

TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE: INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES ON THE UNITED NATIONS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

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Abstract

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a comprehensive framework for addressing global challenges such as inequality, poverty, gender injustice, and social exclusion. Literature, as a powerful medium of social reflection and critique, plays a significant role in illuminating these issues by foregrounding lived experiences and marginalized voices. This paper offers an interdisciplinary reading of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) through the lens of the SDGs, demonstrating how the novel anticipates and interrogates several goals central to sustainable development.

Set in postcolonial Kerala, the novel exposes entrenched social hierarchies shaped by caste, class, gender, and colonial legacies. Issues such as social inequality and discrimination resonate strongly with SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), while the systemic oppression of Velutha and the silencing of Ammu reflect persistent violations of SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). The narrative also critiques structural poverty and labor exploitation, aligning with SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). Furthermore, Roy's depiction of environmental degradation along the Meenachal River foregrounds ecological concerns that connect to SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 15 (Life on Land).

By focusing on "small things" individual lives, private sufferings, and localized injustices the novel reveals how sustainable development cannot be achieved without addressing micro-level

social realities. This paper argues that *The God of Small Things* functions as a literary intervention that complements the SDGs by emphasizing ethical responsibility, social justice, and inclusive development. Through an interdisciplinary approach combining literary analysis, social critique, and development studies, the study highlights the relevance of literary texts in fostering critical awareness and empathy essential for achieving a sustainable and equitable future.

Keywords: *Social Inequality, Gender Justice, Environmental Sustainability*

Introduction

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted in 2015, represent a global commitment to address pressing challenges such as poverty, inequality, gender injustice, environmental degradation, and institutional failure. While these goals are often discussed within the domains of economics, policy-making, and development studies, literature offers a vital interdisciplinary space to examine the lived realities that underlie these global objectives. Literary texts humanize abstract goals by portraying how structural inequalities operate at the level of everyday life. In this context, Indian English literature provides a particularly rich site for exploring sustainability, as it frequently engages with issues of social justice, marginalization, and ecological balance.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), set in postcolonial Kerala, is a powerful narrative that exposes the complex intersections of caste, class, gender, environment, and power. Though written decades before the formal articulation of the SDGs, the novel anticipates many of their core concerns. By foregrounding the lives of marginalized individuals particularly women, children, and Dalits Roy critiques the social and institutional structures that perpetuate inequality and injustice. This paper offers an interdisciplinary reading of *The God of Small Things* through the lens of the SDGs, arguing that the novel functions as a literary framework for understanding sustainable development at the micro-social level.

Literature and the SDGs: An Interdisciplinary Framework

Sustainable development is not solely a matter of economic growth or environmental protection; it also encompasses social equity, cultural inclusion, and ethical responsibility. Literature plays a crucial role in this broader understanding by challenging dominant narratives of progress and

exposing the human costs of development. Through storytelling, symbolism, and character development, novels can critique systems of power that undermine sustainability.

The God of Small Things aligns closely with this interdisciplinary vision. Roy's narrative style is fragmented, non-linear, and deeply emotional, mirroring the fractured social realities of postcolonial India. The novel insists that development cannot be measured only by material advancement but must also consider dignity, justice, and ecological balance. By reading the novel alongside the SDGs, this study bridges literary criticism and development discourse, demonstrating how fiction can contribute to global conversations on sustainability.

SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities and the Caste System

One of the most prominent themes in *The God of Small Things* is social inequality, particularly as manifested through the caste system. The character of Velutha, an "Untouchable," embodies the structural discrimination faced by Dalits in Indian society. Despite his intelligence, skill, and moral integrity, Velutha is denied social mobility and basic human rights due to his caste status. His tragic fate exposes the brutality of a system that enforces inequality through both social norms and institutional violence.

This depiction resonates strongly with SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), which calls for the elimination of discriminatory practices and the promotion of social inclusion. Roy's novel demonstrates how inequality is maintained not only through economic disparities but also through cultural ideologies and institutional complicity. Velutha's relationship with Ammu violates what the novel calls the "Love Laws," revealing how social systems regulate intimacy to preserve hierarchical power structures. By portraying the devastating consequences of caste-based discrimination, Roy underscores the urgency of addressing inequality as a prerequisite for sustainable development.

