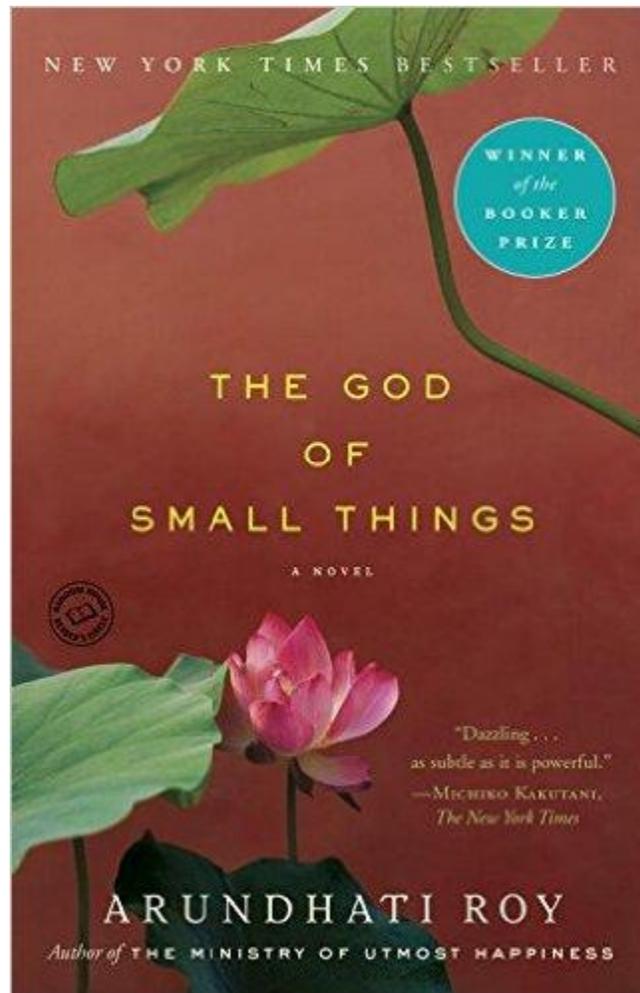


Postcolonial Gothic Hybrid in Arundhati Roy's  
*The God of Small Things*

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**Abstract:**

The Gothic novel, postcolonial concerns, certainly shaped racial Gothic imagination into predictable and recognizable forms. In this sense Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is a complicated postcolonial novel in which Roy employs the Gothic conventions of dark imagery, the supernatural, the haunted house, the ancestral curse, a threatening atmosphere, doubling, and incest to personalize larger cultural horrors of India as experienced by one family in Kerala. The

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small things—a special child-sized coffin, a cold moth with dense tufts, a buried toy wristwatch, a disappearing footprint—pervade the novel to show the ghosts of oppression, colonial devastation, political uprisings, and historical tragedies of India. The Gothic elements and ghosts that haunt the narrative, however, are portrayed by Roy in a fascinatingly distinct form. This paper interprets *The God of Small Things* as a postcolonial Gothic hybrid, asserting that Roy both adopts and challenges Western Gothic conventions to illustrate the haunting of India's colonial past upon its present as the country struggles with its modern-day identity.

**Key words:** Gothic, post colonialism, conventions, dark imagery, supernatural, a threatening atmosphere, dense tufts, oppression, colonial devastation, hybridity.

### **A Postcolonial Gothic Hybrid**

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* as a postcolonial Gothic hybrid, asserting that Roy both adopts and challenges Western Gothic conventions to exemplify the lingering of India's colonial past upon its present as the country struggles with its modern-day identity. Scholars agree that the literature of the postcolonial and the Gothic share similar foundations. Given the inherent similarities between postcolonial and Gothic literature challenges to boundaries of power and ownership, haunting of a repressed past, and embodiment of the frightening writers from colonized countries are increasingly finding the Gothic a fitting literary form to challenge dominant historical narratives and illustrate the anxieties of a country struggling for a postcolonial identity. Roy skillfully employs the Gothic in *The God of Small Things* to challenge historical narratives of India and express the anxieties of India's struggle with its colonial past and modern postcolonial identities.

### **Portrayal of Private Struggles of Family**

In *The God of Small Things*, Roy portrays the private (small) struggles of the Ipe family as a mirror of the public (large) identity struggles of the nation. The twins Rahel and Estha are caught in the internal struggle of the nation as caste, discrimination, and politics converge on one night during their childhood and forever change their lives. The small things are personal toward the Ipe family, but remain representative of the larger significant struggles of the people of Kerala and in some cases, the entire nation of India. The novel tells the story of the Ipe family,

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an upper caste, Syrian Christian family in the Ayemenem village of Kerala. Kerala also serves as a representation of culture and history in a larger international background.

