

## **Dismantling Oppressive Family Dynamics through the Study of Memory in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things***

Fenulah Hepzi G\*  

### **Abstract**

*This article analyses oppressive familial dynamics through memory in *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy. The research employs Antonio Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony and Sigmund Freud's concept of repression to analyse the dynamics of power inside the family unit. The Ipe family exemplifies a microcosm of society wherein caste, gender roles, and social expectations shape individual conduct and interpersonal dynamics. The article examines the experiences of Estha and Rahel, illustrating how childhood trauma influences their adult lives. Estha's quiet is examined as a consequence of suppression and mental anguish, but Rahel's recollections signify loss, separation, and psychological distress. Their reactions to trauma illustrate the impact of memory and silence on identity and relationships.*

*The article highlights how figures, characters like Baby Kochamma and Mammachi endorse patriarchal and caste-based dominance within the home structure. Into the bargain, Comrade Pillai's role illustrates how political power perpetuates social injustice. This contrast underscores the relationship between home and governmental power structures. The study contends that oppression in the novel transcends individual actions, being fundamentally embedded in social institutions and cultural values. The novel elucidates how memory, trauma, and silence collectively influence identity and perpetuate unequal power dynamics across generations within family and societal contexts.*

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\*Fenulah Hepzi G, Postgraduate Student, Department of English, Madras Christian College, Chennai - 600059, Tamil Nadu, India.

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### **Introduction: Family as a Microcosm of Society**

As the Indian proverb goes, 'Matha, Pitha, Guru, Dheivam' ('mother, father, teacher, God'), family is revered with an intensity that can even surpass one's devotion to the divine. The family, preserved across generations, serves as an inevitable construct and a microcosm of the larger society. For a child, the family is the first society they encounter, shaping identity, behaviour, and memory. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) offers a powerful exploration of these dynamics. As a work of domestic fiction, it situates memory, cultural hegemony, and personal identity within the intimate yet politically charged space of the family home. The concept of cultural hegemony, devised by Antonio Gramsci which is predominantly used in the analysis of the society, ruling classes and power structures as a macrocosm is used in this paper as an axiom to analyse the structure of a family, a microcosm of the society.

### **Cultural Hegemony and Domestic Power Structures**

Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony offers a crucial framework for understanding how domination operates in *The God of Small Things*. In Selections from the Prison Notebooks, Antonio Gramsci argues that ruling power sustains itself not primarily through coercion but through the manufacturing of consent. Authority becomes most effective when it embeds itself within "common sense," shaping what appears natural, moral, and inevitable. Power, in this formulation, is internalized. It is reproduced in habits, rituals, silences, and everyday moral language. Roy's Ipe household exemplifies this mechanism with unsettling precision.

### **The Ipe Family and Internalized Oppression**

In the Ayemenem world, domination is rarely theatrical. There are no overt tyrants marching with visible weapons. Instead, caste hierarchies, gender roles, and codes of sexual propriety operate as unquestioned norms. The 'Love Laws' that dictate 'who should be loved, and how. And how much' are not codified statutes but cultural commandments, absorbed as moral truth. This is Gramsci's hegemony at work: the transformation of ideology into instinct. Freud explains how authority becomes internalized within individuals:

The super-ego retains the character of the father, while the more powerful the Oedipus complex was and the more rapidly it succumbed to repression, the more severe will be the domination of the super-ego over the ego later on in the form of conscience or perhaps of an unconscious sense of guilt. The super-ego represents the internalization of cultural authority and continues

the work of parental influence within the individual psyche. (Freud, *The Ego and the Id* 36)

Baby Kochamma and Chacko function as agents of this hegemonic reproduction. Yet they are not sovereign beneficiaries of the system; they are also its casualties. Baby Kochamma's life is shaped by unfulfilled desire and social repression. Chacko, despite his Oxford education, remains trapped within patriarchal entitlement and postcolonial insecurity. Both sustain the very codes that have constrained them. This is precisely how hegemony survives, it recruits the subordinated into its own perpetuation. The enforcement of respectability within the Ipe family operates through micro-practices: policing of speech, regulation of sexuality, and obsessive concern with public perception. Ammu's divorce is not simply a personal failure; it becomes a stain upon the family's honor. Her children are marked as "less-than." Velutha's transgression is not only sexual; it is ontological. He violates caste-coded spatial and bodily boundaries. Freud describes how civilization suppresses individual desire, "Civilization is built upon a renunciation of instinct. Each individual must renounce aggressive and sexual impulses in order to live within society. This repression creates tension within the psyche, and the individual becomes governed by an internal authority which enforces social norms and punishes deviation through guilt and anxiety" (Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* 59). The violence that follows is framed not as brutality but as restoration of moral order. In hegemonic systems, punishment masquerades as necessity.

