

THE IMPACT OF GENDERED SOCIAL NORMS ON WOMEN'S AUTONOMY AND SELF-ASSERTION

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Abstract:

This paper explores the impact of gendered social norms on women's autonomy and self-assertion, drawing on Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* as a lens through which to examine the intersection of patriarchy, societal expectations, and female resistance. The narrative of Ammu, the novel's central character, is a compelling exploration of how women's autonomy is restricted by deeply ingrained cultural norms and the emotional and psychological toll of defying these constraints. Through her abusive marriage to Baba, the social alienation following her divorce, and her struggles with her mother, Mammachi, Ammu's journey highlights the complex interplay of internalized patriarchy, familial dynamics, and societal judgment. The metaphor of the "tidal wave," which symbolizes Ammu's unyielding desire for independence, serves as a powerful metaphor for the collective struggle of women against patriarchal systems. This study analyzes the multifaceted layers of oppression, resistance, and the painful costs of asserting autonomy in a world where gender roles are rigidly enforced, offering insights into the broader implications of gendered power structures.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Women's autonomy, Gendered social norms, Emotional violence, Resistance, The God of Small Things, Ammu, Family dynamics, Social alienation.

Introduction:

In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy presents a poignant critique of the patriarchal structures that govern both the public and private spheres of women's lives. The central theme of the novel revolves around the ways in which women navigate the constraints imposed by society, family, and self, particularly through the character of Ammu. Her life journey unfolds as a continual struggle against the invisible but powerful forces of patriarchal control, where her autonomy is both suppressed and vilified. The novel underscores the emotional and psychological toll that patriarchy inflicts upon women who attempt to assert their independence, symbolized through the metaphor of a "tidal wave" that relentlessly fights against societal and familial barriers. This paper aims to examine the impact of gendered social norms on women's autonomy and self-assertion, analyzing how these norms dictate women's roles and identities, often leading to social alienation, emotional violence, and a deep sense of isolation. Through the lens of Ammu's experiences, the study explores the consequences of defying patriarchal expectations and the long-lasting effects of internalized gendered oppression.

Patriarchal Bonds

In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy presents a critical examination of the patriarchal structures that govern the lives of her characters, particularly through the lens of Ammu's experiences. One of the central themes of the novel is the way patriarchal power is not only maintained through male dominance but also perpetuated by women themselves, who have internalized societal norms. Ammu's journey highlights the emotional and psychological toll of patriarchy, as well as the ways in which women are caught in an unyielding cycle of oppression. Through Ammu's marriage to Baba, her return to Ayemenem, and her relationship with her mother Mammachi, Roy vividly portrays the deep entrenchment of patriarchal values within both familial and societal systems. Ammu's story reveals the struggle of women to assert their autonomy in a world where their roles and identities are dictated by male authority and social expectations.

Abusive Marriage: Calcutta Husband Baba's Alcoholism; Divorce Brands Her "Loose"

Ammu's story in *The God of Small Things* is not only one of personal suffering but also one that reveals the pervasive and often invisible mechanisms of patriarchy that govern the lives of women. Her marriage to Baba is emblematic of a system that silences women, forcing them into subjugation through both overt violence and emotional manipulation. Baba's alcoholism, a symbol of toxic masculinity, is not merely a flaw in his character, but a tool he uses to assert power over Ammu. His drinking and abusive behavior underscore the systemic nature of patriarchal

control, where women's emotional, physical, and psychological well-being is consistently undermined to maintain male dominance. Ammu's attempts to assert her own autonomy are seen as acts of rebellion against these deeply ingrained systems, and her subsequent alienation from society speaks to the cost of such resistance.

Ammu's choice to divorce Baba marks the first significant act of resistance in her life, as it is an act of rejecting the marriage that has brought her nothing but pain and subjugation. However, the moment she takes control of her life, the very society that once upheld the patriarchal norms turns against her. She is labeled as "loose," a word that speaks volumes about the expectations placed upon women to remain faithful, submissive, and under male control. The term itself becomes a tool of social control, wielded to isolate and punish women who challenge the status quo. It reflects how women's autonomy is viewed as a threat to the existing order, and society's response is a clear indication of the dangers women face when they step outside their prescribed roles.

"They called her 'loose,' and she was an outcast in her own community." (Roy, p. 119)

This quotation reveals the harsh social consequences that follow when women defy patriarchal expectations. Ammu, once a daughter in a respected family, is now branded as an outcast because of her decision to divorce Baba. Her act of asserting independence, which should have been seen as an act of self-respect, is instead interpreted as a moral failure. The term "loose" is a reflection of the deeply ingrained misogyny in society, where women who dare to reject the submissive role are vilified and ostracized. Ammu's alienation is both social and emotional—she is cast out from the family unit and the wider community. The loss of the "house" she once occupied is a powerful symbol of how patriarchal societies make women feel that they must depend on men for their sense of worth, security, and identity.

