



CHILDREN'S SUFFERING IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

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Abstract

This study examines children's suffering in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. This analysis uses a sociological approach to literature, specifically based on the theories of Wellek and Warren. This study uses a qualitative method with data collection conducted through in-depth reading of the novel, identifying relevant quotations, gathering supporting theories from academic references, and grouping data based on the topic of children's suffering. Data analysis is carried out through data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. The results show that children's suffering in the novel appears in three main forms. First, a lack of affection and emotional attention from the family makes the child feel unloved and neglected. Second, psychological violence and social pressure stem from strict rules and expectations within the family. Third, rejection and abandonment by parents and other family members cause deep emotional wounds.

Keywords: children's suffering, family, sociology of literature, power imbalance

1. Introduction

Literature often becomes a medium to show human suffering, social injustice, and emotional wounds that are sometimes hidden in real life. In many cultures, especially those shaped by strict rules, strong social hierarchy, and patriarchy, children experience emotional challenges they cannot express or fight against. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* presents this reality clearly, showing childhood not as a period of happiness or innocence, but as a time marked by trauma, silence, and emotional conflict.

The family is the most basic social system where children first learn values, behaviour, and emotional interaction. Beyond fulfilling physical needs such as food and shelter, the family provides an emotional and psychological foundation that shapes children's identity, beliefs, and social understanding. Friedman (in Bowden & Jones, 2003) defines a family as a group of two or more individuals living together with shared rules and emotional bonds, where each member has roles that contribute to family unity. When family relationships function positively, children develop strong emotional security. However, dysfunction,

conflict, and violence can result in deep psychological consequences, especially for children who are still forming their worldview.

Studies on family dynamics show that inequality within family relationships can trigger emotional hardship. Nasution (2021) states that the family is not only a learning space but also the first environment where social identity is constructed. Children who experience unfair treatment or continuous pressure within their homes may face challenges in developing self-confidence and feeling valued. Berk (2001) further emphasizes that warm and open communication between parents and children serves as a crucial foundation for emotional development, as children learn through observation, making parental attitudes, values, and coping strategies highly influential.

Children's suffering within families does not always manifest physically but also symbolically and socially. According to Sari and Maulana (2020), rejection, neglect, or exclusion from meaningful family involvement can lead to long-lasting emotional strain. Many families fail to fulfil their responsibilities, resulting in emotional



wounds that affect children's behaviour, relationships, and self-perception. Granada et al. (2013) explain that such suffering can appear through sadness, apathy, anger, and social withdrawal, particularly when children grow up in environments marked by instability and unequal power dynamics. Tate (2020) adds that children suffer not merely from direct violence, but also from the absence of essential developmental elements such as love, security, and emotional expression.

According Miller (1981) identifies three forms of suffering within the family: lack of affection, psychological violence and social pressure, and rejection and abandonment. These forms are not only seen in literature but also reflected in real life. In Indonesia, data from the Komisi Perlindungan Anak Indonesia (KPAI) in 2022 recorded more than 2,000 cases of domestic violence involving children, including verbal and emotional abuse, neglect, and trauma. A case in Malang involving a 13-year-old girl who suffered emotional neglect and behavioural control from her parents illustrates how family environments can become sources of suffering rather than protection, resulting in trauma symptoms such as withdrawal and depression.

Such reality parallels the experiences of character in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, who endure emotional rejection, lack of parental affection, and structural power imbalance within their family. Their suffering reflects how family dynamics shape children's understanding of themselves and the world. Previous studies on the novel have explored patriarchy (Utami, 2020), caste discrimination (Mehta, 2021), and class prejudice (Meliala, 2017), yet none specifically examine children's suffering as the central focus. This study addresses that gap by analyzing how familial structures and social pressures contribute to the emotional and psychological suffering of child characters in the novel.

Employing the sociological approach to literature proposed by Wellek and Warren

(1949), this study views the novel as a reflection of social realities surrounding family systems, cultural expectations, and interpersonal power structures. Through this lens, children's suffering in the text is understood not only as a personal emotional experience, but also as a representation of broader social contexts and structures.

This research is important because many children today continue to suffer within their own families. The findings are expected to raise public awareness especially among parents and caregivers regarding the essential role of family as a source of emotional safety rather than harm, and to encourage greater sensitivity toward the psychological condition of children experiencing in domestic environments.

