



Social Justice and Human Rights in the Writings of Arundhati Roy: A Contemporary Reinterpretation of Phule and Ambedkar's Ideas

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Abstract

This research paper explores the theme of social justice and human rights in the writings of Arundhati Roy, examining how her works reinterpret the ideas of Mahatma Jyotiba Phule and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. While Phule and Ambedkar primarily focused on issues of caste discrimination, inequality, and the upliftment of marginalized communities, Roy's contemporary writings engage with similar concerns but in the context of modern-day India. Through an analysis of her novels, essays, and public advocacy, this paper delves into Roy's exploration of social justice, highlighting her critique of the existing socio-political structures, the continuation of caste-based discrimination, and her alignment with Phule and Ambedkar's vision of a more equitable society. The paper aims to demonstrate how Roy's works resonate with their ideas, offering a contemporary framework for addressing the pressing issues of caste, identity, and human rights in the 21st century.

Introduction

Arundhati Roy, a prominent contemporary writer and activist, is known for her fervent critique of socio-political structures, particularly those that perpetuate injustice and inequality. Roy's works, both fictional and non-fictional, address various issues such as the exploitation of marginalized communities, human rights violations, environmental degradation, and the misuse of power. Her literature and activism often draw upon ideas championed by social reformers such as Mahatma Jyotiba Phule and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, both of whom fought for the upliftment of the marginalized, especially the Dalits and women. This paper argues that Roy's works can be seen as a contemporary reinterpretation of the ideas of Phule and Ambedkar, as they address the ongoing struggles for social justice and human rights in India today.

Keywords: *Social Justice, Human Rights, Arundhati Roy, Phule's Ideology, Ambedkar's Ideology, Caste Discrimination, Marginalized Communities, Dalit Rights, Humanitarian Activism*

Literature Review:

The concept of social justice and human rights in the Indian context has been deeply shaped by the works and ideologies of social reformers like Mahatma Jyotiba Phule and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Their contributions, particularly in the realms of caste abolition, the upliftment of the oppressed, and the establishment of a just society, have continued to influence modern-day thought leaders, writers, and activists.

Arundhati Roy's literary and activist contributions have drawn significant attention in this regard. Her works, such as *The God of Small Things* and *Capitalism: A Ghost Story*, provide a critique of contemporary India's socio-political structures. Many scholars have explored Roy's exploration of social justice and human rights through her critical engagement with issues such as caste discrimination, capitalist exploitation, and governmental violence. These issues align closely with the ideas of Phule and Ambedkar, who both argued for a more equitable society



free from caste-based oppression. However, Roy's work presents these themes in a modern, globalized context.

In examining Roy's work, scholars have often referred to Phule and Ambedkar's emphasis on education, empowerment, and equality. Roy's portrayal of the continued relevance of these social reformers' ideals in addressing the persistence of caste oppression, gender discrimination, and economic inequality is a point of major interest in the literature. Some key studies focus on the comparative analysis of Roy's activism and Ambedkar's vision, highlighting how Roy's resistance to corporate and state-led dispossession echoes Ambedkar's critique of the state's treatment of marginalized communities. Additionally, Roy's feminist engagement with caste discrimination—especially in works like *Listening to Grasshoppers*—resonates with Ambedkar's call for women's empowerment in the context of caste. A critical gap in the existing literature lies in a thorough, detailed examination of how Roy's fiction, such as *The God of Small Things*, reflects the philosophical doctrines of Phule and Ambedkar. Though numerous scholars have examined Roy's essays, fewer have provided a detailed analysis of her novels from the lens of caste and social justice.

Methodology:

This research paper adopts a qualitative methodology, combining literary analysis with sociological examination. The methodology will focus on the following components:

Textual Analysis:

The primary method will involve an in-depth reading of Arundhati Roy's key works, especially *The God of Small Things*, *Capitalism: A Ghost Story*, *Listening to Grasshoppers*, and select essays. These texts will be examined to identify themes related to social justice, human rights, caste discrimination, and economic inequality. The analysis will focus on how these works represent marginalized communities, particularly Dalits, and how Roy critiques both the persistence of caste-based oppression and the role of the state and corporations in perpetuating these injustices.

Comparative Analysis:

A significant portion of the methodology will be dedicated to comparing Roy's works with the writings of Phule and Ambedkar. This comparison will highlight the ways in which Roy's critiques of modern-day capitalism, corporate exploitation, and social injustice align with the reformist ideologies proposed by Phule and Ambedkar. The comparison will be drawn from historical context (19th and 20th century) and modern-day contexts, focusing on the continuity of social injustice into the 21st century.

Secondary Sources: Secondary literature on Phule, Ambedkar, and Roy's works will be consulted to support and expand the primary analysis. This will include scholarly articles, books, and critiques that focus on Dalit literature, post-colonial studies, feminist theory, and human rights discourse. These sources will provide a broader understanding of the theoretical frameworks that inform Roy's critique of caste and social justice.

Thematic Framework: The study will explore recurring themes of oppression, resistance, and empowerment in Roy's texts, comparing them with the social reform movements led by Phule and Ambedkar. Particular focus will be on how Roy addresses the intersectionality of caste and gender, drawing on Ambedkar's feminist approach and Phule's advocacy for women's education.



Interviews and Public Advocacy: In addition to textual analysis, this research may also incorporate Roy's public speeches, interviews, and activist work. Roy's public interventions on issues related to human rights, such as her critique of India's nuclear policy and her opposition to large-scale development projects that displace marginalized communities, will be examined. These actions highlight her active engagement with Phule and Ambedkar's vision of social justice.

