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The Representation of the Female Labor Force within Patriarchal Frameworks and the Politics of Sexual Intimacy in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

Munaza Akhter

Ph.D Scholar, Department of English Language and Literature, The University of Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan

Email: munaza.akhter@nu.edu.pk

Dr. Umar-ud-Din

Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, The University of Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan

Correspondence: professor.eng.ew@tuf.edu.pk

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of the female labor force in *The God of Small Things*, analyzing both women engaged in professional workplaces and those running small enterprises from home. The study investigates whether Indian women are depicted as diverse and multifaceted, reflecting real-life complexities, or whether they are portrayed through stereotypical lenses as victims, incompetent, and unskilled. Grounded in Gaye Tuchman's concept of symbolic annihilation, the analysis focuses on revealing trivialization, omission and condemnation of working women; it also incorporates Kate Millett's ideas from *Sexual Politics* to explore patriarchal power dynamics in intimate heterosexual relationships. The findings reveal that most women hold low-paying, subordinate positions with no authority, making them vulnerable to instability in their life. Women in the novel exhibit little interest in education, prioritizing marriage, romance, and courtship instead. Even Mammachi, the only financially independent female character, lacks control over her own life and remains subjected to her husband's dominance and violence. Additionally, the study highlights how sexual intimacy in the novel is intricately linked to power, with women feeling more empowered when their male partners occupy a lower social or cultural status.

Keywords: Female labor force, Symbolic annihilation, Patriarchy and power dynamics, Gender stereotypes in literature, Sexual politics and agency.



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Introduction

The representation of working women in literature plays a significant role in shaping societal perceptions and influencing gender norms. Since the 1980s, India has witnessed a notable rise in the number of women participating in the workforce, leading to increased autonomy and financial independence (Najeeb et al., 2020). In literary narratives, the portrayal of working women across diverse fields and skill sets an important precedent for young girls, reinforcing the idea that professional success is attainable. Conversely, constrained representation, misrepresentation or the absence of such portrayals can perpetuate regressive ideologies and hinder societal progress (Chakravarty, 2008). Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) offers a compelling exploration of gender roles, particularly in its depiction of working women within a patriarchal framework. Analyzing these portrayals is crucial to understanding how literature sustains or challenges traditional power structures, thereby influencing the recognition of women's multifaceted contributions to society.

Methodology

This study employs the theories of Gaye Tuchman and Kate Millet as critical frameworks for textual analysis. Andrade et al. (2023) emphasize that theory is central to scholarly research, reinforcing its relevance and legitimacy. In *The Symbolic Annihilation of Women by the Mass Media*, Tuchman argues that women are frequently marginalized, trivialized, or excluded in mass media representations. She asserts that mass media often restricts women to traditional roles, depicting them as homemakers, mothers, or dependent on male characters. Even working women are confined to subordinate or pink-collar roles, which are characterized by low wages and limited career growth (England et al., 2002). Millet (2000) conceptualizes politics within intimate relationships, describing power-structured dynamics where one group dominates another. The study applies Catherine Belsey's textual analysis method to examine symbolic annihilation and sexual politics in *The God of Small Things*. Belsey (1991) defines textual analysis as a method focused on engaging with the text's meanings directly.

Textual Analysis and Discussion

Dimmed Aspirations: The Constrained Representation of Women's Pursuits in Education and Careers

Representation of education-pursuing women in media and literature is essential in shaping societal attitudes and reducing gender-based stereotypes. A study from the 1990s by Jejeebhoy (1998), which was published almost at the same time when *The God of Small Things* was released, demonstrated that women in South Asia were increasingly focused on getting education and pursuing careers. This shift reflected growing aspirations among women to enter the workforce and contribute economically, marking a departure from traditional domestic roles. However, in *The God of Small Things*, education and career focused women are completely absent. All female characters are either completely uneducated, have no interest in pursuing education, or they are barred from pursuing education.

Baby Kochamma, the grandaunt, got into convent to get a diploma in theology not because she was deeply interested in pursuing education but because she wanted to be near father Mulligan, the priest she fell in love with (p.24). And when she realized that the convent would not provide her this opportunity, she left it and came back home. Baby Kochamma, unlike other women, was allowed to get education by her father because she was not getting any marriage proposals (p.26). Women, in the novel, are more focused on romance than getting educational qualification.

