Vellya Paapen also betrays him because of the fear of society. In fact, each of them is supposed to uphold his rights. Ironically, all of them speak ill of him. The whole cosmos seems to be antagonistic to him, because he loves the unloved one (Ammu) and that love ultimately kills him. She accepts it; “‘He’s dead,’ Ammu whispers to him. ‘I’ve killed him’.” (8) According to G. D. Barche, “The sea of our society swallows them up”. (45)

Moreover, the author presents violence against children, child-abuse and child-negligence. Estha was eleven years old; he was sexually exploited by the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man in a movie hall. He told Estha to masturbate his penis, “Estha held it because he had to”. (103) Estha’s terror is described as, “a Little Man’s first encounter with Fear” (119). Further, it says, “The lemondrink was cold and sweet. The penis hot and hard”. (103) Orgasm or climax is depicted as, “Then the gristly-bristly face contorted, and Estha’s hand was wet and hot sticky. It had egg white on it. White egg white. Quartered-boiled”. (104) Estha was “Feeling vomity” (107), when semen fall in his hands. By representing this incident, Roy makes her readers aware of the violence against children. She sarcastically states:

‘India’s a Free Country,’ Estha said.

No one could argue with that.

India was a Free Country.

You could make salt. Row jam, if you wanted to.

The Orangedrink Lemondrink Man could just walk in through the gauze doors.

If he wanted to. (197)

Estha represents a child abuse in public, and thus, a socio-political violence because this incident led him to the loss of the capacity of expression. He became quiet, hence, characterized as “quietness”, for he could never ever share this shameful torture. He passed through a stage of mental tormentation of masturbation and the abominable semen in his hand. A. N. Dwivedi comments as, “Arundhati has definitely succeeded, through this episode, in raising the issue of child-abuse and child-negligence”. (136)

Everybody else sleeps well in the hotel room, but he could never. The narrator says, “Estha Alone walked heavily to the bathroom. He vomited a clear, bitter, lemony, sparkling, fizzy liquid”. (119) He is tortured and tormented by Baby Kochamma at the police station. As a result “quietness” captures his whole being. He stops speaking. The narrator says, “Once the quietness arrived, it stayed and spread in Estha. It reached out of his head and enfolded him in its swampy arms”. (11) Further it is stated as, “Slowly, over the years, Estha withdrew from the world”. (12)

Furthermore, the police call Estha an “illegitimate”, and his mother a “*veshya*”. (8) The twins saw their mother Ammu crying with tears after the police Inspector tapped her breasts with his baton, “It made the twins sick with fear”. (8) People of Ayemenem perpetually hate them because they are not the children of a Syrian Christian. It is written, “Worse still, they were Half Hindu Hybrids whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian would ever marry” (45). They represent the violence and hatred against the mixed-blood and they are separated from others in all the social activities. (5)

The manager’s attempt to exploit Ammu sexually makes her husband force her to submit to the manager. Abuse of authority is represented here when powerless workers suffer violence under a powerful manager. As an English Manager, he certainly represents the colonial power that exploited India for centuries.

Roy presents the exploitation of the workers even in the post-colonial India. Their reasons for the revolution, and the demands are stated as:

Their demands were that paddy workers, who were made to work in the fields for eleven and a half hours a day - from seven in the morning to six-thirty in the evening - be permitted to take a one-hour lunch break. That women’s wages be increased from one rupee twenty-five paise a day, to three rupees, and men’s from two rupees fifty paise to four rupees fifty paise a day. (69)

The workers are given less wages and made to work for the extra long hours. Moreover, Kerala is facing the problems of unemployment and famine. Mammachi also exploits her workers by giving inadequate wages to them. Hence, the workers are dissatisfied. The entire factory workers of India have been experiencing the same kind of exploitation by the masters. Representing their situation, Roy raises the voices of protest against such exploitation.

## 5. Conclusion

This research aimed at analysing Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* presents violence as a problem in order to raise the voice of protest against agonies and sufferings of the suppressed people. Roy has spoken on behalf of the suffering subjects of India as their representative, and opposed violence generating customs, culture, religion, systems and practices. The novel can be considered an apologetic writing- as a formal written defence that strongly opposes the problems of domestic and socio-political violence against women, children, lower-caste, poor and the powerless people of Indian society. It is universally appealing because violence is not the property of Indian society as it is universal.

Roy suggests that the traditional social structure of India as a whole plays a role of an antagonist to destroy the lives of the weak and innocent human beings. This can be understood implicitly and explicitly by means of her presentation of a situation in which a higher-caste woman Ammu and a lower-caste man Velutha have fallen in love. This is the breaking of the social taboos - the narrow orthodoxy of the caste system. Velutha has been projected as a gentle lover who satisfies his partner, "He kissed her eyes. Her ears. Her breasts. Her belly". (337)

Roy opposes the rough handling of wives by their brutal husbands, "The Kathakali Men took off their make-up and went home to beat their wives. Even Kunti, the soft one with breasts". (236) Men in society act in dramas and show that they are kind and gentle towards their women. In actuality, they beat their wives in their homes. Every sentence of the novel is satiric. Critic A. N. Dwivedi, has got a similar opinion about Roy's presentation. He says, "She seems to be a harsh critic of the traditional way of Indian life, especially the one that Indian women have been leading" (11). K. M. Pandey writes, "Thus, the Ammu-Velutha relationship is portrayed as a protest against the existing laws of society". (54)

The lower-caste Velutha has been beaten to death by the higher-caste policemen. It is the common phenomena in the caste-ridden society India. According to Roy it is the "Feelings of contempt born of inchoate, unacknowledged fear – civilization's fear of nature, men's fear of women, power's fear of powerlessness". (308) Roy's portrayal of Velutha's persecution, abuse and ill-treatment in the hands of the policemen speaks in

itself that such brutality is violation of human rights. She vigorously opposes such violence. Velutha is an apostle of non-violence. Twinkle B. Manavar appreciates him as:

In his 'affair' with Ammu he was unique in his own way. He was a very good friend to Estha and Rahel. His loyalty to the party was unquestionable and as trade unionist he was committed to protect the rights of his fellow workers at any cost. His place is certainly nearer to a Shakespearean tragic hero. (129)

Roy has raised her voice of protest against the problems of violence against children in the characters of Estha and Rahel. Their sufferings in the hands of their father and, torture and harassment in Ayemenem house; Estha's sexual exploitation by the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man and the terrorization by the police - all these destroyed his personality.

The novel portrays gender discrimination. The character of Chacko is promiscuous, but his mother Mammachi and aunt Baby Kochamma have no objection to it. When Ammu has no one to love, and when she is loved by Velutha, they oppose and destroy both of them.

Roy attacks the selfishness of Communists in the character of Comrade Pillai who betrays his innocent and honest party worker Velutha and violently captures Chacko's pickle factory. She attacks the selfishness of the colonizers in the character of the English manager Mr. Hollick who wants to exploit the wife of his Indian worker. Roy also protests against the exploitation of the workers who receive inadequate payment for their work. This has been presented through the less paid workers of Mammachi's factory.

In this way, Arundhati Roy has accurately and explicitly presented, and vividly depicted the problems of domestic and socio-political violence of India; thus, the novel *The God of Small Things* is a protest novel and it portrays violence.

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