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Literary Theories

Memory as Counter-History: Silenced Voices and Erased Trauma in The God of Small Things

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Abstract: This paper examines how memory functions as a counter-history in *The God of Small Things*, foregrounding silenced voices and erased trauma that remain absent from official historical narratives. Set against the socio-political backdrop of postcolonial Kerala, the novel exposes how caste hierarchies, patriarchal norms, and institutional power structures systematically suppress marginalized lives, particularly those of Dalits, women, and children. Through fragmented narration and non-linear temporality, Roy privileges personal and collective memory over linear historical accounts, allowing suppressed experiences to resurface as acts of resistance. The paper argues that memory in the novel does not merely recall the past but actively challenges dominant histories by revealing the violence and trauma they conceal. Velutha's silencing and the unspoken suffering of Ammu and the twins illustrate how trauma is transmitted across generations, transforming memory into a site of cultural and ethical reckoning. Drawing on concepts of subaltern silence and post memory, this study demonstrates how the novel reclaims erased histories by narrativizing silence, absence, and loss. Ultimately, the paper situates *The God of Small Things* within the broader discourse of memory studies, showing how literature can function as a powerful counter-historical medium that restores visibility to voices history refuses to remember.

Keywords: Silenced histories, Cultural memory, Counter-history, Caste and trauma, Narrative silence.



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Introduction

Official histories often present themselves as neutral, linear, and complete. Yet such narratives are shaped by power, selectively recording events that serve dominant social, political, and cultural interests while erasing the lived experiences of marginalized communities. Literature, particularly the postcolonial novel, has emerged as a crucial site for recovering these silenced histories. Through memory, fragmentation, and alternative narrative structures, novels challenge the authority of official history and offer counter-historical perspectives. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* stands as a powerful example of how memory can function as a counter-history, foregrounding voices erased by caste hierarchy, patriarchy, and institutional violence.

Set in postcolonial Kerala, the novel narrates the tragic consequences of transgressing rigid social codes, particularly the "Love Laws" that dictate who should be loved and how. The narrative revolves around the childhood memories of twins Estha and Rahel, whose fragmented recollections expose the silencing of Dalit lives, women's desires, and children's trauma. Rather than presenting history as a chronological record of events, Roy constructs a narrative shaped by memory, repetition, and silence. In doing so, the novel resists dominant historical discourses that normalize caste oppression and gendered violence.

This paper argues that *The God of Small Things* employs memory as a counter-historical tool to recover silenced voices and erased trauma. By privileging personal and collective memory over official historical narratives, the novel reveals how trauma is inherited across generations and how silence itself becomes a form of testimony. Through its narrative structure and thematic focus, the text exposes the limitations of conventional history and asserts literature's role in restoring visibility to marginalized experiences.

Memory and the Limits of Official History

History, as traditionally constructed, often excludes the voices of those without power. Marginalized communities rarely appear in historical records except as statistics or stereotypes. In contrast, memory offers an alternative mode of engaging with the past. Unlike history, memory is subjective, fragmented, and emotionally charged. These qualities, often dismissed as unreliable, allow memory to capture experiences that formal historical accounts overlook or deliberately suppress.

In *The God of Small Things*, Roy challenges the authority of official history by refusing linear narration. The novel moves back and forth in time, mirroring the workings of memory rather than historical chronology. This structure emphasizes that trauma cannot be neatly contained within the past; it intrudes upon the present and shapes identity. The repeated return to the same events, particularly Sophie Mol's death and Velutha's brutal punishment, underscores how unresolved trauma continues to haunt the characters.

The novel also critiques the idea that history is objective. The police report and institutional response to Velutha's death represent an official version of events that erases the truth of caste violence. This sanitized history stands in stark contrast to the memories preserved by the twins, which reveal the cruelty and injustice inflicted upon Velutha. By juxtaposing personal memory with institutional narratives, Roy exposes how history is manipulated to protect dominant power structures.

Silenced Voices and Caste-Based Erasure

One of the most significant silences in Indian history concerns the lives of Dalits. Despite their central role in sustaining society, Dalit experiences remain largely absent from historical narratives. Velutha, a Dalit carpenter in the novel, embodies this historical erasure. His intelligence, creativity, and humanity challenge caste stereotypes, yet his transgression of social boundaries results in brutal punishment.