Pappachi and Mammachi had different expectations and visions for their son and daughter when it came to their education and career. They were proud of their son, Chacko, and supported him in his academic achievements. In contrast, Pappachi and Mammachi never cared about their daughter's well-being or her education: "Pappachi insisted that a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl," so Ammu waited for marriage proposals (p.38).

Ammu's two kids, Estha and Rahel, have clear character distinctions when it comes to education. Estha was an average student (p.11), whereas Rahel, Ammu's daughter, was a below average student who drifted "from school to school" (p.15). Rahel was expelled from multiple schools (p.16-17). After completing school, "she won admission into a mediocre college of architecture in Delhi." She got into architecture degree by chance and not because of her talent or interest (p.17). The narrative portrayed the central female character, Rahel, as someone who had no clue about what she was doing and why she was doing it. Architecture, the degree she got selected for, she had no talent for it nor did she actively acquire the skill.

In comparison to women, many male characters in the novel acquire formal education to polish their professional skills. Velutha, who was from an untouchable caste, excelled in education despite all the odds he faced. The printing press man, Comrade Pillai, was also educated and had multiple certificates hung on his wall. The characters' textual analysis reveals that men are depicted with a diverse range of academic excellence, whereas all female characters are entirely disinterested in obtaining educational qualification or a practical skill.

In her chapter, Gaye Tuchman discusses that women in mass media are predominantly depicted with domestic skills-engaged in household chores, and managing homes. When women are portrayed as professionals, they are often shown as aides and assistants to men, or occupying pink-collar positions that are easily replaceable. Men are portrayed to have fineness in their skills whereas women are described as less competent, lacking in professional excellence.

The central working woman in Ayemenem house was Mammachi. Mamamchi did not start her business out of her passion or for having a career driven aspiration rather she made some mango pickle and banana jam for a fair and as they got sold very quickly so she decided to continue the work (p.47). Mammachi never achieved excellence in her business; Mammachi continued making banana jam illegally (p.30). Despite her consistent efforts, she could not learn to properly preserve her pickles. Even after many years in business, her pickle bottles leaked (p.167). Mammachi ran her business "like a large kitchen" (p.120). By the end of the narrative, her small venture that she built with care and consistent effort did not grow into a giant enterprise rather it collapsed (p.295). Mammachi, out of her gender bias towards her two kids, handed over her factory to her son who never ran it with proper passion and intelligence and eventually the venture collapsed. Depicting working women as lacking competence, intelligence, and the ability to master skills creates a harmful narrative that discourages female readers from pursuing professional growth. Gill and Orgad (2018) explain that such portrayals damage women's confidence and ambition at work. These negative images limit women's opportunities by making it seem like they are not suited for important roles or leadership positions, adding to gender inequality (Gill & Orgad, 2018).

Mammachi was the only female character that worked as a boss and enjoyed some level of authority. Mammachi's daughter, Ammu, after her divorce needed money and a job but Mammachi never supported her daughter. Ammu worked as receptionist in a low-level hotel on a small salary and even from there she got fired because of taking too many sick leaves (p.159). Ammu did dream of becoming an independent woman but she wasn't portrayed as a woman who intensively worked to achieve her goals. She did apply for a job at UN and dreamed to start a

school but she never got the job she had applied for or started the school that she told her kids about. She was not even seen as working towards her dream rather she died a lonely and miserable death. According to a study by Lachance-Grzela and Bouchard (2010), women's portrayal as failing to achieve career goals have detrimental effects on young audiences. These portrayals reinforce biases and undermine the confidence of young women aspiring for professional success. Such narratives discourage girls from pursuing challenging careers, perpetuating gender disparities in professional fields and limiting their long-term ambitions.

Ammu's daughter, Rahel, had a college degree in Architecture yet after her divorce she worked as a waitress in a restaurant and later as a clerk at a gas station (p.20). Rahel was not shown to be working in her field of education. Her qualification could provide her with better job opportunities where she could exercise more authority but she was portrayed working a low-paying job for several years, which showed her contentment with a lower authority position. According to Stamarski and Hing (2015), portraying women in low-paying jobs without opportunities for advancement negatively impacts readers by reinforcing gender-based prejudices.