2. Concepts and Theoretical Framework

This research begins with the understanding that children's suffering, especially within the family, is not only a personal issue but also the result of a broader social and cultural system. In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy portrays how family based suffering shapes children's thoughts, behaviour, and future life.

Children's suffering is an important concept in this study as it forms the theoretical foundation. Hurlock (1980) explains that suffering does not only arise from physical violence but also from emotional neglect and an unsupportive environment. A lack of affection can lead to low self-esteem, emotional distress, and long-term psychological problems. Ariesta (2022) adds that unfair treatment, forced obedience, and comparison among siblings can make children feel unvalued and emotionally suppressed. Miller (1981) also highlights that suffering is not always visible and may appear subtly through emotional pressure, rejection, or neglect, which can lead to guilt, fear, and long-term trauma.

This study uses a sociological approach to literature because literature reflects social realities, including norms, social structures, and family dynamics.



Wellek and Warren (1949) explain that literature connects to society through the author's background, the content that mirrors real life, and readers' interpretations. Similarly, Swingewood (1972) states that literature may also critique social inequality and expose power relations, particularly within families, that place children in vulnerable positions. Through this approach, children's suffering in the novel is viewed not merely as a personal narrative but as a representation of broader social conditions. Literature becomes a medium to reveal and question emotional oppression, power imbalance, and the silent suffering of children within family systems.

3. Method

This study employs a qualitative method because it aims to understand and analyze the phenomenon of children's suffering and its impact in the novel *The God of Small Things*. The analysis focuses on the content of the text to explore themes, characters, and conflicts related to family induced suffering. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is used to examine and understand the meaning individuals or groups assign to a social or human problem, and through this approach, the study examines how literary works represent forms of children's suffering resulting from family relationships. The main data source is the novel *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, first published in 1997, containing about 340 pages and winning the Booker Prize in the same year. Secondary sources such as literary theory books, scholarly journals, articles, and previous studies are also used to strengthen the analysis. The data collection technique includes reading the novel carefully, focusing on the characters Estha and Rahel, underlining important quotations that express suffering, and grouping data based on forms of suffering such as neglect, pressure, rejection, or unfair treatment. These steps ensure the quotations and events taken reflect emotional pain and

family-caused suffering shown in the narrative.

The data analysis technique refers to Miles and Huberman (1994), consisting of three main stages: data collection, data reduction, and data display. During data collection, repeated readings are conducted to gather relevant quotations, descriptions, and dialogues from the primary text, supported by secondary sources such as theories and journal articles. In the reduction stage, data unrelated to children's suffering is filtered out so that the analysis remains focused. The final stage is data display, where the selected data is organized into tables and categorized based on children's suffering to support the research objectives clearly and systematically.

4. Result and Discussion

This chapter presents the result of a study on the various forms of suffering caused by the family as portrayed in the novel *The God of Small Things*, aiming to answer the forms of suffering children experience within the family context and how the effects of suffering are reflected in the story. The method used in this analysis is the theory proposed by Wellek and Warren, which emphasizes two main functions in the family: socialization and emotional support, and using this approach, the study focuses on how the failure to carry out these two functions directly affects the child's psychological condition. The child characters in the novel, Estha and Rahel, are chosen as the primary focus because their life journey clearly shows the sadness arising from the family structure's disharmony, as they experience a lack of affection, psychological pressure, rejection, neglect, and imbalance of power in the family. These experiences leave emotional scars in their childhood and continue to affect their way of life as adults, showing that the suffering experienced by children is not only a personal issue but also a result of unhealthy and unfair social interaction within the family.



4.1 Lack of Affection and Emotional Attention

Lack of affection and emotional attention is one of the forms of suffering experienced by Estha and Rahel in *The God of Small Things*. Their father, Baba, does not act as a supportive figure but becomes a source of emotional pain that affects their psychological growth. Baba's cold treatment, emotional distance, and absence of affection make the twins feel ignored and unworthy of love. Instead of providing affection and emotional security, Baba creates a tense and unsafe environment. The twins grow up without hugs, affirmations, or emotional comfort from their father, which becomes the beginning of their emotional wounds.

