



Folklore as a Tool of Resistance in *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract

The present study investigates the role of folklore as a form of cultural memory and resistance in post-colonial literature; this is exemplified through a close reading of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. The study explores how folklore, through myths, rituals, oral traditions, and traditional practices, functions as a means of preserving cultural identity and challenging colonial domination. This study is conducted drawing on post-colonial theory and on academic perspectives that present folklore as both a cultural archive and a symbolic tool of resistance. The analysis reveals that themes of caste oppression, social injustice, and cultural fragmentation are intricately intertwined with folklore. It also proves that Roy employs a fragmentary narrative form and cultural references to reflect resistance against dominant ideologies. The study concludes that folklore is a dynamic force that preserves collective memory and expresses resistance within a post-colonial society.

Keywords: Folklore, Post-colonial theory, Resistance, The God of Small Things, Caste oppression

Introduction

Literature is a powerful tool of resistance that challenges colonialism. It shapes national identity, preserves culture, and offers a space for oppressed people to voice their concerns and reclaim their histories. Similarly, folklore plays an important role in preserving the national identity, which consists of customs, traditions, dances, songs, wedding and funeral practices, and other cultural expressions. For this reason, post-colonial writers and authors sought to revive folklore in their literary works because it helps in rebuilding identities that were fragmented by colonialism. Among these writers is Arundhati Roy, whose works emerged as an important contribution to post-colonial literature. The present study focuses on Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* and examines the role of folklore in depicting resistance. Therefore, the main research question of the study is: how is folklore used to depict resistance in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*? The hypothesis underlying this study is that folklore in the novel is not only a cultural element but also a tool of resistance that preserves cultural identity and challenges social structures.

1. Folklore, Memory and Resistance in a Post-colonial Context

1.1. Folklore as a Cultural Memory

Folklore can be defined as the knowledge related to traditions, customs, lifestyles, cultures, and oral literature that are transmitted from one generation to another. All these components contribute to the formation of a group's identity (Ukah, 2017). As an umbrella term, folklore encompasses customs and traditions, celebrations and festivals, marriage and burial practices, manners of speech, myths, legends, riddles, folktales, proverbs, jokes, songs, and poems. These cultural elements preserve collective memories and ensure their continuity across generations. In the same vein, Peace et al. argue that folklore includes a community's customs, rituals, songs, music, crafts, and artefacts that embody cultural narratives and collective experiences. Proverbs and sayings also play an important role in transmitting wisdom, moral lessons, and social values (Bhat, 2024). As a result folklore functions not only as a form of cultural expression but also as a repository of cultural memory.

1.2. Folklore as a Tool of Resistance

Several scholars stressed the role of Folklore as a form of resistance against colonialism and cultural domination. According to Peace et al. (2024), folklore contributes to preserving customs, traditions, and collective identity while enabling communities to challenge foreign cultural influences and maintain social cohesion. Folklore here plays the role of a transmitter of solidarity among individuals to protect and assert their identity. Through oral narratives, myths, and popular tales, folklore provides symbolic resources.

Historically, folklore was used as a tool of resistance in various colonial and post-colonial contexts. Native American oral traditions helped preserve cultural identity against assimilation, while African storytelling traditions served as a means of transmitting knowledge and resisting dehumanization during colonial oppression. Likewise, post-colonial societies in Africa and the Caribbean employed folklore to reclaim cultural identity and challenge colonial narratives (Peace et al., 2024). These examples show how folklore functioned as a tool of resistance against systematic oppression.

2-Folklore in Indian Traditions

Indian Folklore reflects the country's rich cultural heritage and diverse traditions. As diverse as India's languages and cultures are, Indian folklore includes a wide range of folktales, myths, oral narratives, and cultural practices that were transmitted across generations. Scholars such as Mukherjee and Chakravarty have emphasized its role as a repository of collective wisdom and cultural identity (Kute, 2020). According to Blackburn, Indian folklore is often expressed through oral epics that reflect crucial social, political, and historical transformations. These epics can be classified as martial, sacrificial, romantic, or heroic, and serve both educational and entertainment purposes while preserving cultural traditions. The narrative and poetic features contribute to the transmission of cultural values and collective memory.