Rahel's baby grand-aunt, Baby Kochamma, was the only female character that had travelled to US for getting a diploma yet she never used her ornamental gardening skill professionally or to make money rather she stayed in the house without doing anything for finances and was provided for, throughout her life, by her family. Another stereotypical job that is associated with women is nursing and in *The God of Small Things* when Ammu took her son to the doctor, a female "nurse" was working there (p.133). Female character is not the doctor, as Gaye Tuchman argues, but an aid to the doctor, a nurse.

Margret Kochamma, Chacko's wife, a white woman, who is shown to have much more agency and independence as compared to the South Asian female characters, also works a pink-collar job initially. She was a waitress when she met Chacko. While working her shift she got into a laughter with Chacko and she was scolded by her employer for unprofessional behavior, "She apologized to him. She was truly sorry for the way she had behaved" (p.244). Margret Kochamma immediately apologized for something as small as a laugh. Doyle et al. (2023), contend that women tend to apologize more frequently than men, and this portrayal of over-apologizing in media and literature can negatively impact the audience, particularly reinforcing perceptions of women as overly submissive or lacking confidence. Margret Kochamma was the only female character that decided to excel in her career. She got teacher training and later became a junior teacher (p.250). She switched from one pink-collar job to another but, unlike South Asian female characters, she did take training for it and improved her skill in her profession. Textual analysis of Margret Kochamma and Chacko's relationship informs us that as long as she was with a South Asian man, she couldn't think clearly or plan her career ahead and once she left him and married an English man she started progressing in her life.

Women as Perpetual Victims: Rivalry, Bitterness, and the Desperation for Male Validation

Women in *The God of Small Things* are through and through victims; their financial independence does not bring any difference to the misery in their lives. Ammu, Mammachi and Pappachi's only daughter, not only witnessed but also experienced constant violence since her childhood. Ammu described her father as "monstrous, suspicious bully with a streak of vicious cunning" (p 180-181). To escape her cruel and painful environment Ammu abruptly married the man she found slightly suitable. But her victimhood extended to her married life as well. Her husband offered her to please his boss to keep his job and upon her refusal she was badly beaten and tortured and later the beating continued in her married life. Ammu kept tolerating the abuse as long as she was the victim but

“when his bouts of violence began to include the children,” only then she left him and came back to her parents (p.42). After divorce she came to her parents’ home when she was twenty-seven years of age and at such a young age, she believed that her family and her fate would not give her a second chance. “In the pit of her stomach she carried the cold knowledge that, for her, life had been lived. She had one chance. She made a mistake” (p.38).

Ammu never found a way to escape her tragic destiny. Once she came back, she along with her children were constantly rebuked and insulted. Despite the fact that she worked very hard in her mother’s factory she was never given a share in her property rather her mother constantly resented her. When her family came to know about her affair with an untouchable man, she was “locked into her bedroom,” she was in “disbelief at what was happening to her—at being locked away like the family lunatic in a medieval household” (p.252). And when Chacko got to know about her affair, he ordered her to leave the house and she submissively did as told (p.159). Rather than resisting his decision since he was not the head of the house, “Ammu was quiet outside, shaking inside, wouldn’t look up from her unnecessary hemming” (p.226).

Her suffering and victimization remained till the end of her life until she died. “Ammu died in a grimy room ... She died alone” without her children or any member of her family around her (p.161). According to Gaye Tuchman, condemnation occurs when society punishes individuals for defying conventional norms and breaking established rules. In *The God of Small Things*, Ammu’s transgressions—divorcing her husband and falling in love with a man from a lower caste—are stark violations of societal expectations. As a result, the novel portrays her condemnation: she is ostracized by her family and community, and even the church refuses to perform her burial rites. Through this portrayal, the novel sends a cautionary message to young female readers, suggesting that choosing a path outside societal norms will lead to isolation, shame, and ultimately a life of misery and a lonely death.

Ammu was a tolerant victim and not a fighter because she observed her mother, Mammachi, submissively tolerating the constant abuse. Her father used to beat her mother not just in her childhood but even when she became an adult. When Mammachi started her business and earned a good amount of money, Pappachi, jealous of her success and youth, tortured her. Mammachi never resisted the beatings, nor did she talk about the beatings to anyone around her. The beatings were not stopped by Mammachi herself but by her son, Chacko, who one night “found Pappachi beating Mammachi in the study. Chacko strode into the room, caught Pappachi’s vase-hand and twisted it around his back. “I never want this to happen again,” he told his father. “Ever.”” (p.47). The need for a woman to rely on a man to stop another man’s violence diminishes her own ability to resist the violence directed at her. The portrayal of women in media and literature as passive victims of violence, especially at the hands of husbands, can be deeply damaging to young audiences. Karlsson et al. (2021) argue that such representations reinforce regressive archetypes by normalizing the subservience of women in abusive relationships.

