

Aestheticization of female body: Narrative Intrusion of the Unnecessary description in *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy

Makhdoom Hussain¹, Ummaia Javed², Muhammad Ayyaz³, Samia Rashid⁴

¹ Visiting lecturer, Lahore leads university. E-mail: makhdoommaharvi@gmail.com

² Visiting lecturer, Islamia university. E-mail: umaiyaranao1@gmail.com

³ PhD Scholar, Muslim Youth University Islamabad. E-mail: mayyazsahil@gmail.com

⁴ Visiting lecturer, University of Lahore Pakistan. Email: samia.arooj@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the aesthetics of the female body in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), through the intrusive descriptions of its surface. Drawing on Gérard Genette's concept of "focalization," it analyses how Roy's narrative voice navigates the representation of female characters, their bodies and the politics of gender and power wherein these representations operate. The study contends that although such descriptions seem overemphasized it is a technique that brings out objectification and commodification of women in a patriarchal society. By identifying the difference between external focalization (the position of the observer) and internal focalization (that of the character), the paper deconstructs the vanity of aestheticization and an ideological reading. This paper aims to investigate aestheticization of the female body in Roy's novel by asking how such descriptions can be considered as a type of narratorial interruption when they seem to go beyond the need of the story or characterization. Hence, this literary analysis engages with the current discussions of feminist literary criticism as it relates to narrative form, gender politics and, or, the representation of subjects in contemporary literature.

1. Introduction

Literature has been writing about gender for hundreds of years, adapting to the different concerns of society at different times and places. Often, it idealizes the female form by using certain images to achieve different goals. Malti-Douglas (2019) says that the female body has been used in literature to reach goals that the author might not be able to reach by simply showing society as it really is (Michie, 1990; Younger, 2009). Various narrative techniques, in conjunction with this artistic decision, amplify the emphasis on a feminist or pseudo-feminist perspective. In this regard, Arundhati Roy, in her subliminal novel, *The God of Small Things*, along with socio-cultural issues of Indian society, also endeavors to objectify the women's

body through her narratives. Consequently, this superfluous depiction of the female form encourages the reader to engage in a literary critique regarding the manner in which certain narratives have been constructed. Such narratives contribute little to the central or secondary plots of the novel, serving merely to provide extraneous details about the female body. Consequently, this paper examines the representation of the writer's female body, delving into these nuanced details.

The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy is a postcolonial novel, written in 1997, that poses the extremes of identity, caste, and family in contemporary Indian society (Roy, 1997). Yet, embedded within its rich narrative lies a contentious practice: the rather unimportant and provocative details about the female body. This has elicited applause and criticism based on complicated narrative methods, and rich descriptive, especially sensory language. Of these, the representation of the female body appears as a particularly contested issue forcing the author to consider certain characteristics of the main narrative. Hence, this paper examines Roy's treatment of the female body, focusing specifically on the presence of what can be termed as "unnecessary detail"—a form of narrative intrusion that calls attention to the body in ways that appears to exceed the demands of the plot or character development.

Furthermore, Gérard Genette's notion of "focalization" is used in the study to examine how Roy's narrative voice moves through and embodies the privacy and corporeality of her female characters. This is how the paper tries to bring out the different cultural, aesthetic, and gender aspects of Roy's descriptions by looking at whether or not these descriptions move the story along or make the female characters seem like objects. The study puts this criticism in the context of Gérard Genette's idea of "focalization," which gives us a way to think about narrative perspective and how descriptive detail is spread out (Genette, 1972). The narrative approach uses focalization to describe and view events and characters in a work. Genette's theory differs between the subject who perceives and the subject who tells. This makes it easier to understand how narrative voice and perspective affect how characters are portrayed and how gender and body politics are dealt with (Andalibi & Koopal, 2022). Using this theoretical analysis as a guide, the study investigates whether these descriptions contribute positively to the plot or merely serve as ornamental embellishments that encourage objectification.

