



SOCIAL STRATIFICATION IN ROY'S *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS* NOVEL (A SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH)

Arminsus Yosman¹, Fety Surfaifel², Maksimilianus Doi³

English Literature Study Program, University of Flores

armindoyosman00@gmail.com¹, macksydtory@gmail.com², fetysurfaifel@upi.edu³

ABSTRAK : Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan bentuk-bentuk stratifikasi sosial dalam novel *The God of Small Things* karya Arundhati Roy. Objek penelitian ini adalah novel yang ditulis oleh Arundhati Roy. Analisis difokuskan pada penggambaran hierarki sosial dan ketidaksetaraan di antara tokoh-tokoh dalam cerita. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan sosiologis dengan teori (Zahara & Anwar, 2021:24) yang menyatakan bahwa terdapat tiga dimensi stratifikasi sosial dalam masyarakat, yaitu kekayaan (kelas ekonomi), prestise (status sosial), dan kekuasaan. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah deskriptif kualitatif dengan data yang dikumpulkan berupa kata, frasa, dan kalimat yang terdapat dalam novel. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kekayaan tercermin melalui perbedaan latar belakang ekonomi antar tokoh, prestise digambarkan melalui posisi kasta dan reputasi keluarga, sedangkan kekuasaan muncul dalam bentuk otoritas, pengaruh, dan kendali yang dimiliki tokoh tertentu terhadap tokoh lainnya. Ketiga dimensi ini saling berinteraksi dan membentuk gambaran kompleks mengenai ketidaksetaraan sosial yang memengaruhi hubungan, kehidupan, dan konflik para tokoh dalam novel. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa stratifikasi sosial tidak hanya menjadi latar cerita, tetapi juga menjadi faktor utama yang mendorong dinamika konflik dan perkembangan alur dalam *The God of Small Things*.

Kata kunci: *stratifikasi sosial, novel, karakter, pendekatan sosiologi*

ABSTRACT : This study aimed to describe the forms of social stratification in Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things*. The object of the study was the novel written by Arundhati Roy. The analysis focused on the depiction of social hierarchy and inequality among the characters in the story. The study applied a sociological approach using the theory by (Zahara & Anwar, 2021:24), which stated that there were three dimensions of social stratification in society: wealth (economic class), prestige (social status), and power. The research method used was descriptive qualitative, with data collected in the form of words, phrases, and sentences found in the novel. The results of the study showed that wealth was reflected through differences in the economic background of the characters, prestige was portrayed through caste position and family reputation, while power appeared in the form of authority, influence, and control exercised by certain characters over others. These three dimensions interacted to form a complex picture of social inequality that affected the relationships, lives, and conflicts of the characters in the novel. The findings emphasized that social stratification was not only a background element of the story but also a key factor driving the dynamics of conflict and the development of the plot in *The God of Small Things*.

Key words: *social stratification, novel, character, sociological approach*

INTRODUCTION

Literary works are a part of society and closely connected to the way people live and interact. They show different parts of community life and how people exist together. In stories and books, real-life events and situations are turned into words, which can be fun to read and also teach people something. Authors carefully create these works so that readers can enjoy them. These works help shape and show



the values and culture of a society. (Abrams & Harpham, 2021) points out that literature also carries the traditional words and ways of speaking from a culture, keeping the heritage and special ways of expressing ideas alive through creative use of language. In literary works, social phenomena are fragmented into word forms with entertaining and useful properties. Literary works have a significant role in reflecting and shaping cultural identity and social values, functioning not only as entertainment but also as a tool for understanding the social and political dynamics in society.

Social stratification is shaped through the transmission of social and cultural capital within the family. Children from different social classes receive different parenting patterns, values, and access to education, which ultimately reproduces inequality across generations (Lareau, 2018) In many societies, including India, social stratification is deeply influenced by the caste system, a traditional hierarchy that continues to shape access to education, employment, and political representation (Giddens, 2009). Literature often mirrors these realities, showing how caste influences character development, plot structure, and thematic messages. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* provides a powerful example of how caste discrimination affects people's lives. Through its narrative, the novel illustrates how caste connects with poverty, gender inequality, and the struggle for dignity. Hillmert explains that social stratification must be understood from two perspectives: static (the structure of inequality at a given point in time) and dynamic (how inequality changes or is transmitted across generations). Social mobility becomes a key indicator for understanding how inequality develops throughout the life course (Gujarati & Porter, 2021) Literature thus acts as both documentation and resistance, challenging hegemonic narratives that normalize inequality. As (Eagleton, 2004) asserts, literature is inherently political because it reflects and reshapes ideology and power relations embedded in culture.