The only female character who has full agency of expressing her opinions and doing what she likes is Margret Kochamma. Margret Kochamma was a white woman who lived in Britain. All qualities of an active, independent and self-aware woman are witnessed in the white woman, in the novel, and not in any brown female character. After their marriage when Margret Kochamma got tired of Chacko’s habits, she told him, “She couldn’t live with him anymore. She told him that she needed her own space” (p.117). Chacko respected her decision with a shattered heart and came back to India after divorcing her. Chacko never valued or respected his sister’s independent opinions, nor did he provide her space to exercise her choice in life. He admired and valued his ex-wife, even after their divorce. “Chacko was a proud and happy man to have had a wife like Margaret. White”

(P.143). Narratives that depict brown men captivated by white women, while showing little regard for brown women, perpetuate harmful racial and gendered stereotypes. Such representations reinforce racial hierarchies and diminish the value and autonomy of women of color, fostering a biased social perception. Research on racial and gender stereotypes suggests that such portrayals not only reinforce societal biases but also undermine efforts toward gender and racial equality (Daniels & Zurbriggen, 2016; Emerson, 2002).

South Asian women in *The God of Small Things* are bitter, insecure, jealous and vengeful towards each other. Mammachi and Ammu suffered torture together at the hands of Pappachi, when Ammu was growing up, and naturally it was expected of them to develop a comradeship with each other but Mammachi never empathized with her daughter. She always valued her son and his needs. She sold her gold jewelry to send him when he was studying in London. When Chacko experienced divorce and came back to his mother, “Mammachi joyfully welcomed him” (p.248) but when Mammachi’s daughter got divorced and she returned to her mother’s home, Ammu realized that “a married daughter had no position in her parents’ home. As for a divorced daughter... she had no position anywhere at all. And as for a divorced daughter from a love marriage, well, words could not describe” the outrage the family felt towards her (p.45). After Ammu’s divorce “old female relations...made overnight trips to Ayemenem to commiserate with her about her divorce. They squeezed her knee and gloated. She fought off the urge to slap them. Or twiddle their nipples” (p.43). She abhorred their fake sympathies but never responded steadfastly to the humiliation they put her through. Her mother and all other family members treated Ammu and her children degradingly whereas Chacko’s daughter was adored by everyone because she was half white.

When Mammachi got to know about secret sexual relations of her son, she enabled situations and occasions to quench his sexual appetite. But Mammachi’s reaction was vastly different towards her daughter when she got to know about the physical relations of her daughter with Velutha. Mammachi thought of Velutha’s “black hand on her daughter’s breast. His mouth on hers. His black hips jerking between her parted legs. The sound of their breathing. Mammachi thought and nearly vomited. *Like a dog with a bitch on heat.*” She believed that Ammu had disgraced the family honor and reputation. “Her tolerance of “Men’s Needs,” as far as her son was concerned, became the fuel for her unmanageable fury at her daughter,” she resented that Ammu had “brought the family to its knees. For generations to come, *forever* now, people would point at them ... They’d nudge and whisper. It was all finished-now.” And eventually Mammachi along with other females of the house, “locked Ammu up (tricked her into her bedroom)” and later she was forced to leave the house permanently (p.257-258). Not just Mammachi, Ammu’s aunt, Baby Kochamma, also had bitterness and envy towards her niece. She would tell Ammu that a divorced daughter had no place in her parents’ home. And when she got to know about Ammu’s affair, she got jealous of her niece finding love because she couldn’t digest the idea of her niece “quarrelling with a fate that she, Baby Kochamma herself, felt she had graciously accepted” (p.329).

