

**Poverty and Class Struggle in the Works of
Arundhati Roy and Mahasweta Devi
Prajakta Ahuja**

Assistant Professor, Yashwantrao Chavan Warana Mahavidyalaya,
Warananagar.

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ABSTRACT:

Poverty and class struggle have been persistent concerns in Indian society, shaped by historical, social, and political factors. Indian literature, both in English and in translated regional languages, has served as a lens to examine these inequalities. Among contemporary writers, Arundhati Roy and Mahasweta Devi stand out for their deep engagement with issues of economic deprivation, social marginalization, and systemic oppression. Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) explores poverty, caste discrimination, and gender oppression in Kerala, highlighting how social hierarchies and economic inequality affect the personal and psychological lives of her characters. Devi's works, such as *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* (1990) and *Draupadi* (1989), depict the struggles of tribal and rural communities, foregrounding systemic exploitation, labor oppression, and gendered marginalization.

This paper examines how poverty and class struggle are represented in the works of Roy and Devi, focusing on their narrative techniques, thematic concerns, and socio-political commentary. Through a comparative analysis, the study demonstrates how these writers illuminate the multi-layered dimensions of poverty, revealing the intersections of class, caste, gender, and political marginalization, while asserting literature's role as a vehicle for social awareness and ethical reflection.

KEYWORDS:

Poverty, Class Struggle, Social Marginalization, Caste and Gender Discrimination, Narrative Techniques.

Introduction

Literature serves as both a mirror and a critique of society. In India, where poverty and class disparities have been deeply entrenched for centuries, writers have sought to illuminate the lived realities of the marginalized. Among these voices, Arundhati Roy and Mahasweta Devi provide compelling narratives that foreground the struggles of those often rendered invisible. Their works depict poverty not merely as economic deprivation but as a multidimensional experience shaped by caste hierarchies, gender oppression, labor exploitation, and political marginalization.

Arundhati Roy, writing in English, combines lyrical prose, non-linear storytelling, and complex characterizations to explore the emotional and psychological consequences of poverty and social inequality. In *The God of Small Things*, the lives of the Ipe family and their interactions with marginalized individuals such as Velutha, a Dalit carpenter, reveal the subtle and overt mechanisms through which social hierarchies enforce economic and social exclusion. Roy's narrative highlights that poverty in India is both structural and interpersonal, shaping relationships, identity, and personal aspirations.

Mahasweta Devi, writing primarily in Bengali and widely translated into English, focuses on tribal and rural populations. Her works portray systemic exploitation, exposing the intersection of poverty with class oppression, caste discrimination, and political subjugation. In *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, she illustrates how industrialization, landlord oppression, and state policies marginalize tribal communities, depriving them of economic resources and social justice. In *Draupadi*, Devi portrays the gendered dimensions of oppression, showing how tribal women face violence and exploitation compounded by poverty and social hierarchy.

This research paper explores how both authors depict pover-

ty and class struggle, analysing their narrative strategies, thematic depth, and ethical engagement with social issues. The study examines the ways in which literature serves as a medium to expose inequality, evoke empathy, and provoke critical reflection on the structures that perpetuate poverty.

Literature Review:

Critical scholarship on Arundhati Roy emphasizes her ability to intertwine social critique with emotional depth. Scholars such as Mehrotra (1995) note that Roy's use of non-linear narratives and shifting perspectives allows her to explore the psychological impact of poverty and social inequality across generations. Roy's work has been celebrated for highlighting the subtle ways in which caste, class, and gender intersect, showing how systemic oppression is internalized and reproduced in family and community life.

Mahasweta Devi, by contrast, has been studied for her activist literary approach, combining storytelling with social critique. Dasgupta (2004) observes that Devi foregrounds the material deprivation of tribal and rural communities, emphasizing the political and structural causes of poverty. Her realist style, direct narrative, and focus on marginalized voices make her work a powerful critique of exploitation and social injustice.

Comparative analyses suggest that while Roy explores the emotional and psychological dimensions of poverty, Devi emphasizes material deprivation and systemic oppression, reflecting differences in narrative style and focus. Both, however, illuminate poverty and class struggle in ways that engage readers ethically and socially, providing complementary perspectives on the persistence of inequality in India.

Poverty and Class in Arundhati Roy's Works:**The God of Small Things (1997):**

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) is a masterful exploration of poverty, caste, and social hierarchy, set in the small town of Ayemenem in Kerala. Roy's depiction of poverty goes beyond mere economic deprivation; it delves deeply into the emotional, psychological, and societal dimensions of marginalization. In the novel, poverty is both a social condition imposed by structural hierarchies and a deeply personal experience that shapes identity, relationships, and aspirations. One of the most vivid illustrations of poverty intertwined with caste is the character of Velutha, a Dalit carpenter. Despite his intelligence, skill, and moral integrity, Velutha is systematically denied recognition, dignity, and opportunities solely because of his caste. His economic and social marginalization reflects the rigidities of the caste system that persist in Indian society. Velutha's character exemplifies how poverty in India is not just the absence of material wealth, but also a consequence of social prejudice and exclusion. Roy emphasizes that Velutha's suffering is compounded by both external societal pressures and internalized oppression, making him a poignant symbol of the human cost of systemic inequality.