Recent scholarship increasingly explored the relationship between folklore and contemporary Indian literature. Singh emphasizes the importance of folklore in shaping cultural expression and identity formation in Indian English novels. Similarly, Chatterjee (2019) examines the dynamic relationship between folklore, literature, and cultural identity, while Banerjee et al., (2018) discuss folklore in relation to cultural hybridity and identity politics in postcolonial India. Sharma (2018) further highlights the role of folklore in shaping literary traditions across different regions and linguistics communities in India (as cited in Kute 2020). However, although these studies show the importance of folklore in preserving cultural identity and representing cultural hybridity, they paid little attention to its role as a form of resistance within Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Accordingly, the present study aims to address this gap by exploring how folklore functions as a tool of resistance against social oppression.

3.Materials and Methods

Post-colonialism is defined as the period that comes after colonialism. Yet, this definition is somehow vague, for post-colonialism was not in a specific country because many countries were subjected to and resisted colonialism at different places and timeframes. Therefore, post-colonialism can be considered as a political and ideological term used to describe societies that experienced and resisted colonial domination through cultural and literary forms (Habeeb et al, 2021). According to *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (n.d), post colonialism is an academic discipline that attempts to analyse, explain, and respond to the cultural legacies of colonialism and imperialism. In addition, postcolonial theory/criticism is a way of reading texts that focused on how colonial discourse is repressed, questioned, and challenged in literary works produced in previously colonized societies (Habeeb et al., 2012).

To better understand post-colonialism, it is necessary to distinguish between colonisation and colonialism. The former refer to the physical occupation of territory by force, while the latter develops through multiple stages, including territorial control, economic exploitation, and psychological domination of the colonized subject. The third stage is the most dangerous one because of its long-term cultural effects. Moreover, according to Ashcroft et al, the *Empire Writes Back*, 1989, the term "post-colonial" refers to cultural interactions that emerge from colonial history and the study of the experiences of colonized peoples. The hyphen in "post-colonial" marks the historical transition from colonial rule to post independence conditions. It reflects the shift from pre-colonial to colonial and post-colonial.

The concept of "post-colonial literary theory" arose from the inability of European theory to adequately address the complexities of post-colonial writing and the diversity of its cultural sources. Postcolonial theory emerged from the need to address this diverse practice and the desire to describe the commonalities between these traditions in a comparative manner. Homi Bhabha, in the *The Location of Culture*, 1994, describes post-colonial theory as an analytical approach that examines the complex relationships between coloniser and colonised. It focuses on concepts such as hybridity, mimicry, and cultural contradiction. Bhabha also argues that post-colonial identity is constantly reshaped under colonial influence.

Consequently, this paper adopts qualitative literary analysis of the novel *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy. This approach is based on a close reading and thematic analysis to examine the ways in which folklore is employed as a form of cultural resistance. The study examines issues such as cultural memory, caste oppression, narrative fragmentation, and folk spirituality as forms of resistance. Qualitative research methods fit the study of literature, as they enable deeper understanding of the meanings of text, symbolic structures, and culture, which are received and produced through narrative discourse. Instead of treating things as quantities and measuring them, the approach is to look at how meanings are produced through language, images and narratives.

This analysis is used through close reading and thematic analysis. Close reading enables a focus on linguistic selections and metaphors (as well as narrative strategies) within a small number of text passages. Thematic analysis identifies patterns of folklore and resistance that permeate the novel. This iterative process led to the identification of four overarching thematic categories: folklore as cultural memory, folklore and caste resistance, resistance to colonial modernity, and folk spirituality as symbolic resistance.

The choice of themes is not random but is informed by on-going reading of the socio-cultural context of the text. Every theme represents a dissimilar aspect of the way in which folklore is embedded in the narrative of the novel. While being essentially textual, the study does recognise certain constraints. It does not analyze ethnographic data or carry out analyses of reader response, and it is focused on solely one piece of literature. Yet this tight focus provides more depth and intensity in interpretation of the text.

4.Results and discussion

The analysis of *The God of Small Things* shows that folklore functions as an important form of resistance throughout the novel and not merely as a representation of Kerala's cultural heritage. Folklore does not appear as a cultural artifact, but rather preserves collective memory, challenges social oppression, and resists the cultural changes produced by colonialism and modernity. Four main themes emerged from the analysis: folklore as cultural memory, folklore and caste resistance, cultural resistance against colonial influence, and nature and folk spirituality as resistance.

