The Architecture of Silence: A Comparative Study of 'To the Lighthouse' and 'The God of Small Things'

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***Abstract*—This article compares Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse (1927) and Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things (1997), examining the relationship between family, gender, memory, social authority, and individual consciousness. Despite their different historical and cultural contexts, both novels reveal the family as a space where affection coexists with domination and social expectations shape personal identities. Woolf explores patriarchal authority, women's emotional labour, and artistic independence, while Roy exposes the intersection of gender, caste, and postcolonial social structures. Through fragmented narratives, shifting perspectives, symbolism, and nonlinear representations of time, both writers demonstrate how childhood experiences and suppressed emotions influence adult lives. This article introduces the concept of the "architecture of silence" to explain how domestic relationships and social hierarchies suppress individual desires while preserving painful memories. However, the comparison also recognizes the distinct historical and political concerns of each novel. Through feminist, modernist, and postcolonial perspectives, the article argues that both writers challenge the idealization of family life and portray the complexities of human relationships, psychological suffering, and individual resistance.**

***Index Terms*—Family and Gender, Memory, Feminist Criticism, Symbolism, Modernism, Postcolonial Literature.**

I. INTRODUCTION: TWO NOVELS, ONE QUESTION ABOUT HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse and Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things belong to different literary periods, geographical settings, and intellectual traditions. Woolf's novel, published in 1927, is associated with literary modernism and its challenge to conventional plot, stable characterization, and chronological narration. Roy's 1997 novel belongs to the landscape of postcolonial literature and explores the intimate consequences of caste, gender, class, and historical change in contemporary India. Despite these differences, both novels ask a fundamental question: how do social expectations become internal psychological realities, shaping what individuals feel, remember, desire, and are permitted to express?

In Woolf's novel, the Ramsay family's summer residence on the Isle of Skye becomes a setting for examining marriage, parenthood, intellectual authority, artistic ambition, and mortality. Mrs. Ramsay's emotional attentiveness appears to hold the family together, while Mr. Ramsay's intellectual insecurity and demand for recognition produce tension. Lily Briscoe, a painter who resists conventional expectations of femininity, offers a different perspective on women's independence and artistic self-definition. The novel's three sections "The Window," "Time Passes," and "The Lighthouse" organize these concerns around immediate experience, historical interruption, and eventual return.

Roy's novel, by contrast, centers on the Ipe family of Ayemenem, Kerala. Its narrative moves between the twins Rahel and Estha's childhood in 1969 and Rahel's return as an adult, revealing how a family tragedy continues to inhabit the present. Ammu's relationship with Velutha, a Dalit man, violates the combined restrictions of caste and gender. The twins' childhood, their relationship with Sophie Mol, and the family's response to tragedy expose the violence that can operate within seemingly ordinary domestic arrangements.

A comparative reading becomes productive when it moves beyond the general observation that both writers portray women and family life. Their deeper affinity lies in the way private relationships become mechanisms through which larger systems of authority enter the individual psyche. A father's pronouncement, a mother's expectation, a family's judgment, or a

society's prohibition can become an enduring element of consciousness. This article develops three connected propositions. First, both novels portray domestic affection as inseparable from unequal power. Second, both use memory and disrupted chronology to represent psychological experience rather than merely recount events. Third, both examine the tension between socially approved identities and forms of desire or creativity that exceed those identities. The comparison also identifies an essential distinction: Woolf foregrounds the gendered organisation of middle-class domestic and intellectual life, whereas Roy exposes the interaction of patriarchy with caste, colonial history, and institutional violence. The article's originality lies in bringing these concerns together through the concept of the architecture of silence. This term describes not simply the absence of speech but the network of family expectations, social prohibitions, emotional dependencies, and narrative omissions that determines whose experiences can be acknowledged and whose must remain hidden.

II. CRITICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

The article employs comparative close reading, supported by feminist criticism, modernist narrative theory, and postcolonial studies. Rather than assuming that the two novels express identical social realities, it examines how their different literary methods illuminate related problems. Elaine Showalter's A Literature of Their Own (1977) provides a useful framework for understanding women's writing in relation to gendered literary traditions. Her work helps situate Woolf's and Roy's representations of women within broader questions concerning authorship, cultural authority, and the relationship between literary form and women's experience. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's the Madwoman in the Attic (1979) further illuminates the cultural opposition between the socially acceptable woman and the woman whose anger, ambition, sexuality, or independence threatens patriarchal expectations. This opposition is relevant to Ammu's punishment for transgressing caste and sexual boundaries, as well as to Lily Briscoe's struggle against conventional ideas about women's artistic capacities. For Roy, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) offers a way to consider how institutional power restricts the representation of marginalised subjects. It is particularly important, however, not to treat every woman or every oppressed character as occupying an identical position. Ammu's gendered marginalisation and Velutha's caste oppression overlap, but they are not interchangeable. Roy's narrative exposes a social structure in which different forms of power interact.

For Woolf, A Room of One's Own (1929) is relevant to the question of women's intellectual independence. Woolf's argument that literary production depends on material and psychological conditions helps explain why Lily's painting becomes more than a personal hobby: it is a struggle to establish an independent mode of perception. The methodology is qualitative and interpretive. It focuses on narrative structure, characterisation, recurring images, dialogue, interior monologue, and the relationship between personal experience and social authority. Quotations from the novels are used as primary textual evidence, while theoretical works provide interpretive frameworks rather than substitutes for textual analysis.

III. THE FAMILY AS A STRUCTURE OF POWER: AFFECTION, AUTHORITY, AND EXCLUSION

The family occupies a central position in both novels, but neither writer presents domestic life as an entirely private or politically innocent sphere. Family relationships are governed by expectations about obedience, gender, respectability, and belonging. These expectations influence how individuals interpret themselves and how they judge others.

In To the Lighthouse, the Ramsay household is organised around the contrasting forms of authority exercised by Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay. Mr. Ramsay associate's intellectual achievement with certainty, recognition, and masculine authority. His philosophical work and his concern about his intellectual legacy make him sensitive to perceived failures of admiration. Mrs. Ramsay, by contrast, possesses an emotional intelligence that allows her to perceive the anxieties of others. Yet this sensitivity is not simply a source of freedom: it becomes a form of labour through which she manages the emotional atmosphere of the household. Mrs. Ramsay repeatedly attempts to reconcile opposing personalities and maintain domestic harmony. Her care for James, her

attention to guests, and her desire to bring people together reveal her capacity for empathy. Nevertheless, her role also demonstrates how women are expected to absorb the emotional consequences of male insecurity. Her apparent power within the household depends partly on her willingness to make herself indispensable to others.

The contradiction is significant. Mrs. Ramsay exercises influence, but that influence operates primarily through service, mediation, and emotional accommodation. Her position does not necessarily give her the freedom to define herself independently of familial needs. Woolf thus reveals the complexity of domestic femininity: the woman who sustains the family may simultaneously be constrained by the expectations that make her indispensable.

A comparable contradiction shapes Roy's representation of Ammu. As a divorced woman in the Ipe family, Ammu occupies a precarious position. Her marriage has failed, and she returns to her parental home with her children. Rather than restoring her security, this return exposes her dependence on a family structure that treats her marital status as a source of shame. Her father, Pappachi, and her brother, Chacko, inhabit different positions within the family, but their authority reflects a social arrangement in which women's independence is conditional and easily withdrawn. Chacko's position is especially revealing. He is permitted forms of sexual and personal freedom that Ammu cannot exercise without provoking condemnation.

This double standard demonstrates that patriarchy is not simply a matter of individual prejudice; it is sustained by unequal rules concerning the behaviour of men and women. Ammu's desire becomes scandalous not merely because it is sexual but because she refuses to remain within the limited identity assigned to her. Roy's famous formulation of the "Love Laws" makes this social structure explicit. The narrator describes rules that determine "who should be loved. And how. And how much" (Roy 33). The sentence reduces an apparently intimate question whom one loves to the operation of a larger system of regulation. Love is not permitted to remain an exclusively personal experience; it is evaluated according to social rank, familial authority, and acceptable conduct.

IV. WOMEN'S EMOTIONAL LABOUR AND THE PROBLEM OF FEMALE IDENTITY

Both novels challenge the assumption that femininity is a natural, stable identity. Their female characters are shaped by the expectations of others, but they also develop perceptions and desires that exceed those expectations.