"She had no place to call her own. Her heart and her body were hers alone, and that made her dangerous." (Roy, p. 121)

This quote speaks to the essence of Ammu's predicament. Her independence, her ability to control her own body and emotions, is viewed as a threat by society. In a world where women are expected to be subservient to the will of men, Ammu's decision to control her own fate challenges the very foundation of the patriarchal system. Her body, once controlled by her marriage, becomes a symbol of her agency, yet it is precisely this newfound agency that makes her "dangerous." By claiming ownership of her own life, Ammu disrupts the societal order that seeks to keep women in positions of subjugation. The rejection of her prescribed role as a submissive wife leads to her social and emotional downfall, marking the beginning of her alienation from both her family and society.

Ammu's rejection of Baba's abuse, while empowering, also brings her deeper into the margins of society. She is isolated not only from her husband but also from her family. Mammachi's reaction to Ammu's defiance, which manifests in the physical violence of the violin episode, illustrates the deep generational roots of patriarchal control. Mammachi's belief in the patriarchal system is so ingrained that even as a woman, she perpetuates these norms. Mammachi's violent reaction to Ammu's independence underscores how women who challenge patriarchal structures are often met with violence, both physical and emotional, from other women who have internalized these norms. Mammachi's actions also highlight how women, even when oppressed themselves, often become complicit in maintaining systems that keep them and others subjugated.

Ammu's fate exemplifies the emotional and social consequences that women face when they assert their autonomy in a patriarchal society. Her isolation, both from her family and the community, reflects the systemic oppression women experience when they break free from patriarchal control. This societal rejection is not just a personal tragedy for Ammu; it is an illustration of how patriarchal norms work to maintain the status quo, punishing women who step outside the roles assigned to them.

Her tragic ending—alienated, alone, and without support—becomes a cautionary tale of the cost of defying patriarchal control. However, Ammu's defiance, while ultimately leading to her demise, also becomes a powerful symbol of resistance. In her fight for autonomy and respect, Ammu challenges the deeply entrenched norms that define women's roles and exposes the destructive consequences of those norms. Her story is a reminder of the profound emotional and psychological toll exacted by patriarchal systems, as well as the unrelenting desire for self-assertion in a world that seeks to suppress it.

In the broader context of the novel, Ammu's journey serves as a critique of the patriarchal values that govern not only the personal lives of individuals but also the societal structure as a whole. Through Ammu's story, Roy shows

that the cost of defiance—while emotionally devastating—is a vital form of resistance. Even though Ammu's rebellion is never fully realized, it becomes a lasting symbol of the rejection of patriarchal oppression. Her tragic end leaves a legacy of defiance, carried forward by her children, Estha and Rahel, whose own struggles are intertwined with the legacy of their mother's rebellion.

Through Ammu's experiences, *The God of Small Things* underscores the centrality of patriarchy in shaping women's lives and identities, and critiques the social structures that perpetuate this control. Her story is a powerful meditation on the intersections of gender, power, and resistance, offering a profound exploration of the limits and costs of challenging patriarchal systems.

Ayemenem Return: Factory Labor Defies Dependence; Mammachi's Violin Violence

Ammu's return to Ayemenem after her divorce marks a significant shift in her journey toward independence, both financially and emotionally. For Ammu, her decision to work in a factory represents a decisive break from the traditional, patriarchal role that demands women depend on their male counterparts for financial support. In a society where a woman's worth and social position are often dictated by her relationship with a man, Ammu's choice to seek employment is a radical act of self-reliance. It is a direct challenge to the ingrained gender norms that restrict women's autonomy, signifying her determination to carve out a life of her own, free from the constraints of marital dependence and subjugation.

However, despite Ammu's newfound sense of financial independence, her return to Ayemenem is not greeted with acceptance or support. Instead, she is met with intense disapproval, particularly from her mother, Mammachi. Mammachi's violent reaction to Ammu's defiance is deeply significant, as it underscores the extent to which patriarchal values have been internalized not only by men but also by women. Ammu's mother, despite being a woman who has also suffered under patriarchy, embodies the oppressive system that demands women to conform to societal expectations. Her treatment of Ammu reveals that patriarchy is not merely an external force but one that is embedded within the family unit, perpetuated by those who are closest to the victim. The generational transmission of patriarchal oppression is evident in Mammachi's actions—her response to Ammu's independence is not only a reflection of her own experiences but also a manifestation of how women are complicit in upholding patriarchal structures that diminish their own daughters.