Moreover, complementing the theoretical framework of focalization, this paper explores that Roy's aesthetic strategies speak to the problematic of beautification and beautifying representation. The objectification of the female body is not only discussed here in terms of aesthetics but also as a localized space of ideological struggle over culture and patriarchy. By bringing up this issue, the study hopes to add to the debates going on in the fields of feminist literature and narrative analysis about how literary works act as a bridge between the aesthetic and the political, on the one hand, and the discursive regime of masculinism and femininity, on the other. Hence, it is a contribution to the scholarly appreciation of Roy's narrative techniques and a more general meant to provide a critique of the aestheticization of the female form in contemporary literature.

The study investigates uncharted zones linking narrative mechanics to female objectification by examining how superfluous observations depict female bodily aesthetics in *The God of Small Things*. Research about feminist aspects in books, together with Arundhati Roy's political work, has received little study regarding intrusive story elements' role in artistic depictions of women versus novel progression. The analysis implements Gérard Genette's focalisation theory to demonstrate how point of view manipulates gender depictions while constructing a link between formal stylistic elements and their political impact. This research uses postcolonial feminist methods to analyse regional tensions about female body representation in literature, thus providing an original perspective on contemporary gender and aesthetic criticism.

2. Literature Review

Concerning the female body, the topic has remained sensitive and has always drawn the attention of critical theorists, especially the feminists and narratologists. Critics and theorists have paid much attention to them and how the cultures and gendered ideologies are reproduced and negotiated in the textual surfaces through narratives. The novel written by Roy, which has attracted a variety of critical analyses, is *The God of Small Things*, which is read for its gorgeous words and multi-levelled storytelling (Altaf & Siddiqui, 2024). Besides many other topics and motifs, the representation of the female body has attracted much attention that sharply calls for questioning as to their intention and meaning.

An important concept with which one can address such narrative phenomena is Gérard Genette's theory of focalization, which can now be considered one of the keys in the field of narratology (Nelles, 1990). Genette's idea tells the difference between "who sees" and "who speaks" in a story, giving us a more complex way to look at how descriptive details are distributed and how perspective shapes the meaning of a story (Guanghui). According to Steinby (2016), focalization has become convenient for scholars when engaging in literary analysis with an emphasis on politics of representation, especially regarding the body of the other and/or gendered body. This way of thinking about theory works really well with Roy's book because it jumps around a lot between what seems like detached observation and vivid psychological interiors, making you wonder where these objectifications come from and why they are used.

Many have argued that The God of Small Things is a highly complex narrative that explores themes of caste, class, and gender. Recent attempts of the 'Angry Feminist Critics' have established how Roy insidiously recasts traditional patriarchal hierarchies, even within the cultural context of the book, whilst failing to offer a progressive representation of Indian women (Roy & Jose, 2023). For instance, some critics have pointed at concerns with regard to the portrayal of Ammu and other female characters' bodies, meaning that while such characterization empowers the women in question, they are equally objectified. On the other hand, narratological approaches have heralded Roy's experimentations in perspective and temporality, but they have rarely asked how these strategies relate to the self-reflexive depiction of the female form.

In this paper, we use Genette's theory of focalization to find a common ground between the two different ways of talking about the novel. This implies that the study aims to redirect attention from the descriptions themselves to their narrative function in Roy's literary works. This shows the difference between how something looks and what it means morally. This not only helps us understand *The God of Small Things* better, but it also answers more general questions about how narrative strategies shape how masculinities and femininities are talked about.

According to Tamboukou (2021), the depiction of the female body in literary works is still a research interest that has not lost its relevance in postmodern feminist and narratological analysis. People have talked about how the female body is shown in art, focusing on realistic details that carry meaning, and how it either has no control over or interacts with the objectification of women in order to subvert patriarchal imagery. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, winning acclaim for both the quality of its writing and the complexity of its structure, has been accused of 'eroticizing' women and especially women's bodies in the text. Because of this, the purpose of this paper is to look at how these depictions act as a kind of narrative interruption: the female body descriptions add some texture, but they could also become the main focus, which would take away from the female figure's narrative function.

