An Examination of Sexuality in *The God of Small Things*

Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* is saturated with sexuality. The novel presents to the reader a gamut of sexual situations, ranging from expressions of sexuality deemed unacceptable by society (in particular by Indian culture) to morally ambiguous sexual acts to sexual double standards. Although Roy does not leave any doubt as to which sexual acts are socially acceptable and which are not, she in no way reinforces the idea that social acceptability determines which acts are Right and which are Wrong. In fact, perpetuated social norms in relation to sexuality and sexual expression are often shown as harmful and repressing. By examining the sexuality and sexual situations presented in *The God of Small Things* in four broad categories – sexual coercion, marriage as socially sanctioned sexuality, sexual double standards, and sexual taboos – one can see how social and cultural rules in terms of sexuality, instead of upholding ‘moral’ and ‘ethical’ standards, can be damaging and oppressive.

The first category, sexual coercion, is not one that is blatantly socially acceptable (hardly anyone would argue that forcing someone into a sexual situation is morally okay); however, there are several social and cultural norms that contribute to making a society where sexual coercion, especially sexual coercion of females and children, is frighteningly common. Sexual coercion of females is prominent in societies where there is a “firmly embedded cultural tradition of male dominance coupled with an acceptance of interpersonal violence toward women” (Burkhart and Fromuth 82). This is true of Indian culture, which, like almost every other culture
around the world, is male-dominated. The imbalance of power between genders creates a situation where sexual coercion is often used to reinforce and maintain this imbalance (Stock 62). Display of sexual power over women serves as a reminder of the inequality of power and ensures that the social status of women remains the same.

In *The God of Small Things*, one of the first scenes that appears in the novel is a situation of sexual coercion motivated by this power imbalance. When Ammu goes to the police station to make a statement about Velutha’s arrest, the police officer to whom she is speaking not only does not allow her to make her statement but also taps Ammu’s breasts with his police baton and refers to her using the slur *veshya*. In this situation, the policeman clearly sees Ammu as a powerless party. Not only is she a woman, but she is a women who is divorced and who has broken the social taboo of inter-caste sexual relations by sleeping with Velutha, an Untouchable. In the eyes of Indian society, Ammu is essentially invisible, worthless. However, at the same time, Ammu is a threat. She has defied social custom and ignored the cultural norms that keep Untouchables subservient and separate from the other castes. People are afraid of the caste system crumbling, which makes them fear Ammu’s actions. The policeman’s use of sexual harassment is a way to put Ammu back in her ‘place’: “He knew exactly what he was doing. It was a premeditated gesture, calculated to humiliate and terrorize her. An attempt to instill order into a world gone wrong” (Roy 246). The use of sexual harassment in this case is justified in the eyes of the perpetrator because social and cultural norms remove Ammu’s worth as a person and because the act of sexual harassment is seen as a way to uphold this social imbalance.

A second example of sexual coercion in *The God of Small Things* is the abuse that Estha suffers at the hands of the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man. The sexual coercion of children, most will agree, is morally unacceptable. Like the sexual coercion of adult females, though, there are
certain social norms that contribute to the high number of instances of sexual coercion of children. The most prominent of these is the fact that children are inherently subordinate. “The status of children in this society adds to the vulnerability of all children. As Summit so eloquently described, children are powerless and lacking in credibility. When approached by an abuser or involved in an abusive relationship, children may not object or report the abuse for fear that no one will believe or support them” (Burkhart and Fromuth 87). Children are taught to obey adults, and when they don’t, they are taught to fear repercussions for doing something ‘wrong.’