Roy's narrative technique enhances the portrayal of poverty. The non-linear storytelling, shifting between past and present, allows readers to see how economic hardship and social discrimination shape memory, identity, and intergenerational relationships. The trauma and marginalization experienced by one generation affect the next, highlighting the long-lasting and pervasive impact of poverty. Moreover, Roy's poetic and symbolic language—such as her descriptions of the decaying river, dilapidated houses, and forbidden spaces—serves as a metaphor for social neglect and the corrosive effects of inequality. Even objects and spaces, like the

forbidden “History House” or the decaying mansion of the Ipes, symbolize entrenched social hierarchies and the burden of historical oppression.

Another aspect of Roy’s exploration of poverty is its psychological and emotional dimension. Characters in the novel experience shame, fear, and despair due to their social position. The children, Rahel and Estha, internalize these social inequalities, which shape their perceptions, relationships, and emotional development. Through these psychological portrayals, Roy emphasizes that poverty is not just material but also relational and emotional, affecting how individuals perceive themselves and interact with the world.

Furthermore, Roy examines the intersection of poverty with gender. Women characters, particularly Ammu, face additional burdens due to patriarchal expectations and social norms. Poverty intensifies their vulnerability, limiting their agency and exposing them to both social and economic exploitation. Roy highlights that economic deprivation is inseparable from social constraints—especially for women in lower social strata—thereby portraying poverty as intersectional, where class, caste, and gender are interwoven.

Roy also critiques societal and systemic inequalities through the microcosm of the Ipe household and the broader community. The novel suggests that poverty is sustained not merely by economic scarcity but by the reinforcement of social hierarchies and discriminatory practices. Roy’s portrayal of Ayemenem, with its caste-conscious society, entrenched social norms, and rigid class divisions, reflects a larger commentary on the persistence of structural inequality in postcolonial India.

In summary, Arundhati Roy’s depiction of poverty and class in *The God of Small Things* is multifaceted, encompassing material deprivation, social exclusion, caste discrimination, gendered op-

pression, and psychological impact. Through complex characterizations, non-linear narrative structure, and symbolic language, Roy presents poverty as a pervasive and multidimensional condition, demonstrating how societal hierarchies and social norms shape both the external circumstances and internal experiences of marginalized individuals. Her work invites readers to confront the human costs of inequality while reflecting on the structural forces that perpetuate it.

Themes and Narrative Techniques in Mahasweta Devi's Works:

Mahasweta Devi's literary style is marked by a powerful combination of realism and activism. She does not shy away from depicting the harsh realities of poverty, exploitation, and social injustice. Her narratives are direct and unflinching, presenting the lives of marginalized communities with an honesty that confronts the reader with uncomfortable truths. In her works, the struggles of tribal and rural populations are brought to the forefront, giving voice to communities often silenced in mainstream discourse.

Devi's stories often explore the intersection of oppression, showing how gender, class, caste, and political marginalization are inseparably intertwined. For instance, in *Draupadi*, the protagonist Dopdi Mejhen experiences gendered violence compounded by her social and economic position as a tribal woman. Devi portrays her suffering not as an isolated incident but as a reflection of systemic oppression perpetuated by social hierarchies and state power. Similarly, in *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, the economic hardships of the tribal community are inseparable from the exploitation imposed by landlords and industrialists, illustrating how poverty is deeply embedded in broader structures of power.

Devi's narratives also emphasize political engagement. Her works do not merely depict deprivation—they actively critique the social, economic, and political systems that maintain inequality. By

doing so, her literature serves as both documentation and protest, compelling readers to recognize the systemic roots of poverty and social injustice. Her realism is not only aesthetic but ethical, demanding attention, empathy, and action from the audience.

Comparative Analysis: Arundhati Roy and Mahasweta Devi:

While both Roy and Devi focus on poverty and class struggle, their approaches differ in style and perspective. Arundhati Roy delves deeply into the emotional and psychological dimensions of poverty. In *The God of Small Things*, characters like Velutha and Ammu are caught in a web of caste, social norms, and economic constraints, and Roy explores how these external pressures shape their inner lives, desires, and relationships. Her lyrical, non-linear, and symbolic narrative style allows readers to experience poverty as a lived, felt reality, emphasizing memory, trauma, and the intergenerational impact of inequality.

Mahasweta Devi, on the other hand, foregrounds the material and structural aspects of deprivation. Her tribal and rural characters face systemic exploitation by landlords, industrialists, and state authorities. The oppression she depicts is concrete, immediate, and often violent, highlighting the intersection of economic, social, and political forces. Devi's narrative is realist, direct, and activist, prioritizing social critique over aesthetic embellishment.

Despite these differences, both authors illuminate the multi-dimensional nature of poverty, showing how economic deprivation intersects with social hierarchy, gender oppression, and systemic injustice. While Roy focuses on the psychological and emotional consequences, Devi emphasizes structural exploitation and resistance. Together, their works offer a comprehensive understanding of poverty and class struggle in India, portraying both the human cost of inequality and the social forces that sustain it.

Conclusion

Arundhati Roy and Mahasweta Devi illuminate poverty and class struggle through distinct but complementary literary lenses. Roy's lyrical, non-linear narratives reveal the psychological and intergenerational effects of poverty and social inequality, emphasizing the personal and emotional dimensions. Devi's realist and activist writings expose structural and systemic oppression, showing how tribal and rural communities are marginalized by economic exploitation, social hierarchies, and political violence.

Both writers demonstrate that poverty is more than economic deprivation—it is socially constructed, culturally enforced, and politically maintained. Their works underscore literature's capacity to act as a mirror of society, a critique of injustice, and a vehicle for social awareness and ethical engagement. By portraying the struggles of the marginalized with empathy, depth, and social commitment, Roy and Devi continue to shape our understanding of poverty, class, and inequality in contemporary India.

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