There is hardly any work on Roy's *The God of Small Things*, and most of its constant praises are for the new narration and profound themes of the novel focusing on casteism, sexism, and conventional rules. Critics making analysis of the novel from the postmodernist or postcolonial perspective have stated that it rebels against the patriarchal society, but some of them have also said that Roy's portrayal of the female body is very close to being the agents of patriarchal objectification of women (Tickell, 2007). For instance, Jaina Sanga and Anna Clarke have celebrated the numerous descriptions of the protagonist's body as a sign of her gaining mastery over her life, but such analyses fail to capture instances where the body is used in ways that make the female characters potentially eroticized. Such tension between agency and commodification is still rather under-researched, including from a narratological standpoint.

Gérard Genette's idea of focalization—the difference between "who sees" and "who speaks"—offers a useful way to examine the point of view from which these descriptions come (Burhanudin, 2020; Özer, 2019). Applying this lens reveals a potential dissonance: In Roy's writing, the main male character goes back and forth between the Godlike perspective and the first-person point of view. However, it is still not clear whether the description of the female body is necessary for the story's themes or is just an act of sexual fascination. This ambiguity threatens to incite attention, especially concerning those cases in which definitions of female characters' physical appearance are provided with what appears to be more attention than given their male counterparts.

Although there exists extensive literature on Roy's encode and decode techniques, very few scholars have engaged in close analysis of the gender aspect of focalization. What such an approach obscures is that we don't often see that is made starkly apparent by Satyajit Ray's 'an examination of the inevitable carnality of desperate lives' often ends up eliding the question of where unnecessary bodily detail fits in. By looking at these descriptions through

the lens of narratology, this work looks at how Roy's ways of telling stories interact with and may even add to how gender is portrayed in culture.

3. Research Methodology

G rard Genette's concept of "focalization" provides a critical narratological framework for examining how narrative perspective and descriptive emphasis influence the reader's understanding of characters and events. Feminist narratologists, including Mieke Bal and Susan Lanser have extended Genette's Focalization, presented in *Narrative Discourse*, parts the function of perceiving the events within the story and the function of their narration. According to Genette, by comparing the proximity between the narrator's act of speaking and the character's perspective, the method is used to perform a sensitive examination of the distribution of focalization, as well as how specific features gain prominence while other aspects remain in the shadows. This theoretical approach is useful for reading *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, when literary representation of the female body is a problem of ethics and aesthetics.

Andalibi and Koopal (2022) applied Genette's "focalization" to explicate gender dynamics in narrative which shows that using of Genette's theory is also useful to amplify the critique of the ideology connotations of focalization. Such stakeholders are the ones who control authoritative knowledge and how it is perceived, and they 'do' gender in a way that influences the construction of meaning. Feminist narratologists using Genette's concept of focalization have contended that focalization can reiterate or subvert dominant culture values based on how it guides the reader's aim. In Roy's novel, the female body is often described in vivid, almost sensual detail, prompting the question: whose look draws out these images, and to what functional goal? This paper argues that such descriptions lead to erasure of the distinction between empowering embodiment and reductive aestheticization of the raced, classed, and gendered body, thus situating the novel in a tension between the cultural politics identifying it as a feminist work and the cultural aesthetics mobilizing it as such.

However, Genette's concept of focalization offers an instrument in order to question the extent and the pertinence of the descriptive emphasis. When elements in a story appear more detailed and thought-out than others, especially when they are feminine or female-repressed, they disrupt the plot. To that end, this analysis utilizes Genette's findings to determine whether such descriptions actually add a level of thematic depth to the narrative or are merely ornamental.

3.1. Data Analysis Procedures

This paper argues against the unnecessary ornamentation prevalent in *The God of Small Things* utilizing focalization as the critical framework of analysis. Its purpose is to investigate the critical and stylistic presuppositions behind such narrative strategies and place them in the context of ontological discussions of representation in fiction. This approach does not only enrich cavalcade theories on Roy's storytelling but also critiques the politics of gender in high aestheticisation. By so doing, it sets the scholarly bar high; making the reader to self-reflect on how, and to what extent, narrative practices are both influenced, and influence constructs of gender identity in culture.