This is the case with Estha and Orangedrink Lemondrink Man in *The God of Small Things*. When Orangedrink Lemondrink Man hands Estha his penis in the lobby of the cinema, Estha “[holds] it because he [has] to” (Roy 98). Orangedrink Lemondrink Man is an adult, and it is easy for him to cajole Estha into obeying him, especially when Estha has little understanding of what is going on. After the incident, Estha refuses to tell Ammu about what has happened, as he is convinced that he has done something wrong and Ammu will be angry at him for it. His social upbringing has taught him to fear Ammu’s retribution and has taught him to think that what has happened to him is his fault. So, while the sexual abuse that Estha suffers is not socially sanctioned, it is the position of children in society and their social upbringing that makes them easy targets for such sexual coercion. Unfortunately, the end of the incident does not mean the end of worry for Estha. After the abuse takes place, Estha “is overcome with guilt and fear for what he takes as his responsibility for a wrong he knows he’s committed but doesn’t comprehend” (Thormann 303). The fears that plague him are the fears that Ammu will love him less if she finds out what has happened and also the fear the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man will come find Estha at his home. Estha must deal with these repercussions, and deal with them
alone. The situations of sexual coercion that both Estha and Ammu experience demonstrate how social norms lay the groundwork for the perpetuation of these emotionally and physically harmful acts.

The second category of sexual situations to be examined is less a situation and more an institution. Marriage, in any culture, can be viewed as the institutionalization of socially sanctioned sexuality; only couples that are “socially acceptable” have the ability to get married. This is why in the United States, for example, siblings cannot marry, and same-sex marriage is highly contested. Although marriage is not something harmful perpetuated by social norms (as sexual coercion is), society’s portrayal of marriage as a way to happiness is often a false one. Marriage does not guarantee personal fulfillment or happiness in a relationship, which is how people are often taught to think of it as – as the pinnacle of a committed relationship. In The God of Small Things, there are no examples of marriages where the people involved find happiness and fulfillment. The most socially and culturally acceptable marriage in the novel is the marriage between Estha and Rahel’s grandmother and grandfather, Mammachi and Pappachi. Theirs is the only marriage that does not end in divorce, and it is the only non-interracial marriage that we see among the more prominent characters of the novel. Yet, while Mammachi and Pappachi are the most socially acceptable couple, their marriage being a signifier of this, their relationship is an abusive one. Pappachi beats Mammachi, and, as is common in many abusive relationships, Mammachi can do nothing about it and chooses to stay with Pappachi even through the abuse. Even though society acknowledges their relationship as acceptable as far cultural and social norms go in terms of race and caste, this acceptableness does not translate into a healthy relationship for those involved.
Another example of an unfulfilling marriage in *The God of Small Things* is Rahel’s marriage to Larry. Although this marriage may be less socially acceptable in the eyes of Indian culture, as it is an inter-racial marriage, it is an important example to examine because of the reason given for the marriage itself: “Rahel drifted into marriage like a passenger drifts toward an unoccupied chair in an airport lounge. With a Sitting Down sense” (Roy 19). Socially and culturally, marriage is portrayed as a natural step in the progression of life. When Rahel is drifting without much direction to her life, where does she go? Into a marriage. She drifts into it out of habit – out of social habit, but it is not a fulfilling. She is not fully present in the marriage; there is no connection between her and Larry: “But when they made love he was offended by her eyes. They behaved as though they belonged to someone else. Someone watching. Looking out of the window at the sea. At a boat in the river. Or a passerby in the mist in a hat” (20). Although society promises marriage to be a fulfilling experience; it is not what Rahel needs. She cannot find happiness or closure in marriage. Where she does find closure and healing is through completely socially unacceptable means, as will be seen later. The marriages in *The God of Small Things* show that, overall, social acceptability in no way guarantees happiness or fulfillment.