This suffering becomes more visible through the way the children interact with their surroundings. Estha becomes silent and withdrawn, while Rahel develops insecurity and emotional confusion. The lack of emotional support from parents leads both children to feel disconnected and lonely within their own family. Their emotional development does not grow as expected because the family, which should be a place of love and protection, fails to provide warmth and comfort. The emotional neglect they experience becomes a deep psychological scar that follows them as they grow older.

4.2 Psychological Violence and Social Pressure

Psychological violence and social pressure become another form of suffering experienced by Estha and Rahel in *The God of Small Things*. This suffering appears not as physical harm but through mental pressure, emotional manipulation, and social judgment from adults such as Ammu, Baby Kochamma, and the police. The family, which should protect emotional security, instead becomes a place where the children are controlled and silenced. One example of this is shown in Baby Kochamma's treatment toward the twins: "*Baby Kochamma disliked the twins... Half-Hindu Hybrids whom no self-respecting Syrian*

Christian would ever marry." (45). Words like these make the children feel unwelcome and treated as burdens in their own home.

The psychological burden also comes from strict social rules that enforce caste and morality. When Ammu and Velutha's relationship becomes known, the family faces public judgment, as shown in the line: "*It was a punishment for breaking the Love Laws.*" (328). The consequences of this relationship fall not only on Ammu and Velutha, but also on Estha and Rahel, who must carry social shame they do not understand. The pressure reaches its peak when the children witness police brutality against Velutha: "*They heard the thud of wood on flesh... The gurgle of blood on a man's breath.*" (293). Moments like this show how the children are forced to confront fear and violence far beyond their age.

Emotional manipulation continues when Baby Kochamma pressures the children to protect the family's reputation. She threatens them and forces Estha to lie to the police, leading to one of the most significant moments in the story: "*The Inspector asks his question. Estha's mouth says yes. Childhood tiptoes out. Silence slides in like a bolt.*" (320).

This moment marks the loss of Estha's freedom as a child and shows how psychological pressure forces him to obey adults at the cost of his own voice. Meanwhile, Rahel faces similar judgment and fear, with no one to offer reassurance or explanation.

The psychological violence experienced by Estha and Rahel is not occasional but repeated throughout their childhood. They grow up in an environment shaped by fear, shame, and constant expectations to protect family honor. The adults around them including Ammu, Baby Kochamma, Mammachi, Chacko, and the police reinforce power dynamics that silence and control them. Through these repeated experiences, Estha and Rahel's suffering becomes deeply tied to the social and emotional environment they grow up in, showing how the family and society fail to



provide the care, acceptance, and protection children need.

4.3 Rejection and Abandonment

Rejection and Abandonment become one of the strongest forms of suffering experienced by Estha and Rahel in *The God of Small Things*. Within the family environment, they are not fully accepted and are often treated as burdens. After Sophie Mol's death, their emotional condition becomes more visible, as reflected in: "What Larry McCaslin saw in Rahel's eyes was not despair at all, but a sort of enforced optimism... Like stacked spoons." (19). This quote shows how the lack of acknowledgment and emotional support makes the twins withdraw and remain silent.

The rejection becomes clearer in the interaction between Rahel and Ammu. When Rahel innocently asks whether Ammu still loves her, she receives a harsh response rather than comfort. Ammu says, "When you hurt people, they begin to love you less." (112), which makes Rahel feel unsure about her place in the family. The impact becomes stronger when Rahel is separated from Ammu and never sees her again: "She never saw her again... She was thirty-one. Not old, not young, but a viable, dieable age." (161). This separation marks a significant moment where affection, belonging, and emotional closeness disappear from Rahel's life.

Estha experiences similar neglect when he is taken away from his mother and sent to live with a father who had previously abandoned him: "Estha was sent to his father... A man who had already abandoned him once." (9). Being removed from the only familiar environment he knows creates silence and distance within him. Over time, this rejection affects how Estha and Rahel view themselves, which is seen when Rahel is described as no longer being the same as before: "Rahel had stopped being herself. A long time ago." (17). Their silence reflects how the lack of love and attention in the family affects their sense of belonging.

The strongest form of rejection appears when Ammu angrily blames Estha

and expresses harsh words such as, "I should have dumped you in an orphanage the day you were born! You're the millstones around my neck!" (253). Instead of being treated as children who need guidance and care, Estha and Rahel become targets of frustration and blame. The repeated rejection and neglect they experience demonstrate how the family environment becomes the source of suffering rather than comfort and support. Their silence, distance, and emotional withdrawal throughout the story show how strongly these experiences shape their lives.

