



Research article

# The Defiant Faces: Intersectionality in Arundhati Roy's Resistance Narratives

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## Abstract

This study examines the multilayered concept of resistance in Arundhati Roy's novels *The God of Small Things* (1997) and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017). By foregrounding the voices of marginalized individuals, Roy critically examines systemic inequalities, caste discrimination, and state violence. While existing literary scholarship acknowledges the victimization and marginalization of subaltern women under traditional gender roles, caste systems, politics, and religion, this research highlights how these women actively resist such injustices. Utilizing theoretical frameworks from Guha, Spivak, Gramsci, and Crenshaw, the paper explores the intersectionality of personal and political resistance. It discusses Roy's critique of power structures and her advocacy for justice and human dignity. Thus, the study unveils the layers of defiance in Roy's unique portrayal of varied resistance strategies in her narratives.

**Keywords:** resistance, violence, injustices, subaltern consciousness, political resistance, gender and identity.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declared no conflicts of interest.

**Funding:** No funding was received for this research.

**Article History:** Received: 20 October 2024. Revised: 25 December 2024. Accepted: 28 December 2024. First published: 31 December 2024.

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**Published by:** [Aesthetix Media Services, India](#)

**Citation:** Sharma, K. P. (2024). The Defiant Faces: Intersectionality in Arundhati Roy's Resistance Narratives. *Rupkatha Journal* 16:4. <https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v16n4.14>



## Introduction

Arundhati Roy's literary works are deeply rooted in the socio-political discourse of contemporary India. Apart from political and intellectual activism, her novels like *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* deal with the lives of marginalized characters, particularly women, as Gayatri Chakrabarti Spivak explicitly focuses on the subaltern classes in the history of nationalism and the nation and resists to all elitist biases in the writing of history (1998: 445). In *The God of Small Things*, characters like Ammu and Rahel challenge patriarchal structures. Ammu defies societal expectations by marrying a man from a different caste and later engaging in an inter-caste relationship. Rahel, too, rejects traditional gender roles, leading a life unconventional for women of her time. Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* also depicts subaltern women's victimization and struggle, incorporating events from the partition of India to almost the early 21st century. Most marginal female characters in the novel have resisted injustice by questioning and breaching social, political, and cultural norms and values to construct a world of happiness for all people in a broader social context. For instance, Anjum was not accepted in her home and society as she was born with both male and female genital organs; however, she rejected traditional gender roles and left her home to construct a world welcoming all the neglected and ignored people. Tilotama struggled for the betterment and freedom of Kashmiri women, and Revathy fought for the freedom of other exploited working-class women.

This study is based on a research question on how subaltern women resist the injustices in Roy's select narratives and how subaltern women's resistances against injustice differ in their treatment. Roy's novels *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* depict the devastating ground reality of marginalized, victimized, and exploited women from multiple layers of injustices constructed by established social, cultural, religious, and political systems in India in the fictional form and these exploited and marginalized women have resisted against the injustices by questioning and revolting against such established social norms and values. However, their ways of resistance against such injustice have differed in both her novels. Thus, Roy's novels have differently depicted marginal women's resistances against the injustice on them in their contemporary time frameworks of India.

## Literature Review

Arundhati Roy's writing has explored profound issues and themes like caste, gender, identity, and political and social injustices. The narratives in *The God of Small Things* (1997) and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) address India's socio-political realities, establishing her voice in contemporary literary scholarship. Scholars have analyzed these works for their intricate narrative techniques, critical engagements with environmental issues, postcolonial underpinnings, and intersectional critique of power structures.

Scholars like Nair (2002) have underscored the novel's depiction of caste oppression, particularly through the tragic love affair between Ammu and Velutha, a Paravan. Nair argues that Roy challenges entrenched caste hierarchies by humanizing characters marginalized by societal norms. Similarly, Chacko (2005) highlights how Roy critiques patriarchal structures through the plight of Ammu, whose life is constrained by gendered expectations. The narrative's nonlinear structure

and fragmented chronology have also attracted significant attention. Banerjee (2008) suggests that these narrative techniques reflect the fragmented lives of the characters and their struggle to reconcile personal trauma with collective memory. Furthermore, D'Cruz (2010) emphasizes interweaving personal and political histories, arguing that Roy's portrayal of postcolonial Kerala offers a microcosm of India's sociopolitical complexities.