To return to sexual social norms that cause harm, sexual double standards must be examined. Two sets of double standards clearly emerge when reading *The God of Small Things*, the first being the double standard that exists between the acceptability of divorce for men and for women, the second being the double standard between men and women when it comes to fulfilling sexual needs. In *The God of Small Things*, three of the main characters are divorced: Rahel, Ammu, and Chako. The status of being a divorcee is received very differently by others depending on whether the divorced person is a man or a woman. For example, when Rahel
reveals to Comrade Pillai, after years of her being away from her home, that she is divorced. Pillai responds: “‘Die-voiced?’ His voice rose to such a high register that it cracked on the question mark. He even pronounced the word as though it were a form of death” (Roy 124). In Indian culture, as Comrade Pillai demonstrates, a divorced women is viewed very lowly. Sexual purity in women is highly thought of in India, and when a women is divorced, she loses this status. She no longer has an obvious place in society, as is seen when another character reflects on Ammu’s divorce: “She subscribed wholeheartedly to the commonly held view that a married daughter had no position in her parent’s home. As for a divorced daughter – according to Baby Kochamma, she had no position anywhere at all” (45). Being a divorced women makes a person an outcast, someone living on the fringes of society without any real social standing. The sexual harassment of Ammu, discussed above, is an example of how the status of divorced women perpetuates harmful situations.

The story of divorce, however, is quite different is the divorced person in question is a male. Chako is divorced, just like Rahel and Ammu, and also just like Rahel and Ammu, he is a divorcee from an inter-racial marriage. However, when Chako returns to the family home, he is welcomed back with open arms from his mother who is rather clear that she is not pleased with Ammu’s own divorce. Again in contrast with Ammu, who doesn’t have any position in the eyes of society, Chako takes over his mother’s business and becomes a somewhat prominent figure in the town. While Chako, as a man, is unaffected by his divorced status, Ammu is very much so because she is a woman.

The second double standard which needs to be examined is the double standard that exists when it comes to fulfilling sexual needs. Again, here this double standard is fuelled by social and cultural expectations of female ‘sexual purity,’ which is not expected of men. Upper-
Caste women are not allowed to fulfill sexual needs as men are because it is expected of men to want to fulfill these needs but not of women: “In this culture, males are supposed to pursue sexual contact . . . women are responsible for limit setting . . .” (Burkhart and Fromuth 84). In *The God of Small Things*, Mammachi even refers to this as “Men’s Needs” and (begrudgingly) assists Chako in fulfilling his ‘needs’ by installing a separate door for the women he sleeps with to enter directly into his room from outside the house. If it is acceptable for men to use women to fulfill their needs, why, then, are the women who allow the men to sleep with them viewed in a bad light? As Prem Chowdhry explains:

“If high caste women are considered ‘vulnerable’ to low caste men, the sexual abuse of low caste women by high caste men, extending from rape and sexual exploitation to liaison, remains an ever-growing phenomenon . . . It is not as if the lower caste women *lose* their ‘purity’ and ‘honour’ by mating sexually, willingly or unwillingly – in the eyes of the upper castes, they have no ‘purity’ or ‘honour’ to begin with. Declared to be ‘sexually promiscuous’ by upper caste groups, the onus is firmly on these women for inciting upper caste men.” (347)

So, then, it does not matter if a women is upper or lower caste. If she is upper caste, she loses what ‘sexual purity’ she was deemed to have, thereby losing her standing in society, as Ammu does when she divorces and sleeps with an Untouchable. If the woman is lower caste, she is labeled ‘sexually promiscuous’ and reproached for this. These double standards are very much socially acceptable, but they harm women by placing unfair expectations upon them and then punishing them for failing to live up to these higher expectations which are not placed on their male counterparts.
Finally, sexual taboos place socially and culturally upheld limits on sexuality. These taboos harm by justifying the violence used against people who do not accept and follow them. This is illustrated quite clearly in *The God of Small Things* when Ammu and Velutha break the taboo on inter-caste relations, a taboo rooted deeply in Indian culture. A person’s status in society is determined by which caste they are born into, and their caste then determines whom they can marry. Marrying outside of their caste lessens the status of their immediate family, and, over time, of the entire caste group (Chowdhry 332-33). Protecting the ‘honor’ of one’s caste, then, is taken very seriously. Using violence against those who disregard the class system is very common, especially in the rural areas of India. In one instance, a low-caste girl and the upper-caste boy she ran away with were both beheaded upon returning to their village. The elders justified this violence by saying that “the brutal hacking was to be a ‘lesson’ to others” (Chowdhry 335). We see this play out in Roy’s novel when Velutha is savagely beaten as a result of his relations with Ammu. Throughout *The God of Small Things*, two recurring ideas appear which represent this taboo of inter-caste relations and the violence associated with it. The Love Laws are “The Laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much” (Roy 33). According to the Love Laws, the laws that determine social acceptableness, Ammu cannot love Velutha because he is an Untouchable. Reinforcing the idea of the Love Laws is the theme of History, which is the backing of hundreds of years of establishing and enforcing the taboo. When Ammu and Velutha discover their desire for one another, History is said to have ‘slipped up,’ and from that point on, there are numerous mentions of History returning, of catching up to them, of “history’s twisted chickens [coming] home to roost” (268). And it does catch up to them. Velutha is found and beaten out of fear – out of fear that others will follow, that other
Untouchables will start acting without regard to the caste system. The police needed to instill fear in the others, so they beat Velutha as their example.