4.1 Mrs. Ramsay: Care as both power and confinement

Mrs. Ramsay's influence emerges through her ability to understand people, anticipate their needs, and create moments of collective belonging. Her dinner party represents the possibility of transforming separate individuals into a temporary community. The arrangement of the table, the conversation, and the shared meal become part of her effort to create an experience of harmony. However, this achievement requires considerable emotional labour. Mrs. Ramsay must monitor tensions, respond to insecurities, and manage the emotional needs of those around her.

Her power is therefore relational rather than autonomous: she influences others by caring for them. This position complicates a purely celebratory reading of her character. She is neither merely a victim of patriarchy nor an entirely liberated figure. Her capacity for care provides genuine satisfaction, but the social organisation of that care limits the forms of life available to her. Woolf's representation of Mrs. Ramsay becomes particularly important when considered alongside Lily Briscoe. Lily refuses the assumption that a woman's fulfilment must depend on marriage or domestic service. Her commitment to painting establishes an alternative source of identity, one based on artistic perception rather than social approval.

4.2 Ammu: Desire as resistance and vulnerability

Ammu's struggle differs from Lily's because the social consequences of her independence are more severe. Her divorce has already weakened her position within the family, and her relationship with Velutha makes her vulnerable to a system that links caste hierarchy with sexual respectability. Ammu's desire is significant because it contradicts the identity that her family and community attempt to impose on her. She is expected to be a compliant daughter and a socially acceptable mother, yet her emotional and sexual life cannot be contained within those roles. Her

relationship with Velutha therefore becomes a challenge to the authority of the family and to the caste order that regulates intimacy. Nevertheless, it would be misleading to describe Ammu's resistance as a straightforward victory. Her desire creates a moment of personal agency, but the institutions surrounding her retain the power to punish her. Roy exposes the unequal distribution of freedom: a woman may exercise choice in a personal relationship without possessing the social protection necessary to survive the consequences. The comparison with Lily is particularly revealing. Both women resist prescribed feminine identities, but their struggles occur under different conditions. Lily's artistic practice offers a route toward the completion of a work and a more independent understanding of herself. Ammu's transgression, by contrast, is violently suppressed. The difference reveals the importance of social location in feminist analysis.

V. MEMORY, CHILDHOOD, AND THE PERSISTENCE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL WOUNDS

Memory is not merely a device for recalling the past in either novel. It is a force that organises present experience and shapes the individual's sense of identity. In To the Lighthouse, childhood consciousness is particularly important in the relationship between James and his father. Mr. Ramsay's declaration that the weather will prevent the proposed trip to the lighthouse produces intense disappointment in James. What might appear to an adult to be a minor domestic disagreement becomes, for the child, an enduring emotional experience.

Roy's treatment of childhood trauma is even more structurally prominent. Rahel and Estha's experiences are narrated through fragments, repetitions, partial recollections, and anticipations of catastrophe. The narrative does not initially present the family tragedy as a complete sequence. Instead, it reveals information gradually, allowing the reader to experience the past as something that returns in disturbing and incomplete forms. Estha's withdrawal into silence is especially significant. His childhood experiences cannot be separated from the social circumstances that surround him, including the violence directed at Velutha and the family's treatment of the twins. His silence becomes an expression of psychological injury, but it also illustrates the inadequacy of a social environment that cannot provide the conditions necessary for recovery. Rahel's return to Ayemenem likewise demonstrates that geographical distance and the passage of time do not necessarily resolve emotional suffering. The adult Rahel encounters a landscape filled with reminders of childhood. The familiar place becomes a repository of experiences that have never been fully integrated into the present. The parallel between the novels lies in their rejection of a simple developmental model in which the past is completed and the present begins anew. In Woolf, childhood impressions remain active within adult relationships. In Roy, traumatic memory disrupts the apparent separation between childhood and adulthood.

Their differences are nevertheless crucial. Woolf explores memory as part of the broader instability of consciousness and the experience of time. Roy connects memory to specific structures of social violence, making it impossible to interpret the twins' suffering solely as an individual psychological problem. This distinction also clarifies the meaning of the article's central concept. Silence is not simply a failure to speak. It can be the result of an experience that a family or society refuses to acknowledge. The architecture of silence includes both the original event and the social arrangements that prevent it from being adequately understood.