Roy's second text under scrutiny expands her thematic scope to include nationalism, environmental degradation, and religious fundamentalism. Ahmed (2018) contends that the novel's depiction of interlinked narratives mirrors the interconnectedness of socio-political struggles in contemporary India. The portrayal of Anjum, a transgender woman, and her creation of a sanctuary for marginalized individuals is a focal point for critics like Sharma (2019), who argue that Roy reimagines the possibilities of community and resistance in the face of systemic oppression.

Religious fundamentalism emerges in Roy's work as a major theme, with studies showing how the Hindu nationalist agenda marginalizes religious minorities. For example, Iyer (2018) illustrates how Roy highlights the oppression of religious minorities during events like the Gujarat riots and the Kashmir conflicts. Similarly, Maerhofer (2015) shows that Roy critiques India's Hindu-dominated society, which curtails Muslim rights in the quest to establish a Hindu state. Other scholars, such as Joshi (2020), assert that Roy's portrayal of communal violence and state-sponsored oppression challenges the dominant narratives of nationalism, offering a counter-narrative that foregrounds the voices of the oppressed.

While Roy's portrayal of marginalized women reveals their subjugation, some studies suggest that these women are not mere victims. Gopinath (2019) characterizes Roy's female characters as non-conformists who defy societal boundaries. Islam (2020) remarks, "Roy's novel starts and ends in the same graveyard, which becomes a heaven for human beings and animals that are connected together" (p. 37). This setting symbolizes dismantling gender discrimination in Roy's critique of patriarchy. These studies support the idea that Roy's characters embody a growing awareness of injustice, yet they often fail to trace the transformation in subaltern women's resistance across India's evolving socio-political landscape.

Studies on Roy's works, thus, offer insight into the multiple layers of marginalization faced by subaltern women, yet often focus more on victimization than resistance. This paper builds upon existing research by analyzing how subaltern women in Roy's novels actively confront systemic injustice, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of resistance among marginalized groups in contemporary India.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Antonio Gramsci initially applied the term "subaltern" to designate the working-class people in contemporary Indian society. Gramsci argued that these individuals had no real agency and thus remained under external control. Their societal roles were disregarded, and their existence rendered inconsequential, leading him to describe subaltern history as "necessarily fragmented and episodic" (Gramsci, 1992, p. 55). He also observed that subaltern groups often face "the hegemonic group or other subaltern groups" (Gramsci, 1992, p. 53). According to Gramsci,

hegemony uses material and ideological elements to maintain dominance. This process effectively leads to the ruled giving their consent to the ruling class's control.

In *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci expounded on "hegemony" as a method of cultural leadership and ideological dominance, though he simultaneously argued for "counter-hegemony"—an alternative ideological framework opposing established hegemony (Im, 1991). Counter-hegemony represents a pushback against the dominant order as subaltern people dismantle the ruling elite's ideological structure, challenging their political and economic authority. This concept aligns with "the way people develop ideas and discourse to challenge dominant assumptions, beliefs and established patterns of behavior" (Cox & Schilthuis, 2012, p. 1), which provides a critical perspective for subaltern people to recognize and resist the dominant culture.

Counter-hegemonic actions arise as marginalized groups become conscious of their subjugation, resist marginalization, and withdraw their consent to be ruled (Hoare & Sperber, 2015). Gramsci's concept has inspired analysis of characters in literary works, such as those by Arundhati Roy, where women resist oppression, symbolizing counter-hegemonic struggles against injustice. In breaking free from hegemony, subaltern individuals question the societal status quo, envisioning alternative structures by challenging the existing ideological and political systems, thereby achieving a state where they no longer consent to be dominated (Zembylas, 2013; Adamson, 1983).

A vital role in this counter-hegemonic process is played by "organic intellectuals," who help raise awareness and mobilize the subaltern, often at personal risk (Adamson, 1983; Hoare & Sperber, 2015). Gramsci suggested that once subaltern people achieve consciousness of their marginalized position, they can strive toward a socially just and integrated society. Subaltern groups cultivate a "critical self-consciousness which will enable them to overthrow the existing order and develop a morally integrated society" (Femia, 1987, p. 56). Kimberle Crenshaw discusses the gender and racial intersectionality in her essay "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," and states, "Because of their intersectional identity as both women and people of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one or the other, the interests and experiences of women of color are frequently marginalized within both" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1241).