4. Discussion and Analysis

"Inspector Thomas Mathew came around his desk and approached Ammu with his baton. "If I were you," he said, "I'd go home quietly." Then he tapped 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.11).

The description of Inspector Thomas Mathew's action, especially the comparison of tapping Ammu's breasts to "choosing mangoes," is a deliberate aestheticization of the female body in a deeply dehumanizing and objectifying manner. The metaphor diminishes Ammu to a mere commodity for selection and packing. This narrative intrusion highlights the systematized patriarchal society's perception and control over women's bodies. Mangoes are used in a rich cultural context, symbolizing fertility, ripeness, and even desire in South Asian regions, further emphasizing the objectification of Ammu. Although the description has appeared motivated and exaggerated at the same time as overly intrusive, it has a role in the book's evaluations of power and conformity. The graphic description directly exposes the reader to the ugliness of gendered violence and the impunity with which men in power perceive their ability to violate women, this aligns with Mulvey's (1975) theory of the male gaze. The narrative intrusion shifts the focus from the character's internal experience (Ammu's humiliation and anger) to an external observer's perspective. This duality causes discomfort because it relates to the topic of the eroticization of female suffering.

Furthermore, after the internal focalization, which reflects the point of view of the character, such as Ammu, the writer moves into an external focalization where Mathew's actions and thoughts are revealed. The "tap tap" and the mango metaphor suggest an intrusion of his predatory gaze into the narrative, showcasing the male gaze in action. From the position of the omniscient narrator, clear and rather callous comments on the inspector's actions can be made while setting the scene with outstanding liveliness. These focalizations render the description of the situation unnecessary, yet they clearly highlight Ammu's powerlessness and the context of the power relation. The focalization not only reveals the inspector's morality but also questions the rationality of the culture that allows him to be like that. In this way, Roy breaks a clear boundary between the activities of narrative construction and rudimentary interference, which makes the reader shift in discomfort.

Thus, this 'aestheticization' of Ammu's humiliation is an enactment of the power politics skewing the balance in favour of the men. The description clumsily blurs the focus on Ammu's power with gratuitous eroticism; however, it can be seen that, far from being an embarrassing lapsus, it incorporates critical questions of power, gender, and violence that are central to the novel. In light of Gérard Genette's focalization, the change of perspective to outside observation brings gendered scrutiny to the systematic objectification of women and the male gaze. This unease that the reader is given is not an accident but rather a technique, which Arundhati Roy puts into practice in order to force the reader to be aware of these normalized societal vices.

"She kept damp cash in her bodice, which she tied tightly around her chest to flatten her unchristian breasts. Her kunukku earrings were thick and gold. Her earlobes had been distended into weighted loops that swung around her neck, her earrings sitting in them like

gleeful children in a merry-go- (not all the way)-round. Her right lobe had split open once" (p. 171)

The phrase "unchristian breasts" carries a heavy moral and religious undertone, suggesting that her body is viewed through a lens of sinfulness or impropriety. The act of flattening them symbolizes the social policing that subjugates and erases female sexuality; denying women their agency reflects the close collaboration between religion and patriarchy. The description of her earrings as "gleeful children in a merry-go-round" humanizes the jewelry and juxtaposes it with the implied distress of the "split" lobe. This doubling emphasizes that the aesthetic is critical and conceals a certain violence, suffering, and pain related to changes or objectifications of the body.

First of all, one tends to wonder why her physical attributes are drawn in detail, why her earlobes are depicted as swollen, and why there is a damp cloth in her bodice. But these small points are useful because they put the woman and her story in a frame of reference for socio-cultural reality. The description hammers on the fact that the female body is forcibly transformed into a billboard of social conventions and ideas; breasts are flattened, earlobes stretched, and ornaments worn, all in the telling of a tale of oppression, survival, and compulsion. The "damp cash" hints at economic precarity, adding another layer of vulnerability to her characterization.

