

Representation of Women's Identity and Resistance in Contemporary Indian English Fiction: A Feminist Study

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ABSTRACT

This research article examines the representation of women's identity and resistance in contemporary Indian English fiction through a feminist reading of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017). The article explores how female and gender-marginalised characters negotiate patriarchy, caste, class, sexuality, violence, and social exclusion. Using qualitative textual analysis and a thematic-coding matrix, the paper argues that Roy's fiction presents identity not as a fixed essence but as a contested field shaped by family, community, state power, memory, and history. Characters such as Ammu, Rahel, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, Anjum, and Tilo embody different forms of vulnerability and resistance. Their resistance appears through desire, silence, mobility, alternative community formation, refusal of domestic roles, and survival after violence. The study concludes that contemporary Indian English fiction expands feminist discourse by linking gender with caste, religion, class, sexuality, and political trauma.

Keywords: *Indian English fiction, feminism, women's identity, resistance, Arundhati Roy, intersectionality, patriarchy*

Indian English fiction has consistently engaged with issues of gender, identity, family, caste hierarchy, class, religion, sexuality, and national belonging. Within feminist literary criticism, women's identity is not understood only as biological femininity. It is also shaped by social expectations, domestic roles, language, caste, class, religion, sexuality, and political power. Contemporary Indian English fiction is therefore significant because it often presents women not merely as victims of patriarchy but also as subjects who challenge, negotiate, and reinterpret social norms.

Arundhati Roy occupies an important place in this discourse. In *The God of Small Things*, Roy portrays Ammu, Rahel, Mammachi, and Baby Kochamma within the layered structures of family obligation, caste discrimination, and patriarchal control in Kerala. In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy expands the feminist field through characters such as Anjum and Tilo, whose lives intersect with gender nonconformity, communal violence, state power, and alternative forms of kinship. Roy's fiction shows that women's identity and resistance are never purely private; they are deeply connected to social institutions and political histories.

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This article studies how Roy's selected novels represent identity and resistance across domestic, social, and political spaces. It argues that contemporary Indian English fiction requires an intersectional feminist approach because gender oppression is inseparable from caste, class, religion, sexuality, and state violence.

Objectives of the Study

1. To analyse the representation of women's identity in selected contemporary Indian English fiction.
2. To examine how patriarchy, caste, class, religion, and sexuality shape female subjectivity.
3. To identify forms of resistance expressed by female and gender-marginalised characters.
4. To explore the usefulness of feminist and intersectional frameworks for reading Indian English fiction.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses qualitative textual analysis. The primary texts are Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. The analysis is guided by feminist criticism and intersectionality, with attention to gender, caste, class, sexuality, community, religion, and political power. The study does not use human participants; therefore, informed consent is not applicable. Scholarly integrity is maintained through careful paraphrasing, accurate attribution, and avoidance of unsupported claims.

A thematic-coding matrix is an analytical tool used to organise important characters, incidents, themes, and interpretive meanings. The matrix does not represent numerical survey data. It is a qualitative arrangement of textual evidence derived from close reading of the selected novels.

Theoretical Framework

The article draws on feminist literary criticism, which examines how texts construct gender roles, power relations, and women's agency. Simone de Beauvoir's argument that women are socially constructed as the "Other" remains relevant for analysing how social structures define acceptable femininity. Elaine Showalter's gynocritical approach helps examine women's experience, language, and literary tradition. Intersectionality, developed by Kimberle Crenshaw, further expands feminist analysis by showing that gender oppression cannot be separated from other structures of power such as race, caste, class, sexuality, religion, and state authority.

In Roy's novels, resistance is rarely presented as a simple heroic act. It may appear as emotional refusal, bodily autonomy, forbidden love, mobility, silence, memory, friendship, alternative family, self-naming, or survival. This complexity is central to contemporary feminist readings of Indian English fiction.

Textual Analysis

1. Ammu and the Politics of Forbidden Desire

In *The God of Small Things*, Ammu's identity is restricted by patriarchal family expectations, marital failure, and caste boundaries. As a divorced woman who returns to her parental home, she is treated as a burden rather than as an autonomous adult. Her desire for Velutha challenges both gender codes and caste hierarchy. The relationship becomes an act of

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resistance because it refuses the social logic that assigns women to obedience and lower-caste men to invisibility. However, the violent consequences of this resistance reveal the brutality of the caste-patriarchal order.

2. Rahel and Fragmented Female Subjectivity

Rahel's identity is shaped by childhood trauma, family silence, and social shame. Her adult self appears fragmented because the past remains unresolved. Through Rahel, Roy suggests that women's identity is not linear or stable; it is shaped by memory, loss, and emotional dislocation. Rahel's return to Ayemenem is not merely a physical return but a confrontation with suppressed history.

3. Mammachi and Baby Kochamma: Women within Patriarchy

Mammachi and Baby Kochamma complicate a simple victim/oppressor model. Mammachi has economic talent and public recognition, but she remains trapped within domestic violence and social respectability. Baby Kochamma, meanwhile, exercises power through surveillance, resentment, and manipulation. These characters show that patriarchy can operate through women as well as against them. Female characters may reproduce patriarchal authority when social power depends on respectability, control, and obedience.