SDG 5: Gender Equality and the Silencing of Women

Gender injustice is another central concern in *The God of Small Things*. Ammu, the novel's most tragic figure, is repeatedly marginalized as a divorced woman in a patriarchal society. She is denied education, inheritance, and social respect, highlighting the systemic oppression faced by women. Her desires and autonomy are viewed as transgressive, leading to her social ostracization and eventual death.

This aligns closely with SDG 5 (Gender Equality), which emphasizes the need to eliminate discrimination and violence against women. Roy's portrayal of Ammu exposes how patriarchal norms intersect with caste and class to intensify women's marginalization. Even Mammachi, despite her economic success, remains a victim of domestic abuse, illustrating how patriarchy cuts across social strata.

Through these characters, the novel critiques a society that restricts women's agency and punishes them for asserting autonomy. Roy suggests that sustainable development is impossible without gender justice, as the exclusion of women from social, economic, and cultural life undermines collective progress.

SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions

The role of institutions particularly the police and the legal system in *The God of Small Things* highlights the failure of justice in unequal societies. Velutha's brutal death in police custody exemplifies institutional violence and impunity. Rather than protecting the vulnerable, state institutions serve the interests of the dominant classes, reinforcing existing power structures.

This critique aligns with SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), which advocates for accountable institutions and equal access to justice. Roy's narrative reveals how institutions can become tools of oppression when they operate within unjust social frameworks. The complicity of authorities in Velutha's death underscores the need for institutional reform as part of sustainable development.

SDG 1 and SDG 8: Poverty, Labor, and Economic Exploitation

Economic inequality and labor exploitation also feature prominently in the novel. The working conditions of laborers in the pickle factory and the limited economic opportunities available to marginalized groups reflect structural poverty. Although Mammachi's factory appears to symbolize entrepreneurial success, it relies on exploitative labor practices and reinforces social hierarchies.

These issues resonate with SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). Roy critiques models of economic growth that prioritize profit over human dignity, suggesting that

development must be inclusive and ethical. The novel challenges the idea that economic progress alone can lead to social well-being, emphasizing the need for fair labor practices and social equity.

SDG 13 and SDG 15: Environmental Sustainability

Environmental degradation forms a subtle yet significant backdrop to *The God of Small Things*. The Meenachal River, once a symbol of life and continuity, becomes polluted and neglected, mirroring the moral decay of society. Roy's depiction of environmental destruction reflects the consequences of unchecked industrialization and human neglect.

This ecological concern aligns with SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 15 (Life on Land). By linking environmental degradation with social injustice, the novel highlights the interconnectedness of ecological and human sustainability. Roy suggests that the exploitation of nature parallels the exploitation of marginalized communities, reinforcing the need for holistic approaches to development.

The Politics of “Small Things” and Sustainable Development

The title *The God of Small Things* encapsulates Roy's central philosophy: that attention to small, overlooked lives and experiences is essential for meaningful change. The novel argues that large-scale development initiatives often fail because they ignore micro-level realities. Sustainable development, Roy implies, must begin with empathy, ethical responsibility, and social awareness.

By focusing on children, women, and marginalized individuals, the novel foregrounds the human dimension of sustainability. It challenges dominant narratives of progress and calls for development models rooted in justice, inclusion, and care.

Conclusion

An interdisciplinary reading of *The God of Small Things* through the lens of the SDGs reveals the novel's enduring relevance to contemporary global challenges. Roy's narrative exposes the deep-rooted inequalities that undermine sustainable development and emphasizes the need for social justice, gender equality, institutional accountability, and environmental stewardship. Literature, as this study demonstrates, is not merely a reflection of society but a critical tool for reimagining sustainable futures. By giving voice to the marginalized and illuminating the “small things” that

shape human experience, Roy's novel complements the SDGs' vision of an inclusive, just, and sustainable world.

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