### **Western Gothic Conventions**

Roy utilizes many traditional Western Gothic conventions in her novel, yet she also challenges and inverts these conventions, creating a Gothic hybrid. In doing so, she creates a postcolonial Gothic text that is uniquely her own and uniquely Indian. Roy's use of the Gothic doubly destabilizes the world of her narrative and the novel ends not in a restoration of order, but in a state of shifted order. Through her Gothic reinvention, Roy recreates a Western narrative trope on her own terms and gives a voice to the marginalized people of India by illustrating their experiences and sufferings in a format that the West can understand. Rahel and Estha are forever haunted by a tragedy resulting from their mother's affair with a lower caste man. Rahel relives the history of the Night of Terror a night depicting the severe consequences that result when cultural laws are broken. In the ghosts of a family and a nation, Roy creates her Gothic world. It is a world where the screams of children die in shattered kneecaps (Roy 292).

### **Gothic Imagery**

Gothic imagery also conveys dramatic impulses. Roy displays the haunting evil of impulses in everyday figures of the ordinary and often combines well with evil, the beautiful with the terrifying. She presents the opposites of good and evil in her imagery to underline the ambivalence of the narrative as a larger reflection of India. She utilizes dark imagery in the vein of conventional Western Gothic, yet she also reinvents it with a unique lyrical quality in specific portrayals of Indian life and turmoil.

### **The Good with Evil and The Innocent with Terror**

Roy skillfully combines the good with evil and the innocent with terror in her dark imagery to demonstrate the horror of oppression in India's culture. The innocent and pleasant name of the Orange drink, Lemon drink man takes on haunting qualities when the man abuses young Estha and threatens to come after him again (Roy 98-99). Rahel's toy watch is lost during Velutha's beating and is buried with the terror in the ground (Roy 295). Brass flower vases symbolize a lifetime of domestic abuse (Roy 47). The monstrous wink of a glass eye signifies a

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father willing to kill his own son when the son breaks the caste laws (Roy 241). The child's word of "LayTer" hints of the terror to come (Roy 139). The Gothic imagery, with its combination of innocent and evil, serves to underscore the narrative's dark emotional tone, display evil impulses, and incite intense feelings all signaling the undercurrent of horrific oppression. Gothic imagery also emerges in nature to reflect the emotion of the characters. When the adult Rahel returns to the river, it greets her with a "ghastly skull's smile" (Roy 118). The river remains a ghastly reminder of Sophie Mol's death, a tragedy that forever haunts Rahel. When Ammu dreams of Velutha, she awakens and comprehends the consequences that will come of her affair. Ammu realizes "That the air, the sky, the trees, the sun, the rain, the light and darkness were all slowly turning to sand. That sand would...pull her down" (Roy 212). Ammu knows she is spiraling, giving in to her desire to love a lower caste man, but she is powerless to stop herself. The Gothic imagery in nature also illustrates the history and emotion of the nation. A sparrow lays dead on the backseat of the old Plymouth: "She had found her way in through a hole in the windscreen...She never found her way out" (Roy 280). Like the sparrow, Rahel, Estha, Ammu, and the nation of India remain prisoned, unable to find a way out, trapped by history. The dark imagery intensifies the horror of a repressed past as it haunts at the hand through the characters, culture, and nature. The Gothic imagery competently crafted in poetic brightness and specific to India insulate the narrative with a strange sense of dread and nervousness.

### **The Paranormal**

The constituent of the paranormal intensify the effect of the Gothic imagery throughout the novel, particularly in the image of Pappachi's moth. Pappachi's moth haunts the child Rahel, evoking sympathy as it surfaces when the reader is made aware of her absent guilt. The moth symbolizes the haunting effect of a culture and history one does not fully understand and the subsequent guilt that can result. It is notable that the moth is not simply a moth, but Pappachi's moth. Pappachi, the patriarch of the Ipe family and classic Gothic villain, represents the tyrannical patriarchal figure. He does not allow anyone in the family to sit in his Plymouth: "The Plymouth was Pappachi's revenge" (Roy 47). Pappachi's torment stems from his greatest setback in life: "not having had the moth that *he* had discovered named after him" (Roy 48). The moth embodies the family curse and haunts its offspring. As the narrator notes, "Pappachi's Moth was held responsible for his black moods and sudden bouts of temper. Its pernicious ghost

gray, furry and with unusual dense dorsal tufts haunted every house that he ever lived in. It tormented him and his children and his children's children" (Roy 48). The ghost of the moth repeatedly haunts Rahel as a child. Pappachi's moth torments Rahel. The guilt of one generation carries on to the next.