This social taboo harms not only in the physical violence it bring upon Velutha but also in the repression of the fulfilling relationship that Ammu and Velutha have with one another. Ammu and Velutha find happiness and beauty in each other, which is something they do not find looking at their lives as a whole: “Even later, on the thirteen nights that followed this one, instinctively they stuck on the small things. The Big Things ever lurked inside. They knew that there was nowhere for them to go. They had nothing. No future. So they stuck to the small things” (320). Even when there is political unrest and they are both fringe-dwellers of society, Velutha because he is an Untouchable, and Ammu because she is a divorced women, they find contentment in the small things, in each other. However, the taboo of inter-caste relations makes their relationship impossible, which leads to Velutha’s death and Ammu’s slow mental and physical deterioration.

The second sexual taboo examined in *The God of Small Things* is incest. The sexual taboo on incest is widespread across the world and across many cultures. Many people perceive incest as being forbidden because of the blood relationship that exists between the two people involved in such a relationship. Though the fact that all incestuous relationships share family blood is true, there are many different kinds of relationships that fall under the term ‘incest.’ Most people immediately think of abuse when they think of incest, such as father-daughter sexual relations, but not all incestuous relationships are abusive (Hamer 10-11). When there is no force of power of one party over another, there is no reason why there should be trauma from an incestuous relationship. However, there often is trauma because of “the pressure of the ban which defines all forms of incest as wrong” (11). In the Rahel and Estha’s relationship, they feel
this sense guilt over having broken the Love Laws. They feel the guilt of doing something forbidden, and they remember that it was because of breaking a Love Law that Velutha was beaten, a beating that they witnessed and which caused so much trauma they still have not gotten over it. Estha and Rahel’s relationship is their way of trying to overcome the grief and trauma that has shaped their lives since childhood. But again, it is social rules, the sexual taboo, that represses this relationship, even though it is a relationship that helps them heal emotionally. When Rahel has sex with Estha, her eyes are no longer vacant like they were when she was with Larry in her previous unfulfilling relationship. In their coming together, both of the twins find the closure they need to be able to start to overcome the trauma of their past. However, like Ammu and Velutha’s relationship, theirs is also repressed because of the sexual taboo placed on it. Social rules will not allow them to fully accept the fact that they have slept together; they will feel guilt for something they should not have to feel guilty for.

Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* contains many examples of how social and cultural norms regarding sexuality are harmful and repressive. Social norms such as the power imbalance between males and females and the accepted normalness of interpersonal violence between men and women make sexual coercion extremely common. While society and culture teach people to believe that marriage is a fulfilling and obvious progression in life, marriage in no way guarantees happiness. Sexual double standards repress women by forcing them to live up to higher expectation of sexual purity and then punishing them when they cannot live up to it. Finally, sexual taboos harm by dismantling or imbuing with guilt relationships that otherwise could have been successful and fulfilling. Social acceptableness may seem like an easy way to gauge whether something is Right or Wrong, but *The God of Small Things* shows how certain social rules and expectations in relation to sexuality can be more harmful than they are helpful.
Works Cited


