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Rethinking Failure: A Decolonial Reassessment of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man and Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things

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Abstract

This article reconceptualizes the concept of failure through a decolonial lens, arguing that failure is not a deficit or lack, but a form of resistance against colonial, capitalist, racial and patriarchal systems. Rethinking failure by adopting theories of Jack Halberstam, decolonial theories of Walter Mignolo and Ramon Grosfoguel, and the key concepts of Critical Race Theory, this paper presents a comparative reading of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man (1947) and Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things (1997). Both novels resist dominant narratives of success and visibility through characters whose failed form of being disrupts the rigid societal hierarchies rooted in class, race, and gender. The unnamed narrator of Invisible Man embraces invisibility as an agentive act of nonconformism, while the decolonial love of Ammu and Velutha undermines the caste-oriented, patriarchal norms. Through these narratives, this study aims to reveal how literary failure can be employed as a strategy to delink from the colonial system of values and a new form of being, or re-existence. Integrating African American and postcolonial narratives, this article argues for a decolonial comparative literature that privileges relationality over universalism and makes space for subaltern ways of being and knowing.

Key words: Failure, Decoloniality, Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*

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Introduction

The success/failure binary, deeply inscribed in capitalist and patriarchal structures, defines value through productivity, wealth accumulation, and adherence to heteronormative reproductive roles. Within this framework, "failure" is frequently ascribed to lives that are considered unproductive or subversive, such as those that reject materialism or resist social and economic conformity, resulting in marginalization and social disgrace. This binary not only imposes conformity but also delegitimizes alternative ways of living. As Jack Halberstam (2011) notes, failure is not merely the absence of success but a social form of nonconformism towards ideals shaped by capitalist, heteronormative, and patriarchal power structures (2–4). Halberstam reconceptualizes failure as a form of resistance and a site for imagining alternative possibilities that challenge hierarchies like success/failure and normal/deviant. Drawing on "low theory," Halberstam advocates for embracing losing, undoing, and forgetting as subversive modes of existence beyond capitalist values (17–18). Building on Halberstam's insights, we expand the discussion by exploring how failure can be reinterpreted through a decolonial lens, moving beyond its framing as resistance toward recognizing its transformative and generative potential. The main aim of this study is to reconceptualize the concept of failure through a decolonial lens, focusing specifically on Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1947) and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997). By critically examining these texts, we aim to challenge existing frameworks that predominantly define failure as a form of resistance and instead reframe it as a transformative and generative force. Drawing on decoloniality theory and employing a comparative approach, this study demonstrates how these seminal works engage innovatively with the notion of failure, offering alternative forms of existence and identity.

Ralph Ellison draws on diverse influences, from the experimental styles of Faulkner, Joyce, and Kafka to the improvisational rhythms of jazz. Ellison combined high modernist styles with African American folk culture, a mix that, as Berndt Ostendorf notes, mirrors jazz's blend of African and European traditions. At the core of Ellison's artistic vision was the belief that the task of the Black writer was not to reproduce externally imposed expectations but to give voice to genuine personal and communal experiences. By refusing to conform to prescribed ideas of what African

Americans were "supposed" to feel or represent, Ellison challenged the logic of the dominant success/failure binary, which confined Black identity within narrow and utilitarian definitions of cultural worth (as cited in Bloom 2009: 1-3).

While separated by geography, history, and literary tradition, Ellison and Arundhati Roy share a commitment to dismantling restrictive cultural narratives, Ellison through his refusal of strict definitions of Black identity, and Roy through her rejection of social confinement and materialist ideals, laying the groundwork for a deeper exploration of how personal histories shape artistic vision. Born in 1961 in Assam to a Syrian-Christian mother, Roy experienced, similar to Ellison, the formative influence of a culturally specific landscape intertwined with the lived realities of marginalization. Her early childhood in Ayemenem, Kerala, after her parents' divorce, formed a vivid sense of place comparable to the symbolic geography that underpins Ellison's work. The marginal status of her mother as a divorcee, combined with her activism, shaped Roy's political awareness and sensitivity to social injustice in ways that echo Ellison's attention to structural oppression. Educated in Mary Roy's unconventional schools, she grew up free from rigid social "boxes," shaping the stylistic independence and defiance of authority that parallels Ellison's refusal to conform to literary or ideological orthodoxy (Tickell 2007: 12–13). Rejecting excessive ambition as unimaginative and materialistic, Roy, like Ellison, turns instead to narratives that embrace "loss, grief, brokenness, and failure," discovering joy even within sorrow (14). As both writer and activist, she aligns with Ellison in resisting the overcomplication of what is simple and the oversimplification of what is complex, seeking to communicate with clarity to ordinary people what is happening in the world (xiv).

This research is a close reading of *Invisible Man* and *The God of Small Things* to examine how these texts conceptualize and represent failure. Both novels engage deeply with issues of marginalization, power, and systemic oppression, providing grounds to explore failure as a method of decolonial critique and reimagination. The project will analyze how failure disrupts normative structures of power and success, offering new perspectives on agency and selfhood within oppressive systems. The comparative nature of this study highlights the intersectional dynamics of race, class, and gender in both African American and Indian caste-based societies. Both

novels illustrate how these intersecting concepts shape experiences of failure and resistance. In doing so, the study sheds light on the distinct ways in which marginalized communities experience and subvert oppressive systems, emphasizing the transformative possibilities inherent in failure. Ultimately, this project positions failure as a decolonial act, capable of subverting hegemonic structures and reimagining new forms of existence and identity.