### **Analysis and Interpretation**

Roy depicts the subaltern women's resistance to systemic injustices in *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Using the frameworks provided by Subaltern Studies and gender intersectionality thinkers like Guha, Spivak, Gramsci, and Crenshaw, this study examines and explores how Roy's characters embody various forms of resistance to these societal injustices. The analysis focuses on Ammu and Rahel from *The God of Small Things* and Anjum, Tilotama, and Revathy from *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, illustrating how Roy's portrayal of subaltern women's resistance varies across these characters.

Roy's novels vividly depict structural systems of oppression that sustain dominance. In *The God of Small Things*, the caste hierarchy dominates through the tragic narrative of Velutha, a Paravan who dares to transgress societal boundaries. The caste system's violence is not just physical but

also psychological, with characters internalizing their prescribed roles. For instance, Ammu's struggles against patriarchy are compounded by her "illegitimate" status as a divorced woman. Her love for Velutha becomes an act of defiance, which the casteist and patriarchal society punishes mercilessly. Similarly, Roy deals with gender-based violence in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Anjum, a hijra, faces the subjugation by gender minorities in a rigidly binary world. The rise of communal violence, exemplified in the Gujarat riots, presents how dominance is institutionalized through state machinery and societal complicity. Similarly, Tilottama's experiences as a woman and political violence support the gender intersectionality of oppression.

Ammu's narrative in *The God of Small Things* reflects the multi-layered oppression of a subaltern woman within a wealthy Syrian Christian family in Kerala, India. Although Ammu is systematically oppressed due to her gender, she demonstrates resistance by challenging the norms and values upheld by her family and society. For instance, Ammu is denied a college education, as her father, Pappachi, considers it "an unnecessary expense for a girl" (Roy, 1997, pp. 38-39). Here, Pappachi's remarks encapsulate the male-dominated cultural paradigm that seeks to restrict women's ambitions. As Spivak (2010) asserts, patriarchal norms often suppress women's mobility and limit their agency. Ammu's forced restriction from higher education underscores how subaltern women, particularly in male-dominated settings, encounter gender-based discrimination, even within familial settings. Her resistance, however, is subtle and emerges through her defiance of social expectations.

In response to her oppressive environment, Ammu decides to leave her family and live with an aunt in Kolkata, where she chooses her own partner, thus challenging the traditional expectations of her family and community. Ammu's decision to marry without her family's approval, particularly in an inter-caste, inter-religious union, violates the cultural norms of Syrian Christian society, as Roy illustrates: "Ammu met her future husband... she thought that anything, anyone at all, would be better than returning to Ayemenem" (Roy, 1997, p. 39). This act signifies Ammu's refusal to conform to societal expectations, embodying Gramsci's notion of counter-hegemony, which rejects dominant cultural ideologies (Im, 1991). Guha (1987) suggests that subaltern consciousness emerges when individuals recognize their marginalized status and resist injustices; Ammu exemplifies this as she reclaims her agency and counters the hegemonic structures surrounding her.

Further, Ammu's experience with domestic violence highlights her continued victimization within a patriarchal system. Her alcoholic husband physically assaults her and even attempts to exploit her to please his employer, Mr. Hollick. As Roy depicts, "Mr. Hollick proposed that Babà go away for a while. For a holiday... Ammu be sent to his bungalow to be looked after" (Roy, 1997, p. 41). Ammu's husband's abuse reflects the pervasive violence subaltern women endure in private spheres, driven by societal expectations and patriarchal norms. This aligns with studies by Islam (2022) and Pal (2023), who observe that women are frequently victimized by patriarchal violence at home. However, Ammu resists this injustice, choosing to leave her husband, thus defying the social norms that dictate her submission and dependency. Her defiance further reinforces Gramsci's concept of counter-hegemony, as she challenges the gendered social order and asserts her right to autonomy.

Back in Ayemenem, Ammu faces ostracism within her own family, where her status as a divorced woman and mother of inter-caste children renders her an outsider. Her relative, Baby Kochamma, embodies the biases of her society, regarding Ammu's children as "Half-Hindu Hybrids whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian would ever marry" (Roy, 1997, pp. 45-46). Ammu's return to her parental home as a divorcee from an inter-religious marriage positions her as an anomaly, exacerbating her marginalization. According to Spivak (1997), patriarchal societies often silence women by rendering their voices insignificant; Ammu's treatment within her own family underscores this societal tendency. Yet, Ammu resists these familial and societal restrictions by ignoring such stigmas, thus asserting her independence in subtle but meaningful ways.