4.1.Folklore as a Cultural Memory through Preservation and Fragmentation

In *The God of Small Things*, the analysis reveals that folklore operates as a repository of cultural memory through which Roy preserves aspects of Kerala's cultural world that are threatened by social and historical transformation. This function is particularly evident in the novel's representation of Kathakali. Roy writes that "To the Kathakali Man these stories are his children and his childhood. He has grown up within them" (Roy, p. 218). The metaphor of

the stories as “children” is significant because it reverses the usual relationship between the individual and tradition. The stories are not presented as dead cultural objects inherited from the past; instead, they are imagined as living entities that participate in the formation of the performer’s identity. The phrase “grown up within them” further suggests that cultural memory is not something externally possessed but something through which the individual develops a sense of self.

Roy’s choice of the Kathakali performer is particularly important. Kathakali combines narrative, music, gesture, costume, facial expression, and religious and mythological traditions. By incorporating this performance tradition into the novel, Roy extends folklore beyond oral storytelling and represents it as a form of embodied memory. The performer does not simply reproduce a traditional story; he becomes a carrier of the cultural memory contained within it. Folklore therefore survives through performance and repetition even when the social circumstances surrounding it are changing.

This idea is reinforced through the representation of religious songs and chants. When Roy writes that “the bald pilgrims in Beena Mol began to sing another bhajan” (Roy, p. 92), the verb “sing” introduces sounds into the narrative and momentarily shifts attention away from the dominant political and social structures surrounding the characters. The bhajan is not explained to the reader in a detached anthropological manner. Instead, it is inserted naturally into the characters’ environment, suggesting that religious and folkloric practices remain embedded in everyday life. The lack of elaborate explanation is itself significant: the practice exists as part of a cultural world whose meaning is carried through participation and repetition.

Roy’s treatment of cultural memory, however, is not nostalgic. The novel’s fragmented chronology complicates the possibility of preserving the past in a stable form. Events are repeatedly remembered, reconstructed, and returned to from different temporal positions. This narrative fragmentation mirrors the fragmented nature of memory itself. The past survives, but it does not survive intact. Traumatic events, particularly the death of Sophie Mol and the destruction of Velutha, become embedded in the memories of Estha and Rahel. Consequently, folklore functions simultaneously as preservation and fragmentation: it carries cultural memory across generations while revealing the wounds and silences through which that memory has been transmitted.

4.2.Folklore and Caste Resistance

The analysis of the novel reveals that folklore is closely connected to Roy’s representation of caste oppression. The novel exposes the historical violence underlying the social order through its treatment of Velutha and the Paravan community. Roy observes: “In Mammachi’s time, Paravans, like other Untouchables, were not allowed to walk on public roads...” (Roy, p. 80). The capitalisation of “Untouchables” reproduces the language of caste classification and draws attention to the institutional nature of discrimination. More importantly, the spatial restriction imposed on the Paravans demonstrates that caste is not merely an abstract belief but a system that controls physical movement and access to public space.

Velutha’s character is particularly significant because his abilities contradict the social identity imposed upon him. He is described as exceptionally skilled with his hands and is capable of repairing and creating objects that others cannot. His practical knowledge

challenges the assumption that intellectual and technical ability belong exclusively to socially privileged groups. Roy therefore creates an ironic contrast between Velutha's actual abilities and the low social status assigned to him by the caste system. His skill becomes a silent challenge to the hierarchy that defines him as inferior.

The relationship between Velutha and Ammu intensifies this challenge. Their relationship violates what Roy later calls the "Love Laws" (Roy, p. 39), a striking example of metaphorical language through which social restrictions are presented as if they were formal laws. The expression is deliberately paradoxical: love is normally associated with freedom and personal emotion, whereas a "law" implies regulation and prohibition. Through this metaphor, Roy exposes the contradiction between individual desire and the social mechanisms that attempt to control it.