### **The Moth**

As Rahel's guilt over hurting her mother grows, the moth on her heart "spread its silver wings, and the chill crept into her bones" (108). The moth gnaws on Rahel's heart, as the guilt gnaws on her soul. The moth appears again on the Night of Terror. When the children are on the boat, it collides with a log and tips over. Rahel calls out to Sophie Mol and when Sophie does not respond, "On Rahel's heart Pappachi's moth snapped open its somber wings" (Roy 277). The guilt resurfaces because Rahel knows she has done wrong by disobeying Ammu. When Sophie Mol does not respond to Rahel's calls, Rahel feels the haunting fear of what is to come. The moth emerges again at the police station when Baby Kochamma frightens Rahel and Estha into betraying Velutha in order to save their mother. The narrator states: "Inside the Inspector's room, Pappachi's Moth was on the move" (Roy 300). The children know they are about to do something wrong, yet they do not fully understand it. Roy effectively portrays the moth as Gothic-like with its supernatural qualities to signify the family curse and guilt and their effects upon a small child. The Ipe family is troubled, just as India is troubled. The guilt of an aggressive and domineering past, like Pappachi's moth, haunts future generations.

### **The Troubled House**

The Gothic gathering of the troubled house surfaces in the Ayemenem House. Its ghosts arise from the Ipe family's past passions and crimes Ammu's passion and crime in breaking the Love Laws and the family's involvement in Velutha's death. The family's crimes mirror the Indian nation and the ghosts of its oppressive past. The Ipe family, like the Ayemenem House, is full of fear and anxiety, and in a sense, under attack. When Rahel returns home, twenty three years after the tragedy of Sophie Mol's death, she finds the present day house strange it is filled with ghosts, secrets, and death. The loss of Sophie Mol steps "softly around the Ayemenem House like a quiet thing in socks. It hid in books and food. In Mammachi's violin case" (Roy 17). In Ammu's room, "The terrible ghosts of impossible-to forget toys clustered on the blades

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of the ceiling fan” (Roy 87). The family ghosts live within the walls of the Ayemenem House as haunting reminders of the Night of Terror. Through the ghosts, the uncanny returns to the Ayemenem House.

### **The Ghosts**

The ghosts will not let Rahel or Estha forget Sophie Mol’s death or their involvement in Velutha’s death. When Rahel returns, the house is full of death and decay. As Rahel notes, strange insects burn themselves on forty watt bulbs and their corpses litter the floor and window sills (Roy 11). In the novel, the dark forces of the past haunt every room. In Pappachi’s study, “rank with fungus and disuse,” Rahel finds hidden things an orange pipette, Baby Kochamma’s rosary, tattered notebooks—the dark ghosts of individual memories (Roy 148- 149). The ghosts lead Rahel to the memory of the last time she saw Ammu. Rahel did not say good-bye: “She hated her mother then. *Hated* her” (Roy 153). Ammu died alone. The Ayemenem House is haunted by death, grief, and guilt. The Ayemenem House of 1969 is haunted by the cruelty and abuse of Pappachi, symbolizing the oppressiveness of a patriarchal society. Pappachi haunts the Ayemenem House with his presence. A photograph of Pappachi in Vienna hangs in the drawing room: “There was a watchful stillness to the photograph that lent an underlying chill to the warm room in which it hung” (Roy50). The evil of Pappachi pervades the room as the evil of oppression pervades the nation. The Ayemenem House of the past, as the present-day house, is uninviting. When Ammu divorces her husband, she returns to the Ayemenem House “unwelcomed” by her parents (Roy42). Baby Kochamma often reminds the twins that they live on “sufferance” in the Ayemenem House, “where they really had no right to be” (Roy44). Culture has taken away the sense of home for Ammu, Rahel, and Estha and turned the house into a prison. When Mammachi discovers Ammu’s relationship with Velutha, she locks Ammu in her bedroom. The narrator states, “Ammu was incoherent with rage and disbelief at what was happening to her at being locked away like the family lunatic in a medieval household” (Roy239). Ammu is a prisoner in her possess home, much like the browbeaten people of India are prisoners in their own country.