Women are emotionally manipulative and prejudiced towards each other but they are highly dependent on men for their emotional stability. Mammachi did not have any partnership with her own husband so she completely depended on her son emotionally. “The day Chacko prevented Pappachi from beating her ... Mammachi packed her wifely luggage and committed it to Chacko’s care. From then onwards he became the repository of all her womanly feelings. Her Man. Her only Love.” She even felt envious and hate for women who got Chacko’s attention like Margaret Kochamma. When Chacko invited Margaret Kochamma to his house, his mother hoped that they did not have a sexual relationship. “She despised her. Shopkeeper’s daughter was how Margaret Kochamma was filed away in Mammachi’s mind...Mammachi would have despised Margaret

Kochamma even if she had been heir to the throne of England... She hated Margaret Kochamma for being Chacko's wife" (p.168). After her son's divorce when her daughter told her that "Chacko had never stopped loving Margaret Kochamma. Mammachi disagreed. She liked to believe that he had never loved her in the first place" (p.36).

All women, in the novel, are emotionally fragile and crave romance and love which then control every aspect of their life. Baby Kochamma fell in love with Father Mulligan when she was very young and though her love was never reciprocated, she kept the same feelings with the same passion throughout her life even when she was an old woman. The text writes that she picked up "her maroon diary... She wrote: *I love you I love you*... And every night, night after night, year after year, in diary after diary after diary, she wrote: *I love you I love you* (p.298). The depiction of Mammachi's deep emotional dependence on her son and Baby Kochamma's lifelong attachment to Father Mulligan suggests that South Asian women struggle to find emotional stability, either within themselves or through female relationships. It also overlooks their capacity for personal growth and second chances in life and love. In contrast, the white character Margaret Kochamma is portrayed as moving on from her relationship with Chacko, finding love with Joe and giving herself another chance. This stark contrast between brown and white women trivializes the resilience and emotional complexity of South Asian women.

The Burden of Beauty and Aging

According to Wolf (2002), women in literature and media are often defined primarily by their beauty, which directly influences how they are treated by others. Being beautiful can lead to objectification or trouble, as it attracts unwanted attention and reinforces superficial judgments. Conversely, women who do not conform to or who do not meet the conventional beauty standards are marginalized and overlooked, reducing their value in societal and narrative contexts. This focus on appearance perpetuates unrealistic standards, limiting women's agency and worth to their physical attributes.

Ammu is a central female character in *The God of Small Things* and she is exquisitely beautiful. Ammu's beauty was ominous for her and she was always objectified by most men around her. Her husband's boss offered him a trade that her husband could keep his job secure if "Ammu be sent to his bungalow to be "looked after ""(p.42). Her husband forced and even beat her to accept the offer. Later in the narrative when Ammu visited the police station to vouch for Velutha, inspector Thomas objectified her, "He stared at Ammu's breasts as he spoke" and while talking he intimidated her by tapping "her breasts with his baton. Gently. Tap tap. As though he was choosing mangoes from a basket. Pointing out the ones that he wanted packed and delivered" (p.7-8). And as she left the station, she was crying both because of Velutha's arrest and also because of the humiliation she went through at the hands of the police officer.

Ammu was in her early thirties and her appearance started to change with growing age and she felt a despondency towards her life when she observed her changing appearance. In the washroom she looked at her body and felt that "that Life had been Lived. That her cup was full of dust" (p.222). Women are often socially conditioned to associate their confidence and self-worth with physical appearance, leading to an overemphasis on beauty standards. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) argue that objectification theory explains how societal scrutiny leads women to internalize external evaluations, resulting in self-surveillance and diminished self-esteem. They highlight that this process not only affects women's mental health but also constrains their autonomy and ability to focus on personal growth and achievements.

Ammu's troublesome life, the betrayal of her dear ones and the toll of loneliness took all her beauty and with that all of her confidence. When Rahel met Ammu in one of her last meetings with her mother "She was swollen with cortisone, moonfaced ... Her skin was stretched over her puffy cheeks ... When she smiled, her dimples looked as though they hurt. Her curly hair had lost its sheen and hung around her swollen face like a dull curtain." The narrative described her detailed deteriorated physical appearance and then "she said that she felt like a road sign with birds shitting on her" (p 160-161). The disappearance of her conventional outlook took away her strength and her confidence and she felt no worth for herself. Tiggemann and Slater (2001) argue that the media and literature perpetuate narrow beauty ideals, reinforcing the notion that a woman's value is tied to her appearance. This emphasis on physical attractiveness negatively impacts women's mental well-being, fostering self-objectification, low self-esteem, and reduced aspirations.