To situate this argument within existing scholarship, it is necessary to examine how critics have approached these novels, particularly in relation to their political and social implications. Andrew Hoberek (2008) analyzes *Invisible Man* by exploring how Black identity is shaped and often erased by dominant institutions that enforce conformity, such as schools and companies. He views the protagonist's journey as a struggle between personal autonomy and pressure to assimilate into white-controlled systems (29–46). Similarly, H. William Rice (2008) examines the novel's theme of invisibility, seeing it as both social erasure and a source of agency, where the narrator's lack of recognition by white society also allows him space for self-definition and resistance (113–128). Both critics illuminate how Ellison's novel questions the restrictions imposed on Black identity by systemic and cultural forces. However, neither fully engages with how Ellison's treatment of identity and marginalization can be reframed through the concept of failure as a decolonial strategy. Their analyses largely position the novel within frameworks of institutional critique or symbolic resistance, but they do not address how "failure", whether by resisting assimilation, rejecting visibility on dominant terms, or stepping away from capitalist measures of value, can become a source of transformation and new possibilities. Building on the discussion of *Invisible Man*, it is also important to consider how similar themes of failure and resistance emerge in *The God of Small Things*, particularly in relation to caste, class, and gender oppression within the Indian context.

Aijaz Ahmed (2007), in "Reading Arundhati Roy Politically", critiques *The God of Small Things* for portraying Ammu and Velutha's relationship as driven by personal desire rather than conscious political resistance, which he sees as weakening the novel's challenge to caste oppression (110–119). Emilienne Baneth-Nouailhetas (2007), meanwhile, focuses on Roy's use of fragmented memory and non-linear narrative to reveal trauma and caste violence, emphasizing memory as a political

and narrative force (142–154). While Ahmed highlights the novel's limited political expression and Baneth-Nouailhetas stresses its engagement with memory and trauma, neither fully addresses how failure functions in the novel as a transformative and decolonial strategy. This article fills that gap by exploring failure not only as resistance but as a generative force that destabilizes dominant caste, class, and gender hierarchies, offering new ways of understanding identity and oppression in *The God of Small Things* alongside *Invisible Man*. By adopting a comparative approach, we aim to highlight how *Invisible Man* and *The God of Small Things*, though rooted in distinct cultural and historical contexts, both engage with failure as a means to challenge and subvert hegemonic power structures. This global perspective allows for a nuanced understanding of failure that transcends specific locales, emphasizing its significance as a cross-cultural decolonial strategy that interrogates and reimagines identity, agency, and resistance worldwide.

Conceptual and Analytical Framework

To explore failure as a transformative and generative force in *Invisible Man* and *The God of Small Things*, this article employs a multidisciplinary theoretical framework. Drawing on Halberstam's reconceptualization of failure, decolonial epistemologies by Grosfoguel and Mignolo, Critical Race Theory's analysis of systemic power by Delgado and Crenshaw, and recent developments in comparative literature methodology by Dominguez and Mignolo, the analysis unfolds through close readings that apply these perspectives as interwoven steps of interpretation rather than isolated methods.

As Halberstam (2011) notes, failure is not simply the absence of success, but a socially constructed deviation from ideals of achievement shaped by capitalist, heteronormative and patriarchal power structures. Within this binary, failure signifies unproductiveness, economic inadequacy, and moral deficiency (2–4). Halberstam also reimagines failure as a form of resistance, a space for agency and alternative possibilities that challenge hierarchical binaries like success/failure and normal/deviant. Drawing from "low theory", Halberstam proposes a subversive, creative reinterpretation that privileges losing, undoing, and forgetting as modes of existence outside capitalist values (17–18).

Scott Sandage's historical work on American capitalism similarly argues that the stories of the "unsuccessful" are undocumented, while those of the successful are celebrated and recorded. In this framework, failure becomes a site of hidden histories, especially when reinterpreted through anti-capitalist, nonconformist lenses (88). By connecting Halberstam's critique of failure with Sandage's historical analysis, we find that dominant narratives systematically erase alternative modes of being and knowing, reaffirming racialized, gendered, and capitalist structures.

To challenge these normative constructions, decolonial theorists such as Ramón Grosfoguel (2011) and Walter Mignolo (2018) critique Western epistemologies and propose alternative knowledge systems rooted in the lived experiences of marginalized groups. Grosfoguel emphasizes that no one escapes the hierarchies of the "modern/colonial/capitalist/patriarchal world-system" (Grosfoguel 4). Western thought often pretends to be neutral, universal, and objective, ignoring the speaker's point of view and reinforcing colonial power structures (5). Decoloniality, as opposed to decolonization, calls for the delinking of knowledge from Eurocentric frameworks, and advocates epistemic disobedience through the validation of knowledges from the Global South and subaltern locations (3).