The narrative here reverts to what is called an external focalization, centering on the woman and her corporeal signs while denying her not only access to and curiosity about the main man's inside but even an ability to look at him from the outside. This objectifying perspective corresponds to the societal outlook that evaluates and judges' women through their sexual appeals. This kind of switching enables the text to both devalue aestheticization and partake in it at the same time. The text then depicts the violence and discomfort associated with this objectification process. The narrator's omniscient voice adds layers of interpretation, such as the religious critique in "unchristian breasts" or the whimsical imagery of the "merry-go-round." These incursions show that the narrator dominates the manner in which the character is represented while simultaneously obscuring the distinction between extraneous and important description.

The ponderous detailing of the woman's physical appearance is not an accidental narrative imposition but a conscious attempt to comment on the subjectivity of women's bodies. Using Gérard Genette's concept of focalization, it becomes clear that the external voice serves as a vigilant watchdog over the female form, effectively shaming women into adhering to the rules set down by male authority. Even though the detailed description is deemed irrelevant, it allows them to criticize the theme of suffering and the culture that shapes these images.

"A combative-looking young girl of about twelve or thirteen appeared through the lace curtain. She wore a long, printed skirt that reached all the way down to her ankles and a short, waist length white blouse with darts that made room for future breasts. Her oiled hair was parted into two halves. Each of her tight, shining plaits was looped over and tied with ribbons so that they hung down on either side of her face like the outlines of large, drooping ears that hadn't been colored in yet." (p. 268)

The meticulous detailing of her clothing, "darts that made room for future breasts," and hairstyle is arguably an intrusion by the narrator. This description penalizes her, makes her a simple object to look at, and does not tell us much about her character or a part that she plays in the story. The description of "future breasts" and "large, drooping ears that hadn't been colored in yet" infantilizes the girl while simultaneously framing her body within a developmental lens. This portrays her body as a developing object, raising the possibility of inappropriate viewing. Details of her physical appearance, including the material of her skirt, the darts on her blouse, and her oiled hair, seem to silence her, reducing her to a mere object, a spectacle that must be puffed up for the audience, which is the result of the socialization process of young girls. Therefore, the narrative interferes by creating additional scenes that do not fit the backup and do not contribute to the characters' growth. Rather, it depicts a social and narrative desire to erase and beautify the female physique.

The description does not indicate the state of the girl's mind—if she has any at all—or her meaning to the story. It's all about her looks—thus keeping her in the position of an object that people observe. Despite having deep references that give the novel a lush tone in terms of imagery, it goes overboard and becomes a pandering sickness to aestheticize women and their bodies. The "unnecessary" nature of this description highlights a tension between the literary style and ethical considerations. In that sense, while it generates atmosphere, it also rehearses a kind of narrative paradigm that examines female bodies. Genette's concept of focalization reveals how the external lens situates the girl in a specific way, upholding the norms of objectification. The description adds to the atmosphere, but it's not clear what it's for in terms of plots and character development. This is why it's a bad thing for writers to do things like this.

"She unbuttoned her shirt. They stood there. Skin to skin. Her brownness against his blackness. Her softness against his hardness. Her nut-brown breasts (that wouldn't support a toothbrush) against his smooth ebony chest. His hands were on her haunches (that could support a whole array of toothbrushes), pulling her hips against his, to let her know how much he wanted her" (p. 329)

This is a convincing use of internal focalization. The reader sees everything through Ammu's actions and relations to others—combined with some objectifying external gaze, as in the focus on the characters' bodies. The focus on Ammu's "nut-brown breasts" and "haunches" suggests a shift from her subjective experience to an objectified, external view of her body. Velutha, on the other hand, describes her body in terms of strength and functionality ("smooth ebony chest"), implying a hierarchical framing of their physicality. The blending of focalization creates a tension: as much as the moment is tender, the use of detailed descriptions of body parts reduces Ammu to an object of the narrator's visual pleasure.