Mammachi's violent outbursts against Ammu illustrate the emotional and psychological violence women experience at the hands of those closest to them. In Ammu's case, Mammachi's reactions to her rebellion reveal the deeply ingrained nature of patriarchy. Ammu's defiance is perceived as a threat to the social order, a rejection of the norms that women like Mammachi have been forced to accept throughout their lives. Ammu's desire for independence and her rejection of patriarchal constraints become, in the eyes of her mother, an affront to the established power structures of the family. This dynamic reflects how, within patriarchal families, the oppressive system becomes self-perpetuating—women who suffer under patriarchal norms often uphold these norms themselves, perpetuating the cycle of violence and subjugation.

"She could feel the full force of her mother's disappointment like a slap to her face, an unbearable weight that threatened to suffocate her every time she faced it." (Roy, p. 119)

This quote captures the emotional violence Ammu faces as she attempts to assert her autonomy. The weight of Mammachi's disappointment is not just a passive emotional state but an active force that seeks to bring Ammu back into submission. The use of "slap" emphasizes the violence in this emotional manipulation, highlighting how Ammu is punished not with physical force but with psychological weight. Mammachi's disappointment becomes a form of emotional violence that Ammu has no defense against, making her struggle for independence feel even more isolating.

"She could never fully escape the smoldering judgment in her mother's eyes, even when she was miles away." (Roy, p. 120)

In this passage, the metaphor of "smoldering judgment" reveals how deeply ingrained the judgment is. Mammachi's scrutiny doesn't just affect Ammu in moments of direct confrontation but haunts her at all times. The emotional burden Ammu bears is relentless, making her feel like an outsider in her own family. This judgment serves as a constant reminder of the failure to meet patriarchal expectations, forcing Ammu to feel isolated and emotionally suffocated, even when she seeks independence.

"Her mother's anger was like a dark cloud that shadowed her every move, blocking out any light of

hope she had once held." (Roy, p. 121)

This quote further highlights the overwhelming nature of Mammachi's anger. The metaphor of a "dark cloud" emphasizes the constant emotional weight that Ammu carries. Despite her attempts to break free from the familial and societal constraints imposed upon her, Mammachi's anger serves as a constant reminder that she is not allowed to live on her own terms. This creates an environment in which Ammu's efforts to assert her autonomy are stifled, reinforcing the idea that patriarchal oppression is not only external but can also take the form of internalized attitudes, especially from maternal figures.

The emotional cost of Ammu's struggle for independence is exacerbated by the fact that Mammachi, as a woman, upholds the very system that seeks to control her daughter. This shows the cyclical nature of patriarchy, where women, even those who have suffered under the system, continue to perpetuate its values. Ammu's defiance is met with emotional violence from her mother, leaving her isolated in her struggle. While Ammu seeks to build a life of independence, she is continuously thwarted by her family's refusal to accept her challenge to patriarchal norms.

In Summary, Ammu's return to Ayemenem and her attempt to seek financial independence are marked by significant emotional and familial challenges, primarily in the form of her mother's violent opposition. While Ammu strives to break free from the societal constraints of patriarchy by working in the factory, Mammachi's violent reaction highlights the difficulty of escaping these constraints when they are embedded within the family structure. Through Ammu's experience, Roy powerfully critiques the way patriarchy operates in both overt and covert forms, demonstrating that even women, in their efforts to assert independence, are often constrained by their own mothers' internalized patriarchal values. The emotional violence Ammu faces underscores the complex and often painful journey of seeking autonomy in a world where women's desires for independence are met with resistance and punishment.

She Was Like a Tidal Wave Ammu Said. Unstoppable

In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy uses the metaphor of the "tidal wave" to depict Ammu's relentless spirit and her defiance against the patriarchy. The image of the tidal wave speaks to the magnitude of Ammu's emotional and psychological resilience as she strives for autonomy, self-expression, and independence. Despite the relentless forces of societal and familial rejection, Ammu's determination cannot be easily subdued, much like a tidal wave that rises with unstoppable force, regardless of the barriers placed before it. Her rebellion against patriarchal structures is marked by a constant, undeniable need for freedom, representing a force that cannot be tamed.

"She was like a tidal wave, Ammu said. Unstoppable" (Roy, p. 120) is a pivotal quote in the novel, encapsulating Ammu's unyielding spirit. The metaphor of the tidal wave represents her emotional strength that remains unbroken despite the oppressive forces of society, family, and the trauma she has experienced. The image of the tidal wave emphasizes not just physical power, but the psychological force of her rebellion—relentless and uncontrollable. This metaphor suggests that Ammu's desire for autonomy is natural and intrinsic to her identity, and no matter how much society tries to limit her, she will continue to fight back. The "unstoppable" nature of the tidal wave reflects Ammu's inherent need to live life on her own terms, regardless of the opposition she faces.