The repeated emphasis on rules and transgression also contributes to the novel's critique of caste. Velutha and Ammu do not simply experience private suffering; their relationship exposes the boundaries that the social order attempts to make appear natural. Roy's use of the children's perspective makes these boundaries particularly revealing because Estha and Rahel often perceive social rules without fully accepting their logic. Their partial understanding allows the reader to see the absurdity and violence of conventions that adults treat as unquestionable. The narrative treatment of Velutha's death further complicates the idea of resistance. His individual resistance does not produce social liberation. Instead, the institutions protecting caste privilege mobilise violence against him. His death demonstrates that the social order is maintained not only through beliefs but through physical coercion. Roy consequently avoids presenting resistance as automatically successful. Velutha's body becomes the site on which the conflict between human desire and caste ideology is violently resolved.

Folklore is important within this structure because it provides alternative cultural memories to the official social order. Yet Roy does not suggest that indigenous culture is inherently egalitarian. The same society that preserves songs, rituals, and traditional narratives also reproduces caste discrimination. This tension prevents the novel from romanticising folklore. Cultural tradition can preserve collective identity while simultaneously containing oppressive structures. Roy's treatment of folklore is therefore resistant precisely because it exposes these contradictions rather than concealing them.

4.3.Colonial Modernity and Cultural Resistance

The novel's representation of colonial modernity becomes particularly significant when the characters' relationship with English language and Western cultural values is examined closely. Colonial modernity can be understood as the persistence and transformation of colonial structures of value after formal colonial rule has ended. It refers not simply to the presence of Western cultural practices but to the ways in which colonial histories continue to influence ideas of modernity, education, respectability, class, language, and cultural superiority. This concept is central to the Ipe family. English occupies a privileged position in the family's cultural imagination, and Western education and lifestyles become associated with sophistication and status. Roy exposes this condition through irony rather than direct political commentary. The family has formally entered a post-independence world, yet its attitudes continue to reflect distinctions produced by colonial history. Independence therefore does not automatically produce cultural decolonisation.

Chacko's statement, "Our dreams have been doctored. We belong nowhere" (Roy, p. 60), is particularly revealing. The verb "doctored" is unusual because it normally refers to the alteration or manipulation of something. By applying it to "dreams," Roy creates a metaphor for the psychological consequences of colonial influence. Dreams, which should represent individual desire and freedom, have been externally altered. The second sentence, "We belong nowhere," is extremely short and syntactically simple. Its brevity contrasts with the complexity of the cultural problem it expresses. The first-person plural pronoun "we" also expands the statement beyond Chacko as an individual and suggests a wider postcolonial condition of cultural displacement.

The novel's treatment of English further reveals the ambivalence of colonial modernity. English provides access to education and social mobility, but it also functions as a cultural hierarchy through which characters are judged. This contradiction is especially visible in the children's experience of language. Roy frequently manipulates English through unusual word combinations, repetitions, capitalisation, phonetic spellings, and childish formulations. The children's language does not always conform to standard linguistic conventions, and this stylistic experimentation challenges the authority of standard English.

This is important because Roy does not reject English as a colonial language; instead, she transforms it. The novel is written in English, yet its English is reshaped by Indian cultural references, Malayalam expressions, children's speech, songs, rhythms, and local imagery. The result is a hybrid literary language that neither completely reproduces British English nor abandons it. The language itself therefore becomes an example of cultural negotiation. Roy's narrative style reinforces this process. The repetition of words and phrases, unconventional capitalisation, phonetic experimentation, and fragmented syntax imitate the children's perception of the world while simultaneously disrupting conventional literary English. Such linguistic choices can be interpreted as a form of resistance because they appropriate the colonial language and make it carry experiences and cultural meanings that do not originate within British cultural frameworks.

The novel consequently presents colonial modernity as an ongoing process rather than a completed historical period. Colonial influence interacts with caste, class, gender, family structures, and local traditions. This interaction produces cultural hybridity rather than a simple opposition between "Indian" and "Western" identities. Bhabha's concept of hybridity is useful here because Roy's characters occupy an unstable cultural space in which identities are continuously negotiated. Folklore participates in this negotiation. Songs, rituals, religious practices, local stories, and Kathakali coexist with English education and Western cultural aspirations. Roy does not construct these elements as two completely separate cultural worlds. Instead, she places them in contact and sometimes in conflict. Cultural resistance therefore does not require a return to an imagined, uncontaminated past. It can also take the form of transforming inherited cultural materials and making them speak within new historical circumstances.