Social stratification consists of three interrelated dimensions, namely wealth, prestige, and power, which collectively shape individuals' positions within a hierarchical social structure. **Wealth (economic class)** refers to the distribution of material resources, including income, property, and access to economic opportunities, which determines a person's lifestyle and life chances. **Prestige (social status)** is associated with the level of respect, honor, and social recognition granted by society, often based on occupation, education, familial background, or cultural influence. Meanwhile, **power** signifies the ability of individuals or groups to control others, influence decisions, and shape social outcomes, whether through political authority, institutional dominance, or social coercion.

The God of Small Things stands out as a critique of social stratification in Indian society, portraying how caste, class, and gender hierarchies govern the lives of its characters. Velutha, a lower-caste man, symbolizes both resistance and victimhood, as his position in the caste hierarchy makes him vulnerable to dehumanization despite his intelligence and kindness. The forbidden relationship between Velutha and Ammu defies caste-based "Love Laws," leading to tragic consequences (Kumar, 2025). These layers of oppression reveal how caste interacts with gender and class to maintain patriarchal control. Through poetic language and symbolic imagery, Roy exposes the systems that justify such tragedy. The writer chooses the topic of social stratification in *The God of Small Things* because the novel powerfully reveals how deeply rooted inequalities continue to shape Indian society. The emotionally complex characters and rich symbolism make the social critique both personal and political, highlighting how caste, class, and gender determine access to rights, resources, and dignity.

By analyzing this topic, the writer hope to deepen my understanding of how literature can reflect and critique real-world power structures. The writer believe this study is important not only for its literary value but also for its relevance to ongoing discussions about equality, justice, and human rights.

Related to the explanation above, the problem of this study can be formulated as follow: How the



dimensions of social stratification are presented in Roy's novel *The God of Small Things*?

Based on the problem above, the purpose of this study is to identify and analyze the dimensions of social stratification represented in Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things*.

RESEARCH METHODS

In this study, a descriptive qualitative method was used to analyze the data. According to (Creswell, 2024) qualitative procedures demonstrate a different approach to scholarly inquiry than methods of quantitative research, as qualitative research describes or explains data related to phenomena in a novel without using statistical analysis. This study used qualitative data with descriptive explanations in the form of dialogue quotes and narrative passages from the novel. The research design functioned as a clear and structured guide for the writer in conducting the study and helped in thinking through and analyzing the data. The primary data source was the novel *The God of Small Things* by (Roy, 1997), which contains 158 pages and 21 chapters, serving as the main text for examining themes related to social stratification. The writer closely examined narrative content, character interactions, and thematic elements to identify instances and representations of caste dynamics and discrimination, analyzing key passages, dialogues, and narrative techniques to elucidate the portrayal of social stratification. Additionally, secondary sources such as scholarly books, articles, journals, and works related to social stratification and postcolonial literature were consulted for contextual support. Data collection involved several steps, including reading the novel repeatedly, identifying sentences, quotations, and words indicating stratification, taking notes on these findings, and analyzing them.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Dimensions of Social Stratification

Mostly, Social stratification is the way society divides people into different social layers based on differences that are recognized and accepted by the community. (Zahara & Anwar, 2021:24) state there are three dimensions of social stratification, such as: wealth (economic class), prestige (social status), and power.

Wealth (Economic Class)

Thus, economic class in this novel demonstrates how differences in wealth can influence how society values or feeds someone. As described in quotation below:

"They were the 'Untouchables', the people who were not allowed to touch the upper-caste people. **They lived in a small, dilapidated house on the outskirts of Ayemenem, while the Ipee family lived in a large, well-maintained house.**"

(Roy, 20008: 20 Chapter 1)

The above quote clearly contrasts the lives of the upper class (the Ipee family) and the lower class (the Velutha family). Economically, this quote reflects Weber's view that individuals within the same class have equal life opportunities. The Ipee family, living in a large, clean house, reflects their social and economic status, while the Velutha family, classified as "Parking," lives in a small, dirty house. This highlights how social status significantly influences living conditions and environments. Furthermore, this difference illustrates unequal access to resources and opportunities, as the Ipee family enjoys better education and healthcare, while the Velutha family is trapped in poverty due to social stigma. From Weber's perspective, this economic stratification creates profound inequality, with those from the lower classes struggling to meet basic needs and limited in their social mobility. Roy emphasizes the interaction between caste and the economic system, highlighting the central theme of social injustice in the novel and



its impact on individual identity and destiny in a fragmented society.