Mignolo elaborates that decoloniality emerged in response to the ongoing coloniality that persists even after the formal end of colonial rule. He distinguishes decoloniality from postcolonialism by arguing that the former aims to dismantle the colonial matrix of power entirely, not merely to reform it (Mignolo, "On Decoloniality" 2018: 6, 17). Decoloniality resists capitalist and racial hierarchies by highlighting relational ontologies, border thinking, and pluriversal epistemologies. Mignolo urges us to "build our own houses of thought," rather than renovate the master's house (7). In this sense, failure, when linked with decolonial practices becomes an act of delinking and a refusal to conform to oppressive modern systems. The colonial matrix, according to Aníbal Quijano, persists today not only in economic forms but also in knowledge production and social institutions (Grosfoguel 10–12). Institutions such as NATO, the World Bank, and the IMF perpetuate neocolonial relations globally (14). The notion of failure must therefore be reconsidered through these intersecting structures of domination and resistance.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) also offers a powerful framework for rethinking

failure. According to Delgado, CRT examines how race, power, and law interact to maintain inequality. Rather than accepting the belief that neutrality is possible, CRT exposes the social construction of race and the effect of racism in daily life (Delgado and Stefancic 2001: 3, 7). CRT's activist dimension seeks structural transformation, aligning with decoloniality's efforts for epistemic disobedience. For example, Derrick Bell's work critiques the illusion of racial progress and insists that people of color must focus on changing the entire system, rather than seeking success within it (62). Intersectionality, another key idea of CRT, provides deeper insights by revealing how race intersects with class, gender, nationality, and sexuality, shaping individuals' experiences in complex ways (51).

Jayre Chang-Soon Lee and Kwame Anthony Appiah (1995) introduce additional challenges for racial identity by arguing that race should be replaced by cultural and ethnic identity. Appiah argues that race is a socially constructed concept, not a biologically real category. However, Lee critiques Appiah for overlooking how race is shaped by social and historical dynamics. Even if biologically meaningless, race remains materially powerful (Lee 1995: 442–443). Omi and Winant's theory of racial formation complements this view, emphasizing the political construction of race through the process of racialization. Their concept underscores that race is always a changing concept, shaped by historical forces and sociopolitical needs (443).

From a comparative literature viewpoint, these theoretical intersections provide a strong base for rethinking the very act of comparison. Traditionally, comparative literature focused on European texts and reinforced national and imperial hierarchies. However, as Dominguez shows, recent developments have opened the field to postcolonial and decolonial critiques. Comparative literature must now grapple with its own colonial legacy, asking not what we compare but how and why (Dominguez 2015: xiii–xv, 41–45).

Mignolo critiques traditional comparative methodologies for supporting Eurocentric worldviews. He suggests a move from comparison to relation and a relational ontology that emphasizes relations and connections instead of fixed categories (Mignolo, "On Comparison" 1993: 112). This shift aligns with decoloniality's emphasis on pluriversality, the coexistence of multiple epistemologies without hierarchy (106). Decolonial comparative literature must expose the imperial

roots of concepts like literature, aesthetics, and modernity itself (108). The term Literature, often considered to be a universal category, is in fact a European construct, reflecting the historical development of the concept. Civilizations such as China, ancient Greece, and the Aztecs, to name a few, did not recognize "literature" in its modern sense until the eighteenth century. However, it does not refer to any forms of deficiency or inferiority in their cultural traditions. Rather, it highlights how the term was colonially invented and applied as a universal category to colonize other oral and written forms of expression.

Comparative methodologies historically served to reinforce this European identity by contrasting it with the non-European 'Other' (104–106). A decolonial approach to literary studies must confront this history and delink from the dominating, imperial epistemology that underscores it.

By synthesizing Halberstam's conceptualizing of failure, Grosfoguel and Mignolo's decolonial epistemologies, CRT's interrogation of systemic racism, and comparative literature methodologies, this article argues that failure is not a deficit, but a critical site of resistance and re-existence. This is evident in both novels, where characters confront systemic oppression yet make spaces for alternative ways of being. To fail according to capitalist, heteronormative, and colonial standards, as Ellison's protagonist experiences in mid-twentieth-century America or as Roy's characters navigate caste, gender, and state power in late-twentieth-century India, is to imagine and enact life otherwise. Reading these works comparatively highlights how narratives from distinct colonial and postcolonial contexts concretely demonstrate resistance, refusal, and the reimagining of existence beyond dominant social norms.

Ellison and A Decolonial Reading of *Invisible Man*

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* has had a strong influence on readers across decades as a deep exploration of Black identity, systemic invisibility, and the struggle for self-definition. In this article, we aim to approach this novel from a decolonial perspective, aligning its themes with theories of failure, decoloniality, epistemic disobedience, and double consciousness. We also examine how Ellison's unnamed protagonist enacts a radical form of refusal, redefines failure through intentional invisibility, and ultimately shifts toward a new mode of being outside dominant structures. To

understand the significance of Ellison's contribution, however, it is necessary to situate *Invisible Man* within the larger African American literary tradition, a tradition that has consistently wrestled with questions of dignity, resistance, and visibility.

From its earliest beginnings, African American literature originated as a form of resistance to oppression and has always been driven by a deep commitment to human dignity. As the ideals of resisting tyranny and upholding human worth became central to the American identity in the late 18th century, early African American writers recognized their works not only as a source of inspiration to Black Americans in their pursuit of equal citizenship but also as a means of holding white Americans accountable to the nation's ideals, challenging their moral indifference and racial bias (Gates and Smith 2014: 1:75). This dual purpose, both affirming Black humanity and confronting white indifference, established a pattern that would define the tradition for centuries. By presenting themselves as committed to the humanitarian values of Christianity and the American Revolution, these early writers strategically used irony to expose the hypocrisy in white Americans' promotion of freedom while continuing to support slavery (1:77). This critical irony resonates with Orlando Patterson's description of slavery as creating a "social non-person," someone legally stripped of family ties, personal dignity, and even ownership of their own body (1:80). Within this dehumanizing system, where the institution intentionally ignores an entire people, the act of writing and having a voice became vital, to delink from Eurocentric narratives and to validate subaltern knowledges (Mignolo "On Decoloniality" 6). It was out of this necessity for self-definition and narrative reclamation that a rich and resilient African American literary tradition emerged, shaped by both the urgency of resistance and the pressures of dominant cultural expectations.