This constant performance of moral propriety produces psychic repression. Conflict cannot surface openly because dissent would challenge the 'naturalness' of the system. Instead, tensions sediment beneath language. The result is not equilibrium but implosion. Roy structures the novel around aftermath rather than event, signaling that trauma is not episodic but enduring.

Repression is the cornerstone on which the whole structure of psychoanalysis rests. It is a process whereby ideas which are incompatible with the standards of the individual's moral and social environment are excluded from consciousness and forced into the unconscious, where they continue to exert influence in disguised and indirect ways. (Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* 295)

### **Trauma and Silence: Estha's Psychological Withdrawal**

Nowhere is this more evident than in Estha's adult existence. His muteness is not simply a symptom of individual pathology; it is the logical outcome of hegemonic violence internalized. Roy describes his withdrawal as "the psychological equivalent of what lungfish do to get themselves through the dry season" (12). The metaphor is biologically precise. Lungfish survive drought by aestivation, slowing metabolism, retreating into a hardened shell of mud. Survival requires suspension. Estha's silence functions similarly. Speech is dangerous because language is already colonized by authority. When he is

coerced by the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man and later manipulated by police interrogation, he learns that speech can be weaponized. The hegemonic order does not need him to scream; it needs him to comply. His muteness, then, becomes both defense and prison. Trauma here does not erupt theatrically, it calcifies. Sigmund Freud's concept of traumatic fixation explains this psychological withdrawal. Freud observes that traumatic experiences bind individuals to past events in ways that disrupt normal functioning,

Traumatic neuroses give clear indications that they have at their basis a fixation to the moment of the traumatic occurrence. These patients regularly suffer from reminiscences; their dreams constantly take them back to the situation of the accident, and they appear to be bound to the trauma, unable to escape its effects. The patient is, one might say, psychically fixated to the trauma. (Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 12)

Estha's silence reflects this fixation, rather than articulating the trauma, he becomes psychologically immobilized, trapped within unresolved memory.

The description that he carries the memory of a young man with an old man's mouth deepens this reading. Childhood is prematurely evacuated. The face becomes a site of temporal dislocation. Trauma accelerates aging because it imposes knowledge without comprehension. Estha inhabits a future that should not yet belong to him. In psychoanalytic terms, repression does not erase memory; it displaces it. The past persists as structure rather than narrative.

Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature returns to haunt the survivor later on. The impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* 4)

### **Intergenerational Trauma and Ammu's Childhood**

Ammu's own childhood provides the genealogical root of this psychic inheritance. Her rejection of the "Father Bear and Mother Bear" stories signals early disillusionment with normative familial myths. In her version, Father Bear beats Mother Bear with brass vases, and Mother Bear endures with mute resignation. This is not merely a private reinterpretation; it is a counter-narrative to hegemonic domestic ideology. The fairy tale, traditionally a vehicle for naturalizing patriarchy is exposed as fabrication. Ammu's recognition does not translate into liberation. Awareness alone cannot dismantle hegemony. Her marriage to Baba, her subsequent divorce, and her marginalization within the Ipe household reveal the limited options available to women outside patriarchal protection. The system punishes deviation. Ammu's desire for Velutha becomes a radical act precisely because it defies caste and gender regulation simultaneously. Yet its suppression demonstrates the system's

resilience.

**Trauma is not incidental, it is structural.**

Ammu's childhood exposure to domestic violence conditions her expectations of love. Her rebellion, though courageous, remains circumscribed by internalized patterns of rage and despair. Consequently, her children inherit not only social stigma but emotional volatility. Trauma transmits intergenerationally not as explicit instruction but as atmosphere. Bessel van der Kolk explains how trauma becomes embedded in emotional environments.