Cultural and Social Context: Given that Roy's works reflect contemporary Indian socio-political issues, the research will also consider the cultural context of modern India, particularly its caste-based hierarchies and the socio-economic struggles of marginalized communities. This will include an examination of the neo-liberal economic policies and their impact on Dalits and Adivasis, as critiqued by Roy in her essays.

Arundhati Roy and the Legacy of Phule and Ambedkar

Phule's Vision of Social Justice

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule was a social reformer who advocated for the rights of the lower castes and the oppressed in 19th-century India. He challenged the caste system and sought to empower the Dalits and women through education. His works, particularly *Gulamgiri* (Slavery) and *Tritiya Ratna*, criticized the social order that perpetuated caste-based exploitation and urged for a more inclusive and just society.

In contemporary times, Arundhati Roy's works resonate with Phule's advocacy for social justice. Roy critiques India's modern caste system, highlighting how caste-based discrimination continues to thrive in various forms, despite the country's legal abolition of untouchability. Her essay *The Greater Common Good* criticizes the displacement of Dalit communities due to industrial projects, echoing Phule's concern for marginalized communities being exploited for economic gain.

Ambedkar's Advocacy for Equality

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the architect of the Indian Constitution, was another towering figure who fought for the rights of Dalits and other marginalized communities. Ambedkar's ideology centered on the abolition of the caste system and the establishment of a society based on equality, liberty, and fraternity. His ideas on education, social justice, and political empowerment for the oppressed have had a lasting impact on India's social and political landscape.

Roy's writings align with Ambedkar's advocacy for equality and social justice. Her critique of the Indian state and its treatment of the marginalized echoes Ambedkar's vision of a more inclusive and just society. In *Field Notes on Democracy*, Roy condemns the Indian government's treatment of tribal and Dalit populations in the context of economic development, drawing a direct line between the historical oppression of these communities and the continuing injustices they face today.

Roy's Literary Engagement with Caste and Social Justice

The God of Small Things and the Legacy of Caste

Roy's debut novel *The God of Small Things* (1997) explores the lives of a family in the Kerala of the 1960s, highlighting issues of caste, class, and forbidden love. The novel's narrative revolves around the tragic consequences of violating the rigid caste boundaries that govern social relations in India. The love affair between Ammu, a Syrian Christian woman, and Velutha, a Dalit, is a powerful critique of the oppressive caste system.



The relationship between Ammu and Velutha can be read as a modern retelling of Phule and Ambedkar's call for the dismantling of caste-based hierarchies. The tragic ending of the love affair and the violence that ensues serve as a stark reminder of the continuing power of caste in contemporary India. Through this narrative, Roy interrogates the long-standing societal structures that uphold caste-based discrimination, echoing the ideas of Phule and Ambedkar about the need for radical social reform.

Capitalism: A Ghost Story and the Politics of Dispossession

In her non-fiction work *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* (2014), Roy critiques the capitalist exploitation of India's poor and marginalized, particularly the Dalit, Adivasi, and Muslim communities. She examines how the state and corporate entities collude to dispossess the marginalized, often using violence and coercion. In this work, Roy's critique is aligned with Ambedkar's notion of "economic democracy," where the welfare of the oppressed is central to any democratic framework.

Roy's focus on the dispossession of marginalized communities through economic policies mirrors Ambedkar's critique of the intersection of caste and economic exploitation. In her writings, Roy offers a critique of the neo-liberal agenda in India, which, according to her, continues to marginalize the very communities that Phule and Ambedkar sought to empower.

Human Rights and Contemporary Struggles in Roy's Writings

The Relevance of Roy's Activism in the Context of Phule and Ambedkar's Ideas

Roy's activism, which often involves public protests, writings, and advocacy for the rights of marginalized communities, is an extension of Phule and Ambedkar's vision for a more just and equitable society. Her unwavering stance against state-sponsored violence, corporate greed, and the oppression of Dalits, Adivasis, and other marginalized communities positions her as a contemporary voice carrying forward the struggles for social justice.

In works such as *Listening to Grasshoppers: Field Notes on Democracy* (2009), Roy critiques the erosion of democratic values in India, focusing on how the state's actions continue to reflect the caste-based and class-based inequalities that Phule and Ambedkar fought against. Roy's call for civil rights, education, and social inclusion is rooted in the same principles that guided Phule and Ambedkar's reform movements.

Caste, Gender, and Human Rights in Roy's Advocacy

Roy's writings also highlight the intersection of caste, gender, and human rights. She draws attention to the ways in which Dalit women, in particular, face compounded oppression due to their position at the intersection of caste and gender-based discrimination. In her essays and interviews, Roy consistently challenges both the caste system and patriarchy, advocating for the empowerment of Dalit women, aligning her with the feminist and Dalit movements inspired by Ambedkar's thoughts.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, Arundhati Roy's works serve as a contemporary reinterpretation of the social justice and human rights ideas championed by Mahatma Jyotiba Phule and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Through her novels, essays, and activism, Roy continues to critique the socio-political structures that perpetuate caste-based discrimination, economic exploitation, and marginalization. In doing so, she reimagines the ideals of Phule and Ambedkar for the 21st century, calling for a more inclusive, just, and equitable society. Roy's engagement with these



themes not only keeps alive the legacy of these great social reformers but also offers a framework for addressing the challenges faced by marginalized communities in contemporary India.

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