The novel shows the Ipe family as a symbol of the upper class. They have a lot of money, especially from textile factories and plantations, as well as things they inherited. This wealth lets them live a rich and comfortable life, and it also gives them better chances for a good future, like getting a good education. For example, Chacko went to Oxford, which is a famous university. This kind of opportunity is not easy for people from other classes to get. Economic class is a big part of how society divides people, because it's about who has access to money and resources. In this way, the Ipe family's special position shows how economic class affects not only how wealthy someone is but also their ability to get an education and move up in life, creating a clear difference between them and people like Velutha, who are stuck in a poorer class even though they have talent. As described in the following passage:

"Their mother's family, the Ipes, were Syrian **Christians, and owned a pickle factory, Paradise Pickles & Preserves, on a vast**, sprawling estate. They had a large house, a beautiful garden, and a grand old car."

(Roy, 2008: 58 Chapters 2)

This quote clearly shows that owning assets and resources determines someone's position in society. This family controls production capital, like factories, and owns a lot of property, which matches Max Weber's theory. According to Weber, those who control production tools have more power and economic benefits. Their wealth isn't just a sign of status—it's the base of their strength in society. By controlling resources, they create their own "life chances," ensuring access to good education, better healthcare, and useful social networks. Their wealth also gives them power and social status, placing them at the top of the economic hierarchy in society.

In *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, the story follows the Ipe family in Kerala, India, and shows how the Hindu caste system and the history of colonial rule create a strict social structure. The Ipe family is part of the middle-upper class and has strong British influences, and they try to keep their status by keeping people from different castes separate. Even though Indian laws now say that discrimination based on caste, like untouchability, is illegal, people from the Dalit caste, such as the Paravans, still face unfair treatment in everyday life. The novel shows this contradiction when Mammachi, Pappachi's wife, uses Paravan workers like Vellya Paapen to help run the family business, which points out the gap between the idea of equality after independence and the real, old ways of social division. Economic class is a major part of how society is divided, and it affects people's access to money, resources, and opportunities. The Ipe family's wealth from owning land and a factory shows how economic power keeps them in control, while the Paravans, who have little money, stay at the bottom of the social ladder, showing that inequality still exists even though the law says everyone should be equal. As described in the quotation below:

"Pappachi would not allow Paravans into the house. Not even for Chacko's wedding. **He said he didn't want anything from a Paravan's hand.**"

(Roy, 2008: 32 chapter2)

This highlights the continuation of discriminative attitudes toward lower castes, despite the legal abolition of the existing "untouchability" system. Pappachi's setting of social barriers reflects a claim of superior status, revealing how colonial and feudal attitudes persist in upper-class families, such as the Ipe



family. These attitudes not only reflect personal prejudice but also indicate a broader social hierarchy, in which individuals from lower castes remain excluded from higher-class social and economic life. This shows that, despite legal reforms, discriminatory social norms and attitudes still exist, creating persistent barriers to be overcome in interactions between castes.

Prestige (Social status)

Status is the difference in how respected or admired someone is, based on their way of living, not just on things like money or wealth. So, groups of people who live a certain way and realize how their lifestyle is different from others form the idea of status. Weber explained the difference between status and class. Status is about what people consume and how their lifestyle shows that, while class is about how people make money and get things.

Status is about how much someone is respected or admired, not just because of money or wealth. It's based on the way people live. When groups of people live a certain way and notice that their lifestyle is different from others, that creates the idea of status. Weber explained that status is about what people buy and how their lifestyle shows that, while class is about how people earn money and get resources. In this case, social stigma can also be passed on to children. The children of Ammu, Estha, and Rahel face problems because their mother has lost her social status. This makes them treated poorly and excluded by others. They are often called "children of divorce" and treated differently, showing that social status, unlike economic wealth, depends on lifestyle and how people see each other. So, Ammu's failed marriage not only harms her own standing but also affects how her children are seen in society, showing how status influences both individual and family identity. As described in the quotation below:

"Ammu had no husband. Estha and Rahel had no father. This was their tragedy, their shame. They were the children of a 'divorced' woman."

(Roy, 2008: 19 Chapters 1)

This illustrates that social status is not only linked to the individual, but also affects the entire family, including their children. The children are affected by this social stigma. They become "children of a divorced woman," an identity that brings shame and overshadowing their lives. This identity affects how the community perceives them and limits their social opportunities. It highlights that social status is a rigid social construction, where the low status of one person can cast a shadow over the whole family.