In addition to familial and social discrimination, Ammu is subjected to economic marginalization. Despite her contributions to the family business, her brother Chacko monopolizes the family's assets, reflecting a male-centric perspective. Roy articulates this inequality when Chacko asserts, "What's yours is mine, and what's mine is also mine" (Roy, 1997, p. 57). Ammu's exclusion from economic rights in her own family is emblematic of broader societal structures that subordinate women economically. Casey (2015) observes that economic deprivation often reinforces women's marginalization. By questioning her brother's authority and refusing to accept her economic exclusion, Ammu exemplifies Gramsci's concept of subaltern resistance through her awareness and refusal to acquiesce to the established gender norms. Her demand for financial equity within the family illuminates her consciousness of economic injustice and her resistance against it.

Ammu's transgressive relationship with Velutha, a lower-caste man, further exemplifies her resistance to the social order. In Indian society, inter-caste relationships are often stigmatized, especially when they involve lower-caste individuals. Despite knowing the potential repercussions, Ammu relates with Velutha, whom Roy describes as belonging to "the lowest hierarchy of the Indian rigid caste system" (Roy, 1997, p. 336). Through this relationship, Ammu challenges the caste restrictions upheld by both Hindu and Syrian Christian communities. Her defiance aligns with Guha's (1996) analysis of caste as a tool for subjugating subaltern individuals. Ammu's conscious choice to engage in this relationship represents a powerful act of defiance, symbolizing a rejection of the caste-based hierarchy that perpetuates social stratification and discrimination.

The victimization Ammu endures at the hands of law enforcement further reinforces her subaltern status. When she seeks justice for Velutha, police inspector Thomas Mathew dehumanizes her, as Roy narrates, "Inspector Thomas Mathew came around his desk and approached Ammu with his baton... tapped her breasts with his baton. Gently. Tap tap" (Roy, 1997, p. 8). This portrayal reflects Spivak's assertion that the subaltern is often a gendered subject, marginalized by those in power (Guha, 1987). Ammu's refusal to respond verbally to Mathew, instead of expressing her anger silently, serves as a form of nonverbal resistance. Her silence functions as an assertion of dignity in the face of state-backed patriarchal authority, indicating a nuanced awareness of her vulnerable position within the social hierarchy.

In Roy's narrative, Ammu's character also demonstrates a critical view of human relationships based on her personal experiences of betrayal and neglect. In a conversation with her children, she recounts the story of Julius Caesar's betrayal by his close friend Brutus, cautioning them, "You can't trust anybody, mother, father, brother, husband, best friend, and nobody" (Roy, 1997, p. 83). Ammu's skepticism towards personal relationships reflects the emotional impact of her life's

challenges and the lack of familial support she has faced. Spivak (2010) argues that subaltern individuals, due to their marginalized status, develop a contextual, adaptive understanding of social dynamics; similarly, Ammu's worldview is shaped by her experiences of betrayal. Her cautionary words underscore a form of resistance through emotional detachment as she strives to protect herself and her children from potential disappointments.

Rahel, Ammu's daughter, finds her mother's experience of marginalization primarily due to her status as the child of an inter-caste marriage. Her grandmother, Mamachi, and uncle, Chacko, demonstrate their lack of attachment to Rahel, reflecting the family's internalized prejudices. Roy observes that Rahel's basic needs, such as "food, clothes, fees," were met, but her family had no emotional investment (Roy, 1997, p. 15). Rahel's marginalization within her own family signifies the broader issue of caste and gender-based discrimination in Indian society. Spivak (2010) notes that subaltern women are often stripped of their autonomy and identity; Rahel's treatment within her family illustrates this social marginalization. Her response, a retreat into silence and detachment, embodies a form of resistance, as she refuses to conform to the expectations a male-dominated family structure places upon her.