4.4. Nature and Folk Spirituality as Resistance

Nature and folk spirituality constitute another important dimension of resistance in the novel. Roy repeatedly transforms ordinary natural objects and sensory experiences into

symbols through which characters experience the world outside dominant social structures. The river, insects, trees, rain, animals, and night landscape are not merely decorative elements of the setting. They participate in the novel's symbolic system and frequently acquire meanings connected to memory, desire, death, and freedom. This symbolic dimension becomes especially significant in relation to the children. Estha and Rahel perceive details of the physical world with an intensity that differs from the adult characters. Roy's child-centred perspective allows apparently insignificant objects to acquire extraordinary importance. This technique is consistent with the novel's title, which directs attention towards the "small things" that conventional social and historical narratives tend to overlook. The small and apparently insignificant consequently become a means of challenging the authority of the "big" structures of society.

The river is one of the most important examples. It functions simultaneously as a natural environment, a space of childhood exploration, a site of escape, and a witness to violence. Its symbolic significance changes according to the characters' experiences. For the children, it can initially represent adventure and freedom; later, it becomes associated with Sophie Mol's death and the traumatic consequences of Velutha's persecution. Nature therefore does not remain innocent in the narrative. It absorbs and reflects human history. Roy similarly connects natural imagery with forbidden desire. The statement "They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all violated the laws of who should be loved and how. And how much" (Roy, p. 39) demonstrates how spatial and legal imagery are combined to represent transgression. "Crossed" suggests physical movement, but it simultaneously signifies the crossing of social boundaries. The repetition of "all" expands the statement beyond a single character, while the fragmented final phrase, "And how much," disrupts grammatical completeness. This fragmentation gives emotional emphasis to the restrictions imposed upon love.

The relationship between nature and social prohibition is particularly important in the novel because natural spaces temporarily allow characters to move beyond socially imposed boundaries. However, Roy does not romanticise this freedom. The natural world cannot permanently protect the characters from the social system. Velutha's fate demonstrates that symbolic or emotional escape does not necessarily result in material liberation.

Folk spirituality operates in a similarly ambiguous way. Religious songs, rituals, stories, and beliefs provide alternative ways of interpreting existence, but they do not abolish social hierarchy. Roy therefore presents spirituality as a symbolic form of resistance rather than a simple solution to oppression. It can preserve memory, provide emotional meaning, and create spaces of imaginative freedom, but the social structures surrounding the characters remain powerful. This tension is central to Roy's treatment of resistance. The novel does not claim that folklore, nature, or spirituality can easily overturn caste, patriarchy, or colonial legacies. Instead, these elements preserve alternative memories and meanings within a society organised by powerful structures of exclusion. Their resistant potential lies partly in their ability to make visible what dominant systems attempt to marginalise.

Conclusion

This paper discusses how folklore is employed to depict resistance in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. It sought to explore the relationship between folklore, cultural memory, and resistance within the post-colonial Indian context. The analysis showed that folklore deviates from a merely cultural element or a tradition representation to a means of preserving

identity and challenging social oppression. The findings suggest that Roy's use of folklore, including traditional songs, ancestral practices, family tales, myths, and symbolic elements of nature to preserve cultural memory and express resistance. Folklore functions as a link to remind of local traditions on a society strongly penetrated by colonial heritage, social inequality, and cultural transformation.

The novel, in fact, also illustrates how folklore is tied closely to the experiences of the marginalized characters, especially those affected by caste-based discrimination and social exclusion. In addition, the analysis showed that the coverage of folklore is in itself a mode of resistance. Through the character of Velutha, Roy exposes the oppression of the caste system and resistance to it. Through the experiences of Ammu, Estha, and Rahel, folklore is connected to memory, trauma, and the pursuit of dignity and self-expression. The novel also presents cultural resistance to colonial modernity in its critique of Western influence, social fragmentation, and alienation from cultural roots. In sum, *The God of Small Things* shows how folklore functions as a form of cultural memory, which preserves tradition, sustains Identity, and challenges dominant social and cultural structures.

Roy's appropriation of folklore demonstrates the potential of literature to resist and give voice to the marginalized individuals and communities. Nevertheless, this study is limited to one novel and concentrates chiefly on folklore as a form of resistance. Therefore, future research can be extended into an examination of folklore in other post-colonial Indian novels. Future research can also explore of the links between folklore, gender, memory, and identity from more comparative perspectives.

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