VI. NARRATIVE TIME AND THE REPRESENTATION OF CONSCIOUSNESS

The formal experimentation of both novels is central to their treatment of memory and identity. Their narrative structures do not merely communicate events; they shape how those events are understood.

6.1 Woolf's three-part structure: To the Lighthouse is divided into "The Window," "Time Passes," and "The Lighthouse." The arrangement challenges the conventional expectation that a novel's significance must emerge primarily from a sequence of dramatic events. "The Window" concentrates on the Ramsay family's interactions and the emotional life of the household. "Time Passes" shifts attention away from sustained individual consciousness and towards the passage of time, the decline of the house, and the deaths that occur between the family's visits. "The Lighthouse" returns to the setting and brings the surviving characters into renewed contact with the past.

The second section is particularly important because it reduces the apparent centrality of human intention. Time continues independently of the characters' desires. The house deteriorates, nature changes, and deaths are recorded with a brevity that contrasts with the detailed attention previously given to domestic experience. This structural shift complicates the relationship between personal significance and historical duration. A moment that appears emotionally overwhelming to an individual occupies only a small part of the larger movement of time. Woolf's method also challenges the assumption that psychological experience can be represented through a stable external narrator. Consciousness emerges through shifting perspectives, associations, memories, and impressions. Meaning is produced through the interaction of these perspectives rather than through a single authoritative explanation.

6.2 Roy's circular and fragmented narrative: Roy's novel also rejects straightforward chronology. It moves between childhood and adulthood, present experience and remembered events, anticipation and retrospective explanation. The consequences of the family tragedy become visible before all its causes are fully disclosed. This arrangement produces a distinctive relationship between narrative form and traumatic experience. The reader encounters the past as something that repeatedly intrudes upon the present. Repetition does not simply reinforce information; it conveys the difficulty of escaping an event whose emotional meaning remains unresolved. Roy's use of language intensifies this effect. Repeated phrases, unusual capitalisation, sound patterns, and the reorganisation of familiar expressions create a narrative voice that frequently approaches the rhythms of childhood perception. Language becomes a record of how experience is absorbed, transformed, and sometimes distorted by the mind.

6.3 The significance of comparison: Although both writers disrupt chronology, they do not use narrative fragmentation in exactly the same way. Woolf's formal design investigates the relationship between consciousness, artistic perception, and the passage of time. Roy's fragmented narrative exposes the continued effects of a historical and familial catastrophe. Both novels therefore suggest that linear chronology is inadequate to the representation of human experience. Time may move forward, but memory, grief, and unresolved conflict do not necessarily follow its direction.

VII. THE SMALL THINGS AND THE ORDINARY MOMENTS OF EXISTENCE

One of the most productive connections between the two novels is their attention to experiences that conventional narratives might consider insignificant. Both writers demonstrate that ordinary objects, gestures, conversations, and domestic routines can carry complex psychological meanings. The title The God of Small Things draws attention to the apparently insignificant dimensions of life. Roy's narrative gives importance to the experiences of children, the texture of everyday surroundings, the language of family relationships, and the emotions that social hierarchies attempt to suppress. The ordinary becomes a means of exposing the extraordinary violence concealed within everyday life. The novel's attention to small details is therefore not simply decorative. It challenges the assumption that historical and political significance belongs only to public events.

The family's personal tragedy is inseparable from the larger social order, and the intimate experience of exclusion becomes a way of understanding the operations of caste and patriarchy. Woolf similarly invests ordinary experiences with philosophical and emotional significance. In To the Lighthouse, a meal, a knitting activity, a conversation, or the sight of a distant light can become the centre of an extended exploration of consciousness. Her attention to domestic life reveals the complex psychological processes that conventional narratives often overlook. Mrs. Ramsay's dinner party is an especially important example. The gathering becomes an attempt to create coherence in a world characterised by uncertainty and isolation. The significance of the event does not depend on an extraordinary external incident; it emerges from the relationships among the participants and from the fragile sense of unity that the occasion produces.

VIII. SYMBOLISM: THE LIGHTHOUSE, THE RIVER, AND THE HOUSE

Symbolism provides another important basis for comparison. Both writers use physical objects and

locations to express ideas that cannot be adequately conveyed through direct explanation alone.