Status is about how much someone is respected or admired, and it's not just about having money or being wealthy. It's more about the way a person lives and how society views their lifestyle and choices. According to Weber, status is different from class. Class is about how people get resources, like money or jobs, but status is about how people spend their money, live their lives, and what society thinks of those choices. In the novel, this idea is shown through the way Ammu's children, Estha and Rahel, face social judgment. Because their mother lost her respect after getting a divorce, they are treated poorly and looked down on. They are called "children of divorce" and not allowed to join in with others, which shows how losing status can hurt not only a person but also their whole family. Also, there are strict, unwritten rules that control how people from different social groups can interact. These rules keep the social hierarchy in place, deciding who is respected and who is not. Estha and Rahel learn these rules early on, showing how status is kept and shared through traditions and social habits, which helps build identity and continues unfair differences that go beyond just money. As described in the quotation below:

"They had to know the rules. They had to know what was said and what was not said. And



they had to know **when not to see.**"

(Roy, 2008:45 Chapters 1)

This quote explains how social status is kept in place through strict rules about how people from different castes interact. The phrase "when not to see" strongly shows how power and status work in society. People are forced to ignore or pretend not to notice injustice in order to keep the social order. This matches the idea that status creates groups that are aware of differences and live differently, in this case, by avoiding or limiting interaction with lower castes.

Social status and material possessions are not only determined by the physical assets people possess but also by the material goods they own. A noticeable symbol of these possessions is the old, expensive car they own, which visually distinguishes them from the surrounding community that lives within limited resources. This ownership reinforces their position at the top of the social hierarchy. As described in the quotation below:

"They had a large house, a beautiful garden, and a **grand old car.**"

(Roy, 2008: 58 Chapters 2)

This quote shows how owning a "grand old car" and a big house are clear symbols of social status. These objects visually set the Ipe family apart from other families who don't have such luxuries. In sociology, symbols like these help people and groups identify and separate themselves into different status groups based on lifestyle and spending habits. The car acts as a physical representation of the Ipe family's high social status, which automatically earns them respect and recognition from others.

Power

Class differences, social status, and political parties are all based on power, which is also a key part of how people interact with each other. Although it's true that wealth and power are connected, in a moderate society, wealth is the most important form of organizational power. That's why someone's power mostly comes from their position in an organization, not just from how much money they have.

Ammu's situation after her divorce shows Weber's idea of power as the ability to make others follow your wishes in social situations. Baby Kochamma, being the head of the family, used her position to cut Ammu and her kids off, showing that power isn't just about money but also about being in charge and having social influence. In this case, Baby Kochamma's control over the family allowed her to make Ammu and her children seem shameful. This shows that power goes beyond things you can touch, and it works through how people interact and who is in charge. Ammu didn't have money or a strong position in the family, so she couldn't stand up to Baby Kochamma. But Baby Kochamma could shape how the family saw things, showing that power is about being able to lead and make others follow within a group. As described in the quotation below:

"Ammu had no husband. Estha and Rahel had no father. This was their tragedy, their shame. They were the children of a 'divorced' woman."

(Roy, 2008: 19 Chapter 1)

This quote clearly shows how power can be used to isolate and control someone through social stigma. The phrase "Ammu had no husband. Estha and Rahel had no father" isn't just a factual statement—it's also a way that Baby Kochamma and the society use to look down on them. This stigma becomes a "tragedy, their shame," which effectively pushes them out of the community. Baby Kochamma uses strict social norms as a tool to control Ammu and her children, making sure they don't have the



strength or support to fight back. Her power doesn't come from physical force, but from her ability to force a social story that makes Ammu and her kids feel left out and powerless.

Weber believed that power is the ability to make others do what you want, even if they don't agree. This idea is clearly shown in *The God of Small Things*. After her divorce, Ammu came back to Ayemenem with her kids, Estha and Rahel, but her family rejected her. Baby Kochamma, who was in charge of the family, used her power not just because of money or position, but because she controlled the family's decisions and relationships. She kept Ammu away from the family and made her kids feel like outsiders. This matches Weber's idea that power can come from being in charge of a group, not just from having wealth. It's even clearer when you look at how Baby Kochamma handled the Ipe family. She kept quiet about bad things, made sure certain rules were followed, and stopped people from talking about anything that could harm the family's image. In this way, her power changed how things were seen, stopped people from speaking up, and kept people from being included. So Ammu's being pushed aside and her past being ignored show how power works as a strong social tool that controls actions, keeps people in order, and makes sure everyone follows the rules. As described in the quotation below:

"In a family of **secrets**, it was easy to get lost. They lived in a small world of **unspoken rules**."

(Roy, 2008: 20 Chapter 1)

This quote shows how power is used to control the story within the Ipe family. The phrases "a family of secrets" and "unspoken rules" show that Baby Kochamma's power isn't only seen in her direct orders, but also in her ability to create an environment where people are afraid to speak up. She pushes aside uncomfortable memories and stories, especially those related to Ammu and her divorce, to keep up the family image. This kind of power lets her shape the family's version of the truth, which in turn affects how each family member sees themselves and each other.