Traumatized people chronically feel unsafe inside their bodies. The past is alive in the form of gnawing interior discomfort. Their bodies are constantly bombarded by visceral warning signs, and in an attempt to control these processes they often become expert at ignoring their gut feelings and numbing emotional awareness. (Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score* 66)

Ammu's childhood exposure to violence therefore shapes her emotional responses, relationships, and rebellion.

Gramsci's framework clarifies why this transmission feels inevitable. When domination becomes common sense, victims may reproduce it unconsciously. Baby Kochamma weaponizes morality because morality is the only currency available to her within patriarchy. Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok describe the unconscious transmission of trauma: "What haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others. These unspoken traumas are transmitted unconsciously, creating psychic inheritance in which descendants carry the burden of events they did not themselves experience" (Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel* 171). This psychic inheritance explains how Estha and Rahel internalize the emotional consequences of Ammu's suffering. Chacko performs progressive rhetoric while benefiting from inherited privilege. The police enact brutality in the name of social order. Each actor perceives themselves as maintaining normalcy

**Cultural Hegemony Beyond the Household**

This pattern is not confined to Ayemenem. Across many societies in the Global South particularly those shaped by colonial legacies, caste stratifications, and rigid gender codes discipline within the family often masquerades as tradition. Corporal punishment, emotional silencing, and strict regulation of female sexuality are justified as cultural continuity. Abuse becomes normalized through phrases such as 'for your own good' or 'this is how it has always been'. Such language exemplifies hegemonic naturalization. Antonio Gramsci explains how domination becomes normalized through cultural consent:

The supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as 'domination' and as 'intellectual and moral leadership.' A social group dominates antagonistic groups, but it also leads allied groups, and this leadership is

exercised through consent, which is historically created and organized. (Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* 57)

This framework explains how oppressive practices within families are sustained not merely through force but through accepted cultural norms and internalized beliefs.

In these contexts, trauma frequently remains unarticulated. Mental health discourse may be stigmatized, and emotional suffering is subsumed under notions of duty or endurance. Children internalize fear as obedience. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence further clarifies this internalization:

Symbolic violence is the gentle, invisible form of violence, which is never recognized as such, and is exercised through the most ordinary channels of everyday life. It is imposed through systems of meaning that legitimize domination and make it appear natural. (Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination* 1-2)

Women interpret suffering as sacrifice. Men equate authority with masculinity. The system thus regenerates itself without overt enforcement. This invisible violence reflects the emotional and psychological conditioning within the Ipe family and broader social structures.

### **Narrative Structure and Memory Representation**

Roy's narrative technique reflects this dynamic. The nonlinear structure, fragmented chronology, and repetition of key phrases replicate the compulsive return of repressed memory. Sigmund Freud describes the repetitive nature of traumatic memory: "The patient does not remember anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but he acts it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he repeats it without knowing, of course, that he is repeating it" (Freud, *Remembering, Repeating and Working Through* 150).

Trauma is not narrated once; it circulates. Cultural memory within the Ipe household becomes scar tissue visible yet unspoken. Roy's fragmented narrative expresses repetition, where trauma returns through narrative structure rather than linear storytelling. Cathy Caruth explains trauma as a repetitive and fragmented memory: "The traumatized subject is possessed by an image or event. Trauma is experienced belatedly, in the repeated possession of the one who experiences it. Memory becomes fragmented, incomplete, and resistant to narrative closure" (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* 5).

Estha's final condition living in silence, inhabiting a world emptied of language symbolizes the ultimate victory of hegemony over subjectivity. Yet Roy's act of writing counters that silence. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub emphasize the importance of narrating trauma, "The emergence of the narrative which is being listened to and heard, is therefore the process and the place wherein the cognizance, the 'knowing' of the event is given birth to. The

listener becomes a witness to the trauma, enabling the survivor to articulate what was previously unspeakable” (Felman and Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* 57).