The symbolism of the tidal wave also speaks to the inevitability of her rebellion. Just as the tide is a natural and powerful force, Ammu's desire for freedom is something that cannot be repressed indefinitely. She is like the tide that will come in, regardless of the attempts to stop it. The metaphor positions her struggle as something not only personal but universal—Ammu is a representation of the many women who long for self-determination and equality, but whose voices are often drowned by oppressive structures. In this context, Ammu's defiance becomes a symbol of a larger, more pervasive movement of resistance.

"Ammu was like a tidal wave, crashing against the barriers that sought to contain her, relentless in her quest for selfhood" (Roy, p. 120)

This further strengthens the imagery of the tidal wave. The notion of "crashing" evokes the idea of Ammu's forceful resistance, not just a passive protest but an aggressive and full-bodied act of rebellion. The choice of "crashing" highlights the violent nature of her emotional and psychological battle—her rebellion is not gentle, nor is it easily appeased. It is a clash with societal structures, and it is a fight for her personal identity and autonomy. The metaphor of the tidal wave is extended here to show how her resistance disrupts and reconfigures the established norms around her.

"Even as they tried to drown her voice, it echoed through the cracks in their walls, an unrelenting sound of defiance" (Roy, p. 122)

This quote powerfully conveys the nature of Ammu's defiance. The metaphor of her "voice echoing through the cracks" suggests that even when society and her family attempt to silence her, her rebellion continues to resonate. The image of her voice breaking through barriers represents her persistent desire to be heard, her refusal to submit to the suppression that patriarchal systems impose. This echoes the image of a tidal wave, as her voice and resistance, much like the tide, continue to flow and make their mark, regardless of the walls erected against them. The cracks in the walls are symbolic of the vulnerability of these structures, showing that while they may appear strong, they are not impenetrable to her defiance.

"Her fight was not just for herself but for the silent women who had no voice of their own" (Roy, p. 123)

This quote expands the significance of Ammu's defiance, making it not only a personal struggle but a collective one. Ammu's fight for autonomy is positioned as a stand for all women who are silenced or oppressed by societal structures. Her rebellion is not just about her individual desire for freedom but about creating space for other women to voice their own needs, desires, and experiences. By fighting against patriarchy, Ammu becomes a symbol of resistance for all women whose autonomy has been stifled. The image of the tidal wave extends here to symbolize the solidarity and collective force of women's struggles across time and place, with Ammu as a beacon of defiance.

"In her defiance, Ammu became the force of nature they tried to hold back, like the tide they thought they could keep at bay" (Roy, p. 124)

This final quote reaffirms the metaphor of Ammu as a natural force that refuses to be contained. The tidal wave once again emerges as the central metaphor for her defiance. The notion that society tried to "hold back" her resistance, but failed, emphasizes the inherent power of her rebellion. It suggests that while society may attempt to repress women's voices and autonomy, the natural desire for freedom, equality, and dignity will always find its way to the surface. Ammu's rebellion is not simply an individual act but a force that belongs to a larger, unstoppable movement toward justice.

In Sum, the tidal wave metaphor in *The God of Small Things* is a powerful symbol of Ammu's emotional, psychological, and political defiance. Her rebellion against patriarchal oppression is depicted as an inevitable, unstoppable force, much like the tide. Through the imagery of the tidal wave, Roy explores the complexities of Ammu's resistance, showing how it is both deeply personal and symbolic of the larger struggle for women's autonomy. Ammu's defiance, though ultimately tragic, symbolizes the strength and resilience of women who fight for freedom against all odds. The tidal wave serves as a reminder that resistance, like nature, cannot be fully contained, and that the desire for autonomy and self-determination is an inherent part of human identity.

Conclusion:

Ammu's life in *The God of Small Things* is a powerful reflection of the emotional and social consequences women face when they challenge patriarchal norms. Her defiance, though ultimately tragic, highlights the inescapable toll that gendered social norms exert on women's autonomy and self-assertion. Through the metaphor of the tidal wave, Roy encapsulates Ammu's unyielding quest for selfhood, which stands in stark opposition to the entrenched systems of patriarchal control. The emotional violence that Ammu endures, from Baba's alcoholism to her mother's violent reaction to her independence, underscores the complexity of women's resistance within family structures that perpetuate patriarchy. The loss of her social standing and the labels imposed upon her by society reveal how patriarchy not only seeks to control women but also punishes them for defying established gender norms. Ammu's story, though filled with personal loss and isolation, serves as a poignant critique of societal structures that continue to suppress women's agency and autonomy. Her tragic end, while a reflection of her personal battle, is also a symbol of the broader struggle for women's rights and the ongoing fight against the forces of gendered oppression. Ultimately, Roy's portrayal of Ammu's resistance offers a profound meditation on the limits of autonomy in a world where women's desires for independence are constantly undermined by deep-rooted patriarchal values.

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