### **House of Death**

The Ayemenem House of the past is also one of death. It is on the chaise lounge in the drawing room where Sophie Mol's body is laid out (Roy 238). The narrator presents a haunting description, "Even from a distance, it was obvious that she was dead. Not ill or asleep. It was something to do with the way she lay...Something to do with Death's authority. It's terrible stillness" (Roy 238). The house of the past holds Sophie Mol's corpse, while its ghost haunts the present-day house. As Rahel notes, it is a house where "only the Small Things were said. The Big Things lurked unsaid inside" (Roy165). The ghastly qualities of the patriarchal culture and its oppression haunt the Ayemenem House of the past and return in strange form to haunt the present-day house. Roy effectively utilizes the Gothic trope of the haunted house to manifest the horrors of a patriarchal society and its effects upon the Ipe family, symbolizing the haunting of an oppressive history upon the nation of India. She employs the Western Gothic convention in customary ways, but also creates haunting that are detailed to the members of the Ipe family. As personal ghosts disturb the Ayemenem House, societal ghosts haunt the History House. It is in the History House where caste, culture, and politics transform into aggression and terror. Of the History House, Chacko tells the twins, "When we look in through the windows, all we see are shadows. And when we try and listen, all we hear is a whispering. And we cannot understand the whispering, because our minds have been invaded by a war" (Roy52). Chacko describes the war as "A war that we have won and lost. The very worst sort of war. A war that captures dreams and re-dreams them. A war that has made us adore our conquerors and despise ourselves" (Roy52). The shadows and whispers of the History House represent India's colonial past and the consequent political uprisings. For the twins, it is a past they cannot understand, but even still, they feel it's haunting. The narrator says that Vellya Paapen tells the twins he encountered Kari Saipu's ghost and pinned the ghost to the trunk of a rubber tree, where the pedophile ghost remains (Roy 189). Roy gives the History House a haunting history of sexual crime and suicide, foreshadowing more evil to come.

### **The Night of Terror**

The evil comes on the Night of Terror. The Touchable Policeman arrive "Deadly purposed" searching for Velutha after Sophie Mol's body is found (Roy 289). Rahel and Estha, hiding at the History House, awake to screams as they watch the police beat Velutha nearly to death "mesmerized by something that they sensed but didn't understand: the absence of caprice

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in what the policemen did” (Roy 292). The dismay comes living in the absence of caprice, and the twins mirror the anxiety of the people of India as they struggle with horrors they cannot understand. The police, with their batons, beat Velutha nearly to death: “a clinical demonstration in controlled conditions of human nature’s pursuit of ascendancy...human history, masquerading as God’s Purpose” (Roy 292-293). In Rahel’s view, the police are living out history; their socially and culturally conditioned minds take control of their wills. Rahel describes their actions as competent and economic: “After all they were not battling an epidemic. They were merely inoculating a community against an outbreak” (Roy 293). The police’s actions illustrate the power of the culture over its participants and the culture’s rule over their actions. The police are following history’s orders. It is this history, and the history of the Night of Terror, that haunts Rahel and Estha into adulthood. The History House shows the powerful effects of war and colonialism. Roy creates a sense of disturbing anxiety in the confusion between a culturally tyrannical past and a modern national identity. When the adult Rahel returns, the History House has been invaded by Western culture as the fear that occurred there buries itself in commerce and tourism. In 1992, the History House has become a five-star hotel and the terror remains hidden “under the happy humming of hotel cooks” (Roy 290). For Rahel and Estha, the tragic history will always live on in the History House. But the hotel people have recreated history as a tourist attraction of “toy histories,” manufactured wooden houses, and truncated kathakali performances (Roy 120-121). At the History House, tourism and commerce erase the true ancestral history and instead employ a new cultural history to impress the rich tourists. The threat of erasure takes on a Gothic tone as Rahel’s toy watch remains buried in the ground, “A small forgotten thing. Nothing that the world would miss” (Roy 121). Roy utilizes the Gothic to underscore the terror and dangers of history’s erasure. The history of an entire nation can become a small forgotten thing.

### **Lingering of India’s Colonial Past**

In *The God of Small Things*, Roy adopts conventional Gothic rudiments yet at the same time, she challenges this convention to efficiently exemplify the lingering of India’s colonial past upon its present. By creating a Gothic hybrid, Roy establishes a form of empowerment. In her utilization of intricate complexities of the Gothic tropes, she gives a voice to the marginalized people of India. Roy’s empowering Gothic hybrid underscores the haunting of a colonial,

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culturally oppressive, and politically violent past upon a postcolonial nation. Roy's use of the Gothic conveys the anxiety and disorder of a nation struggling with a modern-day identity.

Punter connects global modernity to the supernatural:

As the great globalising project of modernity, which has its own controlling relation to the postcolonial, rolls on, one of its more curious current effects, is that, perhaps against expectation, we live increasingly in a world of ghosts, spirits, phantoms. (*Postcolonial* 61)

In *The God of Small Things*, Roy creates a world of ghosts that promise to continue haunting.

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