Velutha's relationship with Ammu is not merely a personal affair but a direct challenge to caste-based social order. The violent response to their relationship illustrates how caste functions as an instrument of silencing. Velutha is denied the right to speak, defend himself, or even exist as a subject within history. His death is recorded as a justified act of law enforcement, effectively erasing the truth of his suffering.

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Memory becomes the only means through which Velutha's story survives. The twins' recollections preserve his presence and humanity, resisting the institutional attempt to erase him. Through memory, the novel restores Velutha's voice, transforming him from a historical absence into a powerful symbol of caste-based trauma. In this way, memory operates as a counter-history that challenges the legitimacy of dominant historical narratives.

Gender, Patriarchy, and Narrative Silence

Alongside caste, patriarchy plays a crucial role in silencing women's experiences in the novel. Ammu's life is defined by social restrictions imposed on divorced women. Her desires, frustrations, and suffering are dismissed or condemned, reflecting broader societal attitudes toward female autonomy. Ammu's voice is repeatedly silenced, both within her family and in the larger social context.

Ammu's relationship with Velutha intensifies this silencing. Rather than acknowledging her emotional reality, society reduces her to a transgressor who must be punished. Her death is quiet and unremarkable, reinforcing the idea that women's suffering does not merit historical recognition. Ammu's story exemplifies how patriarchy collaborates with caste to erase women's experiences from public memory.

Roy employs narrative silence to reflect this erasure. Significant moments in Ammu's life are marked by gaps, pauses, and unspoken emotions. These silences are not absences but meaningful narrative strategies that draw attention to what cannot be openly articulated. By allowing silence to speak, the novel exposes the violence embedded in social norms and highlights the necessity of memory in recovering suppressed histories.

Childhood Memory and Generational Trauma

Children occupy a unique position in *The God of Small Things*. Estha and Rahel are both witnesses to and victims of social violence. Their childhood memories reveal truths that adults attempt to conceal. The novel's focus on their perspective underscores how trauma is transmitted across generations.

The twins' memories are fragmented and repetitive, reflecting the psychological impact of trauma. Events such as Sophie Mol's death and Velutha's arrest are relived through sensory impressions rather than coherent narratives. This mode of remembering emphasizes that trauma resists linear representation. The persistence of these memories into adulthood demonstrates how unresolved trauma shapes identity and emotional life.

Through the twins, Roy illustrates how children inherit the silences of adults. They absorb unspoken fears, guilt, and shame, carrying them into the future. Memory thus becomes both a burden and a means of survival. By narrating trauma through childhood memory, the novel challenges historical narratives that prioritize adult perspectives and overlook the long-term effects of violence.

Memory as Resistance and Ethical Reckoning

Memory in *The God of Small Things* is not passive recollection but active resistance. By remembering what history seeks to forget, the characters engage in an ethical act that challenges injustice. Memory refuses closure, insisting that past violence must be acknowledged rather than erased. The novel's non-linear structure reinforces this resistance. By disrupting chronological order, Roy denies readers the comfort of historical distance. The past remains present, demanding attention and accountability. This narrative strategy underscores the ethical responsibility of remembering marginalized experiences. Literature, in this context, becomes a space for counter-historical engagement. Unlike official history, which seeks resolution and coherence, literature embraces ambiguity and contradiction. Through memory, *The God of Small Things* invites readers to confront uncomfortable truths and reconsider whose stories deserve recognition.

Conclusion

The God of Small Things demonstrates how memory can function as a powerful counter-history, recovering silenced voices and erased trauma excluded from official narratives. Through its focus on caste oppression, gendered silencing, and generational trauma, the novel challenges dominant historical discourses and exposes the violence they conceal. Roy's use of fragmented narration, narrative silence, and childhood memory underscores the limitations of conventional history and highlights literature's unique capacity to bear witness to marginalized experiences. By privileging memory over official history, the novel asserts that truth is not solely the domain of institutions but resides in personal and collective remembrance. In doing so, *The God of Small Things* reclaims history from below, restoring visibility to voices history refuses to remember. The novel ultimately affirms the ethical necessity of remembering as an act of resistance, making memory a vital tool in the ongoing struggle against historical erasure.

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