By narrativizing what the characters cannot articulate, the novel exposes the mechanics of consent and repression. Thusly, through a Gramscian lens, *The God of Small Things* demonstrates that violence need not be spectacular to be devastating. The most enduring domination is that which reshapes perception itself. When hierarchy becomes common sense, resistance appears immoral, and suffering appears deserved. The Ipe family’s tragedy lies not merely in individual failure but in their immersion within a cultural logic that equates obedience with virtue and silence with survival.

In this way, the author presents trauma not as anomaly but as product manufactured by a system that sustains itself through the intimate spaces of home, love, and memory.

### **Psychoanalytic Reading of Estha’s Silence**

From a psychoanalytic perspective, Estha’s muteness in adulthood in *The God of Small Things* operates as a paradigmatic defense mechanism. Drawing from Sigmund Freud’s formulation in *The Unconscious*, repression functions as the ego’s strategy for managing intolerable affect.

Repression is not a defense mechanism which is present from the very beginning; it cannot arise until a sharp cleavage has occurred between conscious and unconscious mental activity. The essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious. The repressed material, however, does not remain inactive. It continues to exist in the unconscious and strives for expression, forcing its way into consciousness in disguised and distorted forms. (Freud, *The Unconscious* 147)

Traumatic material is not erased but displaced into the unconscious, where it continues to exert structural influence. What cannot be symbolised in language returns in symptom.

Estha’s silence is precisely such a symptom. The extremity of this withdrawal signals more than introversion; it indicates a radical foreclosure of speech itself. His refusal to speak mirrors his inability to articulate experiences such as the sexual abuse by the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man and the coercive police interrogation that followed Velutha’s arrest. Language, in these instances, was contaminated. Speech became a site of violation. To speak is to risk re-entry into a scene of humiliation and guilt. Silence, therefore, becomes protective, yet simultaneously incarcerating. Crucially, Estha’s silence does not imply absence of memory. Freud’s repression is never annihilation; it is sequestration. The repressed persists as affective residue, anxiety, guilt, dissociation. Roy’s metaphor of the “dry season” encapsulates this condition. Estha survives by

psychological aestivation, suspending vitality in order to endure. The cost, however, is relational paralysis. His muteness erodes reciprocity, rendering even his bond with Rahel fragile and estranged.

### **Trauma, Memory, and Twin Identity: Estha and Rahel**

Rahel's trauma manifests differently, revealing a complementary psychic configuration. This formulation suggests psychic incorporation rather than repression. Estha is not excluded from consciousness; he is internalised. She carries him as an extension of her own fragmented identity. Where Estha denies articulation, Rahel hovers around painful recollection. Her strategy is not pure remembrance but partial confrontation, an oscillation between recognition and distance.

Together, the twins embody two divergent yet interconnected responses to trauma: repression and melancholic attachment. Cathy Caruth expands Freud's concept of trauma by emphasizing its delayed psychological return. Estha externalises pain through silence; Rahel internalises it through identification. Neither achieves resolution. Instead, their polarised coping mechanisms generate mutual dysfunction. Emotional communication collapses. Their once-mythic twin unity. Two-egg twins, Dizygotic. deteriorates under the pressure of unprocessed grief. Separation becomes both geographical and psychic. The tragedy lies not only in individual suffering but in relational erosion: trauma fractures intimacy.

### **Gender, Patriarchy, and Complicity**

A gendered reading further complicates Estha's position within the Ipe lineage. Patriarchal privilege in Ayemenem appears embodied by figures such as Chacko, who performs intellectual cosmopolitanism while exercising entitlement over women and labourers. Estha is anomalous within this structure. His sensitivity, vulnerability, and eventual muteness disqualify him from hegemonic masculinity. He does not inherit Chacko's authority; instead, he absorbs the system's violence. This exposes a crucial insight: patriarchy does not distribute benefits uniformly among men. Those who fail to conform to its norms- emotional stoicism, dominance, heterosexual confidence may themselves become marginal. Estha's abuse and subsequent silencing destabilise the assumption that maleness guarantees power. He is male, yet powerless; socially privileged by caste, yet psychically dispossessed. Hegemony fractures along internal fault lines.