8.1 The lighthouse as a changing object of perception

In Woolf's novel, the lighthouse is simultaneously a physical structure, an object of desire, a point of distance, and a changing presence within the consciousness of different characters. For young James, the lighthouse represents the possibility of fulfilling a cherished wish. His father's refusal to promise a favourable journey makes the object a focus of disappointment and resentment. For Mrs. Ramsay, the lighthouse becomes part of her reflective engagement with the world.

For Lily Briscoe, it belongs to a landscape through which questions of artistic form and perception acquire significance. The lighthouse is therefore not reducible to a single symbolic meaning. Its significance changes with the observer and the circumstances in which it is perceived. This multiplicity reflects the novel's larger concern with consciousness: objects do not possess an entirely fixed emotional meaning independent of the people who encounter them. The distinction between the physical lighthouse and the lighthouse imagined by James is particularly revealing. An object may remain materially the same while its psychological significance changes. Woolf thus challenges the assumption that perception is simply a passive registration of external reality.

8.2 The river and the house in Roy's novel

In The God of Small Things, the river is associated with childhood, movement, danger, and the events that connect the twins' lives to the family tragedy. It is part of their imaginative world, but it also becomes inseparable from the consequences of adult decisions. The Ayemenem house is equally significant. It preserves the traces of family relationships and social hierarchy. Its spaces are shaped by the authority of older generations, by the unequal positions of family members, and by the memories that the adult characters cannot leave behind.

The house is not merely a location in which the plot unfolds. It embodies the persistence of the past within the present. Returning to Ayemenem means confronting a world whose physical familiarity cannot restore the emotional security of childhood.

8.3 Comparative implications

The lighthouse and the river should not be treated as identical symbols. The lighthouse is especially connected with distance, perception, and the possibility of artistic or emotional completion. The river is associated with the interweaving of childhood experience, social boundaries, and tragedy. Nevertheless, both symbols reveal how physical environments become charged with emotional meaning. In each novel, places that appear ordinary acquire significance because they preserve the traces of human experience.

Conclusion: The Architecture of Silence and the Meaning of the Unspoken Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse and Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things demonstrate that family relationships cannot be understood independently of the social structures within which they develop. Both novels explore how gendered expectations, parental authority, memory, and emotional dependency shape individual consciousness. Their narrative techniques also reveal that the significance of human experience often emerges through fragments, silences, recurring images, and moments that conventional storytelling might overlook.

Mrs. Ramsay and Ammu occupy different historical and social positions, yet their experiences illuminate the restrictions imposed upon women whose identities are defined through family expectations. Lily Briscoe's artistic independence and Ammu's defiance of caste and sexual conventions represent different forms of resistance. Their contrasting outcomes reveal that the possibility of personal freedom depends partly on the social conditions within which it is pursued. The novels also share a distinctive understanding of memory. In Woolf, remembered experiences continue to shape relationships and artistic perception. In Roy, childhood trauma and social violence remain embedded in adult life. Neither novel treats the passage of time as sufficient to resolve emotional conflict.

Their symbolism reinforces this understanding. The lighthouse, the river, and the domestic house become repositories of experience, demonstrating that places and objects acquire meaning through their relationship with consciousness and memory. Similarly, the writers' formal experimentation challenges the assumption that chronological narration can adequately represent the complexity of human life. The concept of the

architecture of silence brings these findings together. Silence in the novels is produced by several interconnected forces: the expectations that regulate women's behaviour, the authority that determines acceptable identities, the memories that cannot easily be articulated, and the social institutions that deny recognition to particular experiences. Yet silence is not absolute. Artistic creation, narrative experimentation, memory, and acts of resistance open spaces in which suppressed meanings can emerge. The principal difference remains decisive. Woolf's novel examines the fragility of human relationships through modernist explorations of time, consciousness, and artistic form. Roy's novel connects intimate suffering to the material realities of caste, patriarchy, and postcolonial society. Reading the works together reveals the value of comparative criticism without reducing one literary world to the terms of another.

Ultimately, both novels suggest that the apparent smallness of an experience does not determine its significance. A disappointed child, a woman's unexpressed desire, a remembered gesture, a damaged relationship, or an unfinished work of art may reveal the deepest contradictions of a social world.

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