Rahel, Ammu's daughter had "grown into the skin of her mother. High cheekbones. Deep dimples when she smiled. But she was longer, harder, flatter, more angular than Ammu had been. Less lovely perhaps to those who like roundness and softness in women" (p.92). The narrative explains that she might not be liked by people who have specific appearance expectations which Rahel does not satisfy. Such narration may instill in young girls to evaluate their appearance in terms of other people's expectations. Kilbourne (1999) argues that media and literature consistently tell women to evaluate their appearance based on how others judge them. This external validation pressures women to conform to unrealistic beauty standards, reinforcing the idea that their worth is tied to how they are perceived. Such portrayals cultivate a sense of inadequacy and self-surveillance, limiting women's sense of autonomy and self-acceptance.

Women's appearance is a matter of critical importance for them, no matter what age they belong to. Ammu's mother, Mammachi even in her old age tried to meet the conventional beauty standards by faking her appearance. "Mammachi in her younger years... had collected all her falling hair" in her purse and when she had collected enough "she made it into a netted bun which she kept hidden in a locker with her jewelry" and once her hair started thinning due to her growing age, "she wore her jet-black bun pinned to her small, silver head. In her book this was perfectly acceptable, since all the hair was hers" (p.161). The fact that Mammachi was concerned about her old age appearance when she was still young informs the reader about the anxiety and insecurity women go through regarding ageing. Mammachi did not just accept her appearance in each phase of life, rather she made an effort to look younger than she was. Clarke and Griffin (2008) emphasize that societal ageism pressures young women to view aging as a threat to their attractiveness and worth, fostering anxiety about growing older. This fear drives many to adopt anti-aging practices to maintain a youthful appearance. Supporting this, Hurd Clarke and Korotchenko (2011) argue that media and literature depictions glorify youth and stigmatize aging, further exacerbating these insecurities and reinforcing unrealistic beauty standards.

Sexual Politics: Unveiling the Power Dynamics in Intimate Relationships

Textual analysis of the dynamics of romance and physical intimacy between Velutha and Ammu is extremely interesting and noteworthy. In *The God of Small Things*, Ammu either leads the sexual act or she remains an equal partner in it. When Velutha saw Ammu at the river bank, he was shuddering with fear. Their encounter was led by Ammu, "She went to him and laid the length of her body against his." Afterwards, she initiated their physical intimacy by unbuttoning "her shirt. They stood there. Skin to skin" (p.334). Once they began their foreplay, again she was the one who led him, "Ammu put out her tongue and tasted it, in the hollow of his throat. On the lobe of his ear. She pulled his head down toward her and kissed his mouth. A cloudy kiss. A kiss that demanded a kiss-back" and once he felt an assurance of consent from her, "He kissed her back"

(p335). The actual sexual act was also initiated by her, “Ammu, naked now, crouched over Velutha, her mouth on his” (p.336).

It is very important to decipher why unlike other South Asian novels, the female is more in control and sometimes dominant in the sexual act. Velutha, an untouchable from a marginalized caste, is socially lower than Ammu, and this disparity allows Ammu to assume a dominant position in their relationship. This reversal of societal roles gives Ammu autonomy and control, highlighting how power dynamics are intertwined with social hierarchies. McNay (1992), in *Foucault and Feminism*, discusses how gendered power relations are not fixed but fluid, influenced by broader societal structures such as class and caste. McNay suggests that when these structures are subverted, such as in relationships where women hold greater social power, women can exercise greater autonomy and agency. This is evident in Ammu's ability to lead the sexual encounter with Velutha, a man positioned far lower in the caste system.

Conclusion

Textual analysis reveals that, with the exception of Mammachi, most women in *The God of Small Things* occupy lower-tier positions, at workplaces, that offer neither authority nor financial stability. Women enter professional roles out of necessity rather than passion or expertise. Despite their financial independence, they remain controlled and victimized, lacking the agency to use their economic status as a means of securing freedom or personal autonomy. The analysis also indicates that female characters show minimal interest in education, particularly higher education, which could elevate them to positions of power. Even when women do attain advanced education, they are unable to leverage their skills to secure authoritative roles. Furthermore, the examination of sexual intimacy in the novel suggests that women experience a greater sense of empowerment when their male partner holds a lower social or cultural status.

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