4.4. Effects of Suffering on Children

The suffering experienced by Estha and Rahel in *The God of Small Things* is not only physical, but much deeper because it involves their emotional and psychological states. The family, which should be the safest place, becomes the main source of pain that causes them to lose trust and love. Their suffering appears through silence, emptiness, and confusion that shape how they see the world. "What Larry McCaslin saw in Rahel's eyes was not despair at all, but a sort of enforced optimism. And a hollow where Estha's words had been..." (19). The silence reflects deep emotional pain. Estha loses his direction in life, as seen when he cannot decide which path to take. His inner chaos is symbolized when he wears different shoes on each foot. His suffering pushes him to shut himself away from the world: "He hadn't spoken to anyone since he returned. Not a word..." (10). Rahel understands Estha's silence because they share the same pain. Their emotional closeness shows that their bond is built through the same suffering.

Estha becomes fragile and feels unsafe, like glass that can break easily: "He looked like he was made of glass. Fragile. Breakable..." (162). The silence in him represents a form of inner death because his soul can no longer bear the weight of pain: "Estha was already dead... Without a mother" (11). Even small actions show how fear controls him, such as holding himself still and silent: "he held his farts in for two



hours...” (98). To him, silence becomes a form of protection. His mind is full of the desire to escape his reality, represented by the constant image of trains. Fear of his own thoughts appears when he realizes his mental state is falling apart: “It’s happening... It has begun...” (285). All these things show the impact of suffering that shapes his behavior and thoughts in ways that continue into adulthood.

Meanwhile, Rahel shows quiet emotional instability. She has no clear plans or hopes for her future: “She had no plans, no plans...” (188). This shows that the emotional wounds from her childhood still haunt her. Rahel grows up feeling empty, unwanted, and unsure about her place in life. She experiences the loss of identity due to the lack of love and care from her family. At the same time, Estha carries a deep sense of guilt: “It wasn’t entirely their fault... The fisherman had already found Sophie Mol” (258). This heavy self-blame destroys his self-worth and burdens him emotionally. They both feel that they no longer have a future, so they choose to focus only on the “Small Things” in life as a survival strategy: “they stuck to the Small Things...” (338).

The emotional and mental suffering they experience leaves lifelong effects. They live in a home filled with rejection, indifference, and loneliness. Longing for love and protection, they instead become targets of blame and silence, shaping how they build relationships with others. These effects appear quietly through withdrawn behavior, emptiness, and difficulty trusting others. Estha chooses silence not because he cannot speak, but because speaking feels unsafe. Rahel becomes someone who struggles to build emotional closeness because she feels unworthy of care. Their story becomes a reflection of how family can become the deepest source of pain for children. What should be love, care, and protection turns into neglect, rejection, and lasting emotional scars that remain throughout their lives. Silence, guilt, and broken relationships in Estha and Rahel’s lives show how powerful and long-lasting

the effects of suffering within the family can be.

6. Conclusion

The findings of this study show that children’s suffering is reflected in four main forms: the lack of love and emotional attention from parents and close family members, psychological pressure and social stress that create feelings of insecurity and worthlessness, rejection and neglect, and the imbalance of power within the family. These forms of suffering are not temporary; they continue to shape how children grow, understand the world, and interact with others. The results also indicate that many children do not receive the protection and care they truly need. Their suffering emerges from restrictive and pressuring family systems that offer little emotional safety. Early negative experiences leave long-term impacts, including fear, loneliness, social difficulties, and low self-confidence. These findings emphasize that childhood plays a crucial role in shaping an individual’s character and emotional development.

Based on these findings, several suggestions can be offered. For general readers, the novel provides insight into the silent forms of suffering experienced by children, showing that emotional pain such as being ignored or rejected can be more damaging than physical harm. Students and beginning researchers are encouraged to explore more literary works focusing on children’s emotional experiences and family-related issues to deepen their understanding of literature’s reflection of social realities. For parents and families, this study highlights the importance of providing love, care, and emotional support, as the absence of these elements can create lasting emotional wounds that continue into adulthood. For future researchers, examining other literary works that portray childhood suffering or family problems is recommended. Moreover, combining literary analysis with psychological or cultural approaches may offer richer



understanding of how suffering develops and affects characters over time.

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