Tilotama, in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, presents another layer of subaltern resistance, focusing on the plight of marginalized Kashmiris who have lost family members due to political violence. Spivak argues, "The subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with 'woman' as a pious item. Representation has not withered away" (Spivak, 1988, p. 104). This idea reinforces in Roy's novel that subaltern voices are often controlled and erased in systems of representation by elite discourses. Tilotama, whose background is ambiguous and marked by social stigma, embodies this compounded marginalization. As one of her friends recounts, her mother, who had been involved in a scandalous relationship with an "untouchable" man, was disowned by her family and forced to place her child in an orphanage (Roy, 2017, p. 155). Tilotama's ambiguous familial background and her identification with the oppressed Kashmiris reflect her own resistance to societal norms as she aligns herself with those who are similarly marginalized. Roy's depiction of Tilotama's empathy for Kashmiris demonstrates how subaltern women's resistance extends beyond self-advocacy to encompass solidarity with oppressed individuals, challenging the power structures perpetuating injustice.

Like Anjum, a transgender woman in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Revathy has been victimized by a male-dominated society, as women have been restricted from following their passions. In her letter, Revathy writes:

I wanted to be a lawyer and put my father behind bars forever. But soon I became influenced by communism and revolutionary thinking. I read communist literature. My grandfather taught me revolutionary songs, and we would sing together. (Roy, 2017, p. 420)

The above Revathy's remarks show how a male-dominated society has controlled women's passions and desires. Nevertheless, subaltern women are motivated by various sources to reject injustices. For example, Revathy understands how women have been suppressed by observing her mother's condition, whom her husband has severely victimized.

Revathy, a character in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), vividly illustrates the systemic oppression faced by marginalized communities, particularly from state-led injustices.

She highlights the displacement and violence inflicted upon Adivasi people by the police: "No adivasi can stay in her house or their village. They sleep in the forest outside at night because at night police come, hundred, two hundred, sometimes five hundred police. They take everything, burn, steal everything" (p. 421). This poignant description avoids the exploitation of marginalized communities by state-led injustice. However, these marginalized people have developed a sense of resistance, recognizing their exploitation and demanding justice. As Guha (1997) argues, autocratic political systems often dominate colonized people without their consent. Similarly, Roy (2001) contends that India continues to grapple with the legacy of colonialism, even after independence. This historical context highlights the systemic nature of oppression and the need for resistance.

## Conclusion

This study, thus, examines the portrayal and resistance of subaltern women in Arundhati Roy's novels, *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, showing how Roy's characters reflect shifting strategies for confronting oppression. Across her works, Roy presents marginalized women who resist social, cultural, and political injustices, but the scope and forms of this resistance vary. The theoretical frameworks of Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak on subaltern agency and Antonio Gramsci's counter-hegemony guide this analysis, offering insight into how Roy's subaltern women and Crenshaw's gender intersectionality and adapt their methods of resistance over time in response to their circumstances.

In *The God of Small Things*, Roy's female characters face patriarchal and caste-based constraints that limit their autonomy within both family and society. For example, Ammu, one of the central characters, challenges these norms by making her own decisions regarding marriage and personal relationships, even if it means crossing caste boundaries. Her choices reflect an act of rebellion against male-dominated societal expectations, yet this resistance is largely confined to the domestic sphere. This portrayal aligns with Spivak's notion of "subaltern agency," in which oppressed individuals develop awareness and resist but often remain within the constraints of societal boundaries (Spivak, 1988). Ammu's acts of defiance are expressions of personal agency; however, they lack the broader reach to affect change beyond her immediate social environment, illustrating deeply personal resistance and often constrained by the very structures it seeks to defy. In contrast, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* expands the scope of subaltern women's resistance to include gender and political spheres from personal to collective action. Roy's later characters, such as Anjum and Tilotama, represent a new form of resistance that addresses not only gender-based oppression but also challenges related to caste, religion, transgender identity, and economic inequality. These characters unite with other marginalized groups, defying political and state-led injustices that infringe on their lives and communities. Anjum, a transgender woman, and Tilotama, who faces religious and political conflicts, illustrate Gramsci's concept of counter-hegemony as they ally with others to fight systemic inequality (Gramsci, 1991). Through this unity, Roy's characters create a collective front against the prevailing power structures, signifying a broadened understanding of subaltern agency that recognizes the need for solidarity across diverse marginalized identities. Likewise, these texts have many areas for further research. Environmental and ecological violence, trauma and memory, representation of queer and



transgender in global contemporary literature, intersections of faith, identity, and resistance in modern South Asia can be a gold mine for future researchers.

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