Roy also resists reductive binaries that cast women solely as victims. Mammachi, though brutalised by her husband in earlier years, perpetuates caste hierarchies within the pickle factory and polices Ammu's defiance. Her authority is circumscribed but real. By normalising inequality as "the way things are," she transforms structural violence into domestic common sense. This internalisation exemplifies cultural hegemony's endurance. Baby Kochamma's

role is even more overtly complicit. Motivated by jealousy, resentment, and caste prejudice, she orchestrates the narrative that leads to Velutha's arrest. Her power is not physical but discursive. She weaponises morality, mobilising police authority under the guise of protecting family honour. In doing so, she demonstrates how women can function as custodians of patriarchal and casteist order. Oppression survives not merely through male brutality but through female enforcement of normative codes.

### **Silence as Cultural Memory**

Within this matrix, Estha's repression acquires broader significance. His silence is not solely an individual pathology but a symptom of a household structured by shame and moral surveillance. The Ipe family's cultural memory is sustained through what remains unsaid, domestic violence, sexual transgression, caste violation. Silence operates as both shield and instrument. It preserves respectability while entombing truth. Thusly, Estha's adult condition reflects a society in which "common sense" masks inherited constraint. Repression becomes adaptive in environments where articulation invites punishment. Too boost adaptation calcifies into dysfunction. The twins' estrangement, Ammu's despair, Velutha's annihilation all emerge from a system that equates obedience with virtue and dissent with catastrophe.

Estha's muteness stands as an embodied archive of cultural trauma. His silence is dense with memory, saturated with events that cannot be spoken without destabilising the very structures that demand quiet endurance. In this sense, his repression is not merely psychological but political: it reveals how hegemonic orders inscribe themselves into the intimate architecture of the self.

### **Political Hegemony and Domestic Power**

In *The God of Small Things*, memory is never neutral: it is either weaponised by those in power or buried alive by those who cannot speak. The Ipe household's domestic power struggles mirror the political climate of Ayemenem. Just as Estha learns that silence is the only safe response to injustice, the wider community is taught to accept political decisions that preserve existing hierarchies. Politically, the Ayemenem of the 1960s is depicted as a space where power aligns with caste, class, and ideological dominance.

The Communist movement embodied by characters like Comrade Pillai claims to speak for the oppressed but is shown to be deeply complicit in perpetuating social control. Pillai's political maneuvering around Velutha's case exemplifies this: although he is a supposed champion of workers' rights, he abandons Velutha when caste politics and his own ambitions intersect. The political sphere here enforces hegemonic dominance by masking structural oppression under the language of solidarity and reform, a classic example of Antonio Gramsci's notion that cultural hegemony works not just through coercion, but through the consent manufactured by those in power. In contrast,

the domestic sphere in Ayemenem enacts cultural hegemony through familial and interpersonal relationships, reproducing the same hierarchies with more intimate tools.

### **The Interconnection Between Political and Domestic Power**

Mammachi's household functions as a microcosm of Ayemenem's political order. She tolerates Chacko's serial exploitation of lower-caste women "He couldn't help having a Man's Needs" but condemns Ammu for her relationship with Velutha. The domestic code here is one in which patriarchal and casteist norms dictate moral judgment. The family's enforcement of the Love Laws: the laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much. mirrors the political laws outside the home, showing that private and public hegemony feed each other. What makes the political and domestic spheres in *The God of Small Things* so tightly intertwined is that the home becomes a training ground for the very compliance the political system requires. Chacko's casual entitlement toward female workers is normalised at home before being mirrored in his public persona as an Anglophile, Oxford-educated landlord who negotiates with local political figures. Meanwhile, Pillai's Communist rhetoric finds fertile ground precisely because the people he influences have been conditioned in their own homes to accept the hierarchies he benefits from. Thus, while the political sphere in Ayemenem sustains cultural hegemony by framing oppression in acceptable ideological terms, the domestic sphere sustains it by framing oppression as love, duty, and moral necessity. Together, they create a closed loop where resistance whether in politics or at home is stifled not just by fear of punishment but by the internalised belief that the order is natural, inevitable, and even virtuous.

### **Conclusion**

*The God of Small Things* serves as a commendable piece of work for the understanding of the relationship between cultural hegemony in domestic spheres and memory, both that transcends generations. Domestic narratives as *The God of Small Things* sheds light at the unspoken yet rampant practices prevalent in the society.

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