The tension between expressing resistance while considering white readership expectations created a complex literary legacy. A pivotal moment in this evolving tradition was the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, when African American writers responded to systemic injustice with an explosion of artistic creativity (Gates and Smith 1:929–930). Though this period celebrated Black cultural achievement, it also revealed the ongoing struggle for equality that would culminate in the civil rights movement decades later. The moral base of the 1950s–60s movement, which recognized racism as a fundamental unjust practice, helped create space for

deeper literary explorations of Black identity (2:914). Similar structures, where artistic expression is inseparable from confronting deeply rooted social hierarchies, characterize the struggle over caste, gender, and political repression in late-20th-century India, providing the context of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. It was within this historical and cultural lineage that Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* emerged, extending the tradition while reimagining its possibilities.

Rooted in mid-20th-century America, *Invisible Man* follows the unnamed African American narrator's journey as he moves from the segregated South to Harlem, navigating changing loyalties and growing uncertainty. Beginning with his expulsion from a Southern Black college after a well-intentioned act with disastrous consequences, he moves north in search of opportunity, but is drawn into a series of disorienting episodes, from the insulting scene of the "Battle Royal" to the seductive promises of the Brotherhood, a political organization that ultimately undermines his trust. Told in retrospect from an underground basement, the narrative unfolds in a non-linear style, blending realism with surreal and ironic elements. Through experiences that both build and break his sense of self, the narrator begins to question the social structures around him and the ideals that once shaped his ambitions, ultimately retreating from the world with an uncertain return.

In *Invisible Man*, Ellison draws on the rich tradition of African American folklore to explore how cultural narratives like the trickster tale shape Black identity and offer strategies for surviving systemic oppression. From the novel's beginning, the narrator grapples with the final words of his grandfather, who advocated a form of subversive survival: "Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses… let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open" (Chapter 1), employing what Mignolo calls "border thinking": knowledge and survival strategies developed outside colonial logics. These words haunt the narrator's perception of power and resistance, evoking the tradition of the trickster in African American folklore, figures like Brer Rabbit who use wit to survive within hostile systems.

"BOY, WHO WAS BRER RABBIT? He was your mother's back-door man, I thought. Anyone knew they were one and the same: "Buckeye" when you were very young and hid yourself with innocent eyes; "Brer", when you were older. But why was he playing around with these childish names? did they think I was a child? Why

didn't they leave me alone? I would remember soon enough when they let me out of the machine" (chapter 11). the names Brer Rabbit and Buckeye were both reminiscent of the childish memories of the narrator, situating him within the African American folktales of survival. The Rabbit's passive resistance becomes a metaphor for the narrator's intentional passivity in the paint factory hospital. celebrating cleverness over the oppressive power of the master, Brer represented not just cultural heritage but practical strategies under oppression (1:86). Such tactics constitute a form of epistemic disobedience, challenging dominant frameworks through marginalized cultural knowledge. Yet this mode of resistance, while ingenious, also underscores the constraints placed on direct confrontation, revealing both the creativity and the limits of survival within oppressive systems. This interplay between inherited cultural strategies and the narrator's search for self-definition leads directly into Ellison's broader reflections on the nature of race and identity, where race emerges not as an essential truth but as a social construct shaping, and often distorting, personal` growth.

From Ellison's perspective, the concept of race has a profound impact on the formation of individual identity. At the core of Ellison's viewpoints is the idea that race is something created by society, not something that defines who a person truly is. He rejects the idea that skin color determines culture or ability, arguing instead that identity is shaped over time, like a work of art (Dickstein 2010: 54). Ellison rejects biological determinism, aligning with Critical Race Theory's understanding of race as a social construct (Delgado and Stefancic 3–7). Yet while Ellison emphasizes the human capacity to create and redefine race, such agency is far less possible within rigidly stratified systems like the Indian caste hierarchy, where social identity is ascribed at birth and enforced through deeply entrenched cultural, economic, and political structures, yet these power structures have never impeded the defiance and resistance of the oppressed. "We create race by creating ourselves," Ellison writes, "and to our great surprise, in doing so, we create something far greater: a culture." This idea is represented in the narrator of *Invisible Man*, who starts out wanting recognition and a sense of belonging but eventually finds meaning through solitude and deep self-reflection in his underground niche. The narrator's evolution toward authentic selfhood, culminating in retreat to an underground liminal space, illustrates

Halberstam's notion of failure as refusal, a withdrawal from capitalist and colonial demands for recognition (Halberstam 2–4, 17–18). This refusal is a decolonial gesture that disrupts imposed identities and epistemologies (Grosfoguel 3).