The contrast between Ammu's "softness" and Velutha's "hardness," as well as the toothbrush imagery, reduces her body to a site of aesthetic contemplation and sensual indulgence. It also revives stereotypical sexual roles where the woman is presented as a gentle, submissive, and receptive figure as opposed to the man, who is presented as tough, self-acting, and assertive. Phrases such as "nut-brown breasts" and "haunches" foreground Ammu's physicality in a way that diminishes her agency, framing her body as an object of desire rather than as an equal participant in the intimate act. Some bits of the novels are laid out in detail in some aspects

and neglected in others; the unnecessary details of Ammu's body, for example, and the simile of the toothbrush to Ammu's body detract from the immediate and contextual importance of the scene by emphasizing the aestheticization of her body. The external control of focalization establishes Ammu's body as an erotic object for men to gaze upon. However, using such imagery as a toothbrush metaphor to describe the hauling really disrupts the scene's potential to elicit an emotional or thematic response related to the film's criticism of literary practices that demean women. Although such descriptions give velvet to the language, they only deepen the patterns of the enshrinement of the female body in literature.

"Ammu's face was pale and as smooth as a stone. Her skin was cold. Her eyes were blurred and yellowed with jaundice. But the delicate aura of her grief lit her cheeks and made her eyes dance." (p. 9)

The description moves from a clinical observation of illness ("pale," "smooth as a stone," "yellowed with jaundice") to a poetic and aestheticized portrayal of grief ("delicate aura of her grief," "lit her cheeks," "made her eyes dance"). This transition means that beauty has struck at an otherwise grim and realistic environment. Having restored Ammu's grief as lighting her cheeks, the author's concern is shifted from Ammu's suffering to the external, somewhat eroticized observation, as if the blossoming grief painting eyes gives her the beauty of suffering. Whether this approximates Ammu's inner truth might begin with the question of whether this poetry accurately conveys the truth about her grief. Although the text purports to depict Ammu's suffering, it does so from a subjective perspective, particularly a masculine one—or a masculine view of her suffering as beautiful. Furthermore, the quote demonstrates how the narrative eroticizes Ammu's body aligns with studies by Fludernik (1996), transforming her grief and illness into beautiful art. In Genette's sense of focalization, this movement points to a properly problematic external intrusion into the character of Ammu.

5. Conclusion

This analysis looks at the text through the lens of the aestheticization of the body archive. It shows how the registers of romantic storytelling and the thematic commentary of the narration are purposely mixed together. Arundhati Roy's vivid and intrusive descriptions—ranging from Ammu's body being metaphorically compared to "mangoes" to the poeticized depiction of her grief—serve as a critique of societal structures that commodify and objectify women. Despite the perception of these moments as tuneful, sensational, or voyeuristic, they hold significance in the novel's exploration of power relations, gender, and structural violence.

The passage where Inspector Thomas Mathew taps Ammu's breasts "as though he was choosing mangoes from a basket" starkly demonstrates the societal entitlement over women's bodies. The metaphor not only transforms Ammu into a consumer object but also emphasizes the tradition of male domination over women's bodies. This is an act of symbolic degradation that conveys the structural violence that exists in this narrative. Roy does it through narrative intrusion—the act deliberately draws the reader to the violence. Here, the aestheticization serves a dual purpose: while it highlights systemic objectification, it also has the potential to exacerbate it.

Similarly, descriptions like "darts that made room for future breasts" and "nut-brown breasts (that wouldn't support a toothbrush)" reflect a shift to external focalization, showcasing the intrusive male gaze embedded in societal narratives. By putting women and girls in either a developmental or aesthetic framework, these detailed depictions take away their bodies and their ability to make their own decisions. Focusing on changes in a story, like putting the socially constructed inspection over the characters' subjectiveness, is an example of critical terminology. The studied story both objectifies and criticizes the objectification regime.

The interplay between the aesthetic and the violent is particularly striking in descriptions such as "her delicate aura of grief lit her cheeks." Ammu's suffering also takes on an aesthetic quality, with her illness and sorrow depicted as a beautiful image. This shift from the medical to the bucolic plays out the erasure of female suffering into aesthetic regimes, revealing the culture's habit of packaging female suffering as consumable commodities. Furthermore, Roy obliquely crosses the boundary between realistic description and intrusive and thus forces the reader to question his/her own annoyance with the intrusiveness of this account of a sexual violence survivor's life. By using intrusive, external focalization, Roy is exposing and criticizing both the groups that keep objectification going and the ways that writing makes it easier for it to happen.

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