Weber said that power is when someone can make others do what they want, even if those others don't agree. This idea is shown clearly in *The God of Small Things* through Ammu's life after she gets divorced. When she came back to Ayemenem with her kids, Estha and Rahel, her own family turned their backs on her. Baby Kochamma, who had the most control in the house, used her power not just because she had money or a good position, but because she could decide what happened in the family and how people related to each other. She made Ammu feel lonely, called her kids "the children of a divorced woman," and treated them like a disgrace. Baby Kochamma's power is also seen in how she kept up the family's image: she made sure bad stories weren't told, she made sure people followed rules that weren't spoken out loud, and she made sure no one questioned the story she told. In this way, power was more than just being in control—it was also a way to shape how people thought, limit how they acted, and keep people out of the group. Ammu and her kids' story shows how, according to Weber, power comes not just from money, but from being respected in society and being able to control others' lives, which helps keep the social order and power structure in place. As described in the quotation below:

"She was a **woman who had no locusts stand on her shoulder. No grand allowance was made for her.**"

(Roy, 2008: 12 chapters 1)

This quote shows that Ammu does not receive the support or protection that men typically get in society, which further lowers her position in the social hierarchy. The power held by men in society creates unfairness for women, who lack access to resources and protection. In the context of the story,



Ammu has to fight on her own to gain recognition and her rights, reflecting the challenges women face in a patriarchal society. This aligns with Weber's view that power often comes from unequal access to resources, where women like Ammu have to struggle for recognition and rights within a system that oppresses them.

Power is the ability to make other people do what you want, even if they don't agree. This idea is clearly shown in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. The story takes place in Kerala, India, and shows how strict social rules, class differences, and traditional gender roles control people's lives and keep unfairness in place. When Ammu comes back to Ayemenem after her divorce, it shows how power works within a family. Baby Kochamma is the strongest person in the house. She pushes Ammu away and calls her kids outsiders, not just because of money or class but because she bosses around the family and decides who gets along with whom. This matches what Max Weber said about power. He believed power isn't just about money or wealth—it also includes being in charge, being dominant, and being able to control how others act. The same kind of power is seen in the forbidden love between Ammu and Velutha. Their relationship breaks the rules of caste and what men expect women to do. But the strict social order punishes them for going against these rules. Baby Kochamma, who stands for the family's authority, hides the truth and enforces rules that help keep the family's image clean, even if it means ignoring fairness. In this way, power acts as a tool that keeps society in order, keeps people unequal, and pushes people who break the rules to the side. Through Ammu's choices and Velutha's sad ending, Roy shows how power, social position, and class are all connected. They work together to control how people behave and keep control over society. As described in the quotation below:

"They all broke the rules. They all **broke the rules. But the rules were different for different people.**"

(Roy, 2008: 33 chapters 2)

This illustrates how power operates in the context of social stratification. Within the story, though all the characters violate social norms, the consequences of these violations differ depending on their social status. For example, when members of the Ipe family break the rules, they face different consequences compared to Ammu and Velutha. This highlights that power is not just related to wealth but also to an individual's position in the social hierarchy. In doing so, it creates deep inequality in the society.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* portrays the complex reality of social stratification in Kerala, India, where stratification is not only based on economic differences but also reinforced by inherited social and cultural norms such as the caste system and patriarchy. Through her characters, Roy illustrates how a person's social position influences their opportunities, treatment by society, and access to resources. Based on Marger's social stratification theory as cited in (Zahara & Anwar, 2021:24) economic class is reflected in financial differences between stable families like the Ayemenem family and individuals from weaker groups such as Velutha, while social status appears through societal recognition of certain castes, and power is seen in the ability of individuals or groups to control decisions in social and personal contexts. The novel also demonstrates that social stratification creates lasting inequality, as character relationships reveal how power consistently benefits those in higher positions while lower groups experience discrimination, exploitation, and unjust legal treatment, showing that stratification is a systemic issue shaping societal interactions. Therefore, *The God of Small*



Things functions not only as a family narrative but also as a social critique of inequality resulting from societal stratification, and through a sociological approach this study reveals that Roy deliberately uses narrative, symbolism, and character conflict to expose an oppressive social reality, emphasizing that meaningful social change is only possible when systems of inequality are questioned and challenged. Ultimately, this study not only deepens the understanding of social inequality but also contributes to the field of literary sociology by demonstrating how literature can critically reflect societal conditions and raise awareness of the importance of social justice and equality within diverse social structures.

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