4. Anjum and Queer/Feminine Self-Fashioning

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness broadens feminist analysis through Anjum, a gender-marginalised character whose life disrupts binaries of male and female, home and exile, private and political. Anjum's movement from family to Khwabgah and later to Jannat Guest House represents a search for livable identity. Her resistance lies in survival, self-naming, and the creation of alternative community. Roy thereby links gender identity with citizenship, religion, violence, and belonging.

5. Tilo and Political Autonomy

Tilo resists easy categorisation as wife, beloved, nationalist subject, or victim. Her autonomy is expressed through mobility, silence, political awareness, and refusal to fit conventional roles. Through Tilo, Roy connects feminist identity with questions of state violence, Kashmir, and the ethics of witnessing. Tilo's resistance is not loud or programmatic; it is embedded in her refusal to surrender interior freedom.

Research Thematic Data

The following tables present qualitative thematic data. They organise textual evidence into analytical categories and should be read as close-reading support rather than as statistical survey findings.

Table 1. Thematic-coding matrix

Character/Incident	Text	Theme Code	Analytical Memo	Intensity
Ammu	The God of Small Things	Gendered restriction	Family and social norms limit female desire and choice.	High
Ammu-Velutha relationship	The God of Small Things	Resistance through forbidden intimacy	The relationship challenges caste and gender boundaries.	High
Rahel	The God of Small Things	Fragmented identity	Childhood trauma shapes a fractured	Medium

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Character/Incident	Text	Theme Code	Analytical Memo	Intensity
Mammachi	The God of Small Things	Patriarchal accommodation	Economic agency coexists with domestic subordination.	Medium
Baby Kochamma	The God of Small Things	Internalised patriarchy	Female authority may reproduce patriarchal control.	Medium
Anjum	The Ministry of Utmost Happiness	Queer/feminine self-fashioning	Gender identity is narrated as lived struggle and self-creation.	High
Khwabgah community	The Ministry of Utmost Happiness	Alternative kinship	Marginalised bodies construct a non-normative home.	High
Tilo	The Ministry of Utmost Happiness	Political autonomy	A woman resists easy domestic and nationalist categorisation.	High
Anjum after Gujarat violence	The Ministry of Utmost Happiness	Survival and witness	Trauma becomes a site of memory and ethical resistance.	High
Jannat Guest House	The Ministry of Utmost Happiness	Community as resistance	The graveyard guest house becomes an alternative social space.	High

Table 2. Theme frequency across coded textual units

Theme	Frequency in coded units	Interpretive meaning
Women's identity and selfhood	8	Identity appears as negotiated, wounded, and socially contested.
Caste/class control over bodies	7	Social hierarchy regulates desire, respectability, and punishment.
Gendered violence and vulnerability	8	Female and gender-marginalised bodies carry the cost of social order.
Resistance through choice and speech	6	Resistance appears through desire, refusal, memory, and autonomy.
Alternative kinship/community	5	Characters create homes outside normative family structures.
Narrative fragmentation as feminist form	4	Broken chronology mirrors trauma and challenges linear authority.

DISCUSSION

The thematic data suggest that Roy's fiction represents women's identity as relational, historical, and political. Ammu's identity is shaped by marriage, divorce, motherhood, sexuality, and caste. Rahel's identity is shaped by trauma and memory. Anjum's identity is shaped by gender variance, religion, violence, and community. Tilo's identity is shaped by

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political crisis and emotional independence. In each case, the self is not isolated from society; it is produced through conflict with social institutions.

Resistance in the selected novels is also multi-layered. Ammu resists through desire, but the social order violently punishes her. Rahel resists through survival and memory. Mammachi's partial agency reveals the limits of economic independence without gender justice. Anjum resists by creating a home for those excluded by family and nation. Tilo resists through refusal, movement, and ethical witnessing. These forms of resistance are not always victorious, but they expose the injustice of the systems that contain them.

The novels also show that feminist criticism in the Indian context must be intersectional. Gender cannot be separated from caste in *The God of Small Things*, and it cannot be separated from religion, sexuality, and state violence in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Roy's work therefore expands feminist reading beyond domestic oppression to include the politics of community, citizenship, and history.

Findings

1. Women's identity in the selected novels is constructed through family, caste, sexuality, religion, and political power.
2. Roy presents patriarchy not only as male domination but also as a social system reproduced through family, respectability, and silence.
3. Resistance appears through forbidden desire, self-naming, memory, refusal of normative roles, and creation of alternative communities.
4. Gender oppression in Roy's fiction is inseparable from caste, class, religion, sexuality, and state violence.
5. Fragmented narrative form supports feminist meaning by representing trauma, memory, and non-linear subjectivity.

CONCLUSION

This research study concludes that contemporary Indian English fiction provides a rich field for feminist analysis because it represents women and gender-marginalised subjects in relation to multiple structures of power. Arundhati Roy's selected novels show that identity is neither fixed nor purely private; it is shaped by social boundaries and historical violence. Yet Roy's characters also embody forms of resistance through desire, memory, community, refusal, and survival. The article, therefore, argues that feminist readings of Indian English fiction must move beyond a narrow male-female framework and attend to intersectional structures such as caste, religion, sexuality, class, and political conflict.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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