The narrator's journey toward selfhood, rejecting imposed racial identities and embracing solitude as resistance, finds resonance in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Just as race functions in *Invisible Man* as a socially constructed category shaping identity and power, caste and gender in Roy's novel operate as systems of classification and control. Both works show that these categories, while rooted in history, can change over time and act as both tools of oppression and sources of resistance. This intersectional approach highlights the ways identity is negotiated and challenged in diverse colonial and postcolonial contexts. In the process of self-discovery, the unnamed narrator undergoes a profound philosophical struggle. In the beginning, he possesses no authentic identity of his own, only roles and labels imposed upon him by the society. Ellison's novel powerfully dramatizes this condition, employing modernist techniques to examine how race shapes the search for individuality. "Who was I, how had I come to be? Certainly, I couldn't help being different from when I left the campus; but now a new, painful, contradictory voice had grown up within me…" (Chapter 12). As the narrative unfolds, the protagonist gradually realizes that genuine selfhood does not stem from external validation but from confronting and embracing the complexity and contradictions of his own lived experience, an artistic philosophy that echoes Ellison's own literary values. "Outside the Brotherhood we were outside history; but inside of it they didn't see us. It was a hell of a state of affairs, we were nowhere. I wanted to back away from it, but still I wanted to discuss it, to consult someone who'd tell me it was only a brief, emotional illusion. I wanted the props put back beneath the world. So now I had a real need to see Hambro. Getting up to go, I looked at the wall map and laughed at Columbus. What an India he'd found! I was almost across the hall when I remembered and came back and put on the hat and glasses. I'd need them to carry me through the streets" (Chapter 23). In this passage, the narrator's invisibility is emphasized through his desire to withdraw and to seek guidance, highlighting his alienation both from the Brotherhood and from society. Rather than following the conventional trajectory of the bildungsroman, in which the hero gains social integration, *Invisible Man* charts a

different path. The narrator ultimately retreats into an underground "liminal space", reminiscent of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, where the narrator finally begins to claim creative agency. Here, Ellison asserts the radical idea that ordinary individuals, particularly African Americans can achieve a form of artistic freedom by recognizing the flexibility of identity and reality. He rejects deterministic portrayals like Wright's *Native Son*, arguing that such works neglect the imaginative capacity of Black life. Although Ellison respects Wright's influence, he moves away from stories of being trapped and focuses instead on change, creativity, and new possibilities (Dickstein 62).

However, despite Ellison's emphasis on identity as an evolving and imaginative process, mainstream portrayals of African Americans continued to reduce them to simplistic caricatures, reflecting Richard Wright's perspective about the struggle over who gets to define reality (Ellison, "Shadow an Act" 1995: 59). This struggle found its profound theoretical expression in W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness," the psychological division of seeing oneself through both African American and American perspectives (Gates and Smith 1:682). While Du Bois's idea addresses the racialized split in African American identity, a parallel can be seen in the feminist postcolonial notion of "double colonization," in which women in colonized societies are subjected to both imperial oppression and patriarchal domination. For writers, the position of marginality brought both pressure and purpose, as they had to balance their cultural identity while trying to represent their experiences truthfully.

Ellison, perhaps more than any other figure, embodied this challenge while transforming it into artistic innovation. His experiences from the Tuskegee Institute to Harlem's Communist circles informed his deep understanding of Black life across America's regions and ideologies (Dickstein 49). Ellison's work critiques not just racial oppression but the failure of American literature itself to fully represent democratic ideals through its exclusion of marginalized voices (Albrecht 2010: 87). His exploration of double consciousness became not just a theme but a creative method, blending high literary tradition with vernacular expression. This approach is evident in Ellison's rejection of rigid categories for Black writing. He viewed the vernacular not as inferior dialect but as a dynamic creative process called "functional felicity", a form of epistemic disobedience that can prompt agency for the subaltern

(Dickstein 53).

Multiple Forms of Resistance: Clifton, Rinehart, The Narrator

Resistance in African American literature has taken many forms; spiritual, cultural, intellectual, and political. From early slave narratives to contemporary fiction, writers have challenged systems of oppression not only through direct resistance but also through subtle acts of survival, irony, and redefinition of self. Resistance in *Invisible Man* is portrayed in multifaceted ways, from quiet survival to open rebellion. One of the most fruitful ways to read the narrator's journey is through Jack Halberstam's concept of failure. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam argues that failure can be a site of resistance against dominant capitalist and heteronormative logics. Failure, in this view, is not personal weakness but a refusal to participate in systems of oppression (17-18). One striking example is Tod Clifton, a charismatic young Black activist in Harlem and a key member of the Brotherhood. Initially committed to the organization's ideals of racial unity and social change, Clifton becomes increasingly disillusioned by its manipulation of Black voices, exemplifying the failure of integrationist politics critiqued by Critical Race Theory (Delgado and Francic 62). His eventual departure from the Brotherhood marks his re-entry into historical invisibility and denial of the organization's false promises. His decision to sell Sambo dolls on the street, and his subsequent death in a confrontation with police, marks a powerful descent from idealism into disillusionment (Nadel 2010: 8). Symbolically, Clifton's manipulation of paper dolls parallels how real Black individuals are dehumanized and reduced to lifeless puppets by white-controlled institutions like the Brotherhood (8). Before his death, both Ras the Exhorter and the Brotherhood attempt to use Clifton for their own ideological ends. His violent rejection of both shows a recognition of the contradictions and hypocrisies embedded in racial and political ideologies. In this way, Clifton becomes a pioneer to the narrator's own awakening; a recognition that history is not linear, but shaped by contradiction, reversal, and crisis (15). Clifton's death incited the narrator's psychological and physical collapse. This moment of collapse and retreat from the visible world does not signify defeat, but the beginning of radical self-discovery, where identity emerges through both an anticonformist refusal to be contained by prescribed roles, aligning with the theory of failure's recognition that

breaking from normative success can open space for new, liberatory ways of being and interrogating the previously stablished assumptions. “What if Brother Jack were wrong? What if history was a gambler, instead of a force in a laboratory experiment, and the boys his ace in the hole? What if history was not a reasonable citizen, but a madman full of paranoid guile and these boys his agents, his big surprise! His own revenge? For they were outside, in the dark with Sambo, the dancing paper doll; taking it on the lambo with my fallen brother, Tod Clifton (Tod, Tod) running and dodging the forces of history instead of making a dominating stand” (Chapter 20). This passage shows how the narrator begins to question authority and the order of history, embracing uncertainty as a space for self-definition and resistance.

Ellison uses recurring metaphors of blindness and vision throughout the novel to illustrate this journey, from the blindfolded boys in the battle royal, to the blind preacher Barbee’s sermon, to Brother Jack’s glass eye, which reveals his limited perception (Dickstein 58). The narrator’s invisibility can thus be understood as a decolonial act: it refuses the colonial logic of visibility, which requires subjects to be seen and validated within frameworks of racial and ideological control. Instead, invisibility offers a form of agency that is not dependent on external validation or recognition by colonial or capitalist institutions. It opens up the possibility of narrating new forms of identity and existence outside the imposed binaries and hierarchies of colonial power. The narrator comes to see that even groups like the Brotherhood expect strict loyalty to their beliefs instead of offering real freedom, which leads him to retreat in the end. The “Battle Royal” scene, one of the most powerful moments in the novel, serves as a public ritual. Ellison argued that such spectacles were not merely fictional but mirrored Southern behavioral patterns and rituals designed to maintain caste boundaries and reinforce racial hierarchies. These rituals, embedded in societal norms, have a deep symbolic meaning and reveal the shared assumptions of both oppressors and the oppressed (Ellison, “The Art of Fiction” 1995: 4).

In this context, Rinehart, the protean figure encountered late in the novel, introduces a radically different kind of survival strategy. As a preacher, pimp, gambler, and mystery figure, Rinehart represents the surprising insight that comes from being unnoticed; he is everyone and no one. To the narrator, Rinehart represents the embodiment of the grandfather’s strategy, subversion through compliance, but

turned into a skillful change of identity (Ellison, "The Collected Essays" 1995: 74). Rinehart's fluid identity performs a survival strategy based on invisibility and adaptability, resonating with Halberstam's concept of failure as creative refusal (Halberstam 14).

In contrast to Clifton's death or Ras's violent nationalism, the narrator makes a path outside these binaries. He does not seek redemption through assimilation or revolution but imagines a new mode of being altogether. His act of narrating, his writing becomes the most powerful way to claim agency. He reclaims language, story, and meaning from the structures that sought to erase him. In this way, the novel performs its central role: to be invisible is not to be absent, but to be not recognized. Choosing invisibility, the narrator retreats underground not in surrender, but as a powerful act of decolonial resistance. "I was and yet I was unseen. It was frightening and as I sat there I sensed another frightening world of possibilities. For now I saw that I could agree with Jack without agreeing. And I could tell Harlem to have hope when there was no hope. Perhaps I could tell them to hope until I found the basis of something real, some firm ground for action that would lead them onto the plane of history. But until then I would have to move them without myself being moved . . . I'd have to do a Rinehart" (Chapter 23). He is no longer a puppet in someone else's story. In the symbolic darkness of the underground, he finds light. The coal cellar, rich in metaphorical association with warmth and energy, becomes a space of intellectual and spiritual awakening (72-73). This descent is not degradation, but a form of revelation that is totally aligned with Mignolo's insistence on building "our own houses of thought" beyond colonial epistemology (Mignolo, "On Decoloniality" 7). The underground cellar, metaphorically rich and empowering, transforms marginalization into self-determined agency, opening a space for new identities beyond colonial-capitalist binaries (Halberstam 17–18). The narrator's retreat into invisibility is not a collapse or defeat but an act of conscious refusal against a system that demands ideological conformity and recognition on oppressive terms. This refusal is deeply political, rejecting the colonial and capitalist systems that value individuals only insofar as they contribute to the existing social order. This new politics of freedom and equality does not seek reform within the system but imagines life beyond it. By embracing failure as refusal and invisibility as resistance,

the narrator challenges the hegemonic demands for visibility and success, creating space for alternative modes of being that resist assimilation and control. In doing so, the novel exemplifies how failure, revisited through decolonial lenses can become a powerful tool for dismantling oppressive structures and envisioning new futures grounded in autonomy and self-definition.

Historical Context and Literal Emergence of *The God of Small Things*

Having examined *Invisible Man* through the lenses of decoloniality, cultural resistance, and the theory of failure, this study now turns to Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* to broaden and deepen the analysis. The shift from Ellison's mid-20th-century African American setting to Roy's late-20th-century India is intentional, driven by the same central aim: to understand how marginalized people encounter with systems of race, caste, and power, and how "failure" can be transformed into a form of resistance. Though rooted in different histories, Jim Crow segregation and the caste system, both novels challenge dominant ways of thinking and use inventive narrative forms to do so. Placing them side by side allows for a comparative, transnational view of how identity and agency can be reimagined under oppression. Having explored Ellison's portrayal of race, invisibility, and failure in the context of mid-century America, Roy's *The God of Small Things* shifts the focus to caste, gender, and postcolonial legacies in India. Both novels reveal how colonial power restructures social hierarchies and how marginalized subjects resist through refusal and redefinition, offering a rich comparative framework for understanding diverse forms of oppression and agency.

India's post-independence political landscape, marked by events like the 1975–77 "Emergency" that is a period of authoritarian rule characterized by censorship, suspension of civil liberties, and mass arrests, profoundly shaped the themes of modern Indian-English literature (Tickell 46). Roy's Booker Prize-winning *The God of Small Things* (1997) represents this era, linking personal and political histories into a narrative that critiques postcolonial India's long lasting social hierarchies.

Set in Kerala, a state in southern India, *The God of Small Things* unfolds across two distinct time periods: the late 1960s and the early 1990s. At the heart of the novel is a doomed and socially transgressive relationship between Ammu,

a Syrian-Christian woman and divorcee, and Velutha, a Dalit carpenter considered "untouchable" by caste hierarchies. The narrative is largely narrated through the perspectives of Ammu's twin children, Estha and Rahel, whose childhood experiences frame the process of narrating the key events: the forbidden romance, Velutha's brutal beating and death at the hands of the police, and the tragic drowning of their cousin, Sophie Mol. These events are not disclosed in a linear fashion; instead, Roy uses a non-linear structure, where the adult twins meet again after more than twenty years, slowly revealing what happened in the past. This dual timeline creates a reflective and deeply thoughtful tone, allowing Roy to not only revisit the traumatic episodes of the family's history but also to explore their deep psychological impact on Estha and Rahel, ending with their emotional return to their childhood home in Ayemenem and their controversial act of incest as adults (3).

Decolonial Love and Failed Resistance

Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Ellison's *Invisible Man* both represent how failure can be a powerful form of resistance against colonial and oppressive systems. Characters like Ammu, Velutha, and Ellison's unnamed narrator live in worlds shaped by histories of colonialism, where caste, race, and gender decide who matters and who is seen. But instead of trying to succeed within these unfair systems, they reject the rules and the entire system. This reflects what decolonial thinkers like Walter Mignolo and Ramón Grosfoguel call "epistemic disobedience", a refusal to follow Western ideas of success, identity, and worth.

The forbidden relationship between Ammu, a Syrian-Christian woman, and Velutha, an Untouchable man, serves as a powerful act of decolonial resistance. Situated within a deeply hierarchical society shaped by both colonial and caste-based oppression, their love challenges multiple structures of control: gender, caste, religion, and class. By engaging in a relationship that violates the "Love Laws" dictating "who should be loved, and how," Ammu and Velutha disrupt inherited social norms rooted in both indigenous patriarchy and colonial systems that re-inscribed caste hierarchies for political ends. Their transgressive union reclaims a space for human intimacy, pleasure, and choice outside the boundaries set by dominant power structures, thus becoming an embodied rejection of imposed identities and social roles.

Although their relationship ends in tragic failure, Velutha's death at the hands of the police and Ammu's social exile, this failure does not mean defeat. Rather it signifies a nonconformist agency that arises from lack of contribution to the dominant systems. Ammu and Velutha's love opens up a breach in the seemingly rigid systems of caste and gender and exposes their fragility; thus, Roy elevates their decolonial love to a symbolic level, where defeat, as an agentive strategy resists silence and embodies instead a liberating defiance. While Ammu and Velutha's cross-caste relationship reveals the rigid social hierarchies of India, Roy also depicts another failed relationship, Chacko's marriage to Margaret Kochamma, an English woman. Placing these two failed relationships together exposes the oppressive structures of both colonial and caste systems. Although Ammu and Velutha's relationship was the violation of strict caste rules, Chacko's interracial marriage is ruined due to colonial history, that is through their incompatibility, how they see each other and how society sees them. Chacko's love for Margaret was shaped partially based on his Anglophilia and the colonial desire. Ultimately, these two narratives highlight how the two power structures, colonial and caste, determine the limits of love laws. Just as these failed love stories challenges and disrupts the rigid hierarchies of dominant systems, Roy's narrative structure similarly refuses the limits of conventional form; by blending and subverting genres, she extends the novel's resistance beyond its characters' actions into the shape and rhythm of the story itself. Similarly, Ellison's narrative form in *Invisible Man* defies conventions, reflecting the fluid, fragmented, and multifaceted nature of Black identity under racial oppression. Both novels use innovative storytelling to resist dominant epistemologies and to articulate subaltern experiences that refuse to be neatly categorized or contained.

Roy's novel resists simple genre classification, integrating elements of fairy tale, political allegory, and classical tragedy. While it gestures toward the bildungsroman tradition through its focus on self-awareness and maturation, Roy fundamentally subverts the genre's conventional linearity by emphasizing the emotional and psychological continuities between childhood and adulthood, particularly via the twin protagonists (Tickell 3). This narrative strategy facilitates a complex interrogation of memory and identity, destabilizing teleological notions of progress. This restructuring of the bildungsroman is particularly significant within

postcolonial literature, where the genre's association with biography and nation-building forms the linking of personal and political histories. Roy engages with this tradition critically, employing fractured and non-linear memory to challenge dominant narratives of decolonization and national identity. Modern Indian literature often adopts an ironic and satirical stance toward nationalist discourse, questioning and revising established mythologies of the nation-state. *The God of Small Things* exemplifies this critical stance, interrogating both individual trauma and broader socio-political injustices through its innovative narrative form and themes. "The real secret was that communism crept into Kerala insidiously. As a reformist movement that never overtly questioned the traditional values of a caste-ridden, extremely traditional community. The Marxists worked from *within* the communal divides, never challenging them, never appearing not to. They offered a cocktail revolution. A heady mix of Eastern Marxism and orthodox Hinduism, spiked with a shot of democracy" (Chapter 2). This passage embodies the fake ideals of Indian nationalist movement, while covering the inequalities embedded within the system, just as the narrator of *the Invisible Man* discovers that the Brotherhood conceals control while claiming to offer freedom. The narrator experiences an awakening when his faith in the Brotherhood collapses, revealing it to be another system of control rather than genuine liberation, a disillusionment that mirrors the way Indian nationalism, after independence, betrayed the hopes of those who had believed it would bring true social justice.

This critique aligns with postcolonial theory's dual roots: Marxist historiography and French post-structuralism. The divided intellectual roots of postcolonial theory were already visible in some of its earliest works, such as Edward W. Said's *Orientalism* (1978). Said's analysis drew on two different thinkers in ways that sometimes seemed contradictory: the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci and the French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault. In *Orientalism*, Said argues that Western study and representation of the Orient over many centuries was not neutral or objective. Instead, it was a deeply political construction that portrayed Arabic and Eastern cultures as the "Other", a negative image set against the supposedly rational, civilized, and superior European "Self." For Said, this way of representing the Orient served as a key ideological support for colonialism (73). The rise of postcolonial

studies, which focused on psychological and textual forms of cultural resistance as well as hybrid or migrant identities, often obscured the ongoing inequalities between the West and its former colonies. The shift in postcolonial studies toward 'subjective' politics, focusing on language, identity, and personal experience, diverted attention away from social, political, and cultural issues related to ongoing domination and inequality. "In concentrating on issues of 'representation' and 'identity', postcolonial studies disguises its close relationship with the 'condition of its own emergence, that is, global capitalism'". From this viewpoint, postcolonialism doesn't truly challenge or disrupt neo-colonial values. Instead, it works alongside dominant Western artistic styles, like postmodernism, offering "acceptable" examples of cultural difference without questioning the underlying power structures (74).

In *The God of Small Things*, we see powerful images of group protest (like the Naxalite movement) along with Ammu's personal fight against harsh judgment from her community. At the same time, her children quietly rebel against the love for all British things. Despite their resistance to colonial forms and structures, Chacko reveals the deep and lasting roots of colonialism in India's history. "Chacko told the twins that, though he hated to admit it, they were all Anglophiles. They were a *family* of Anglophiles. Pointed in the wrong direction, trapped outside their own history and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swept away. He explained to them that history was like an old house at night. With all the lamps lit. And ancestors whispering inside" (Chapter 2).

Postcolonial theory helps explain this issue, especially because one of the novel's main ideas is that old colonial power still exists today in new ways in South India. From a decolonial perspective, these acts, whether Ammu's refusal to submit to caste and gender expectations or the children's rejection of colonial cultural preferences, reflect what Grosfoguel describes as the ongoing struggle to "delink" from coloniality, resisting both the visible and invisible structures of power that persist after the end of formal colonial rule (Grosfoguel 15). Roy says that modern global capitalism, through privatization and foreign investment, leads to what she calls "barbaric dispossession," or the unfair loss of land and rights. She even suggests that it is a new kind of colonialism, controlled from far away using digital tools. What is interesting is that the same global companies and systems that helped her become

successful are the ones she criticizes (Tickell 75).

Gendered and Caste-Based Oppression

Roy raises important questions about the role of Indian authors and artists today, suggesting that there are moments in a nation's history when the political climate compels even the most sophisticated among us to take a clear and open stand (17). Her novel reflects this stance by exposing how patriarchy and caste intersect to marginalize women, illustrating that gender, like race is not an inherent characteristic, but a category shaped and maintained by social, cultural, and institutional forces. As scholars such as Delgado and Stefancic argue, race is not a biological fact but a socially constructed category shaped by historical and political contexts (3–7), and gender functions in a similar way. Both race and gender operate as systems of classification that assign meaning and value to bodies, and in *The God of Small Things* both intersect with caste to create complex forms of marginalization. As Peller notes, forms of oppression such as caste, race, class, and gender do not function separately but connectively, producing unique experiences of discrimination for those who inhabit multiple marginalized identities (130). Roy's narrative consistently reveals the everyday violence and injustices of patriarchy, portraying women as persistently subjected to bullying, coercion, and the expectation to subordinate their own desires to the demands of male family members. One of the most striking representations of female desperation appears in Roy's depiction of Ammu's emotional turmoil, conveyed through a powerful and challenging metaphor: "What was it that gave Ammu this Unsafe Edge? [. . .] It was what she had battling inside her. An unmixable mix. The infinite tenderness of motherhood and the reckless rage of a suicide bomber" (Chapter 2). This image captures the internal conflict Ammu faces, suggesting that her frustration is not only intense and transgressive, but also profoundly self-destructive (Tickell 35-36). While entrenched gender norms present Ammu's role as a divorced mother socially unacceptable, *The God of Small Things* also exposes the deep flaws of patriarchal masculinity through its portrayal of oppressive and abusive male figures like Pappachi, Kari Saipu, and the Orangedrink Lemondrink man. These characters exemplify the damaging limitations of male gender roles rooted in control and violence. "On one such night, Ammu, aged nine, hiding with her mother in the

hedge, watched Pappachi's natty silhouette in the lit windows as he flitted from room to room. Not content with having beaten his wife and daughter (Chacko was away at school), he tore down curtains, kicked furniture and smashed a table lamp. An hour after the lights went out, disdaining Mammachi's frightened pleading, little Ammu crept back into the house through a ventilator to rescue her new gumboots that she loved more than anything else. She put them in a paper bag and crept back into the drawing room when the lights were suddenly switched on.

Pappachi had been sitting in his mahogany rocking chair all along, rocking himself silently in the dark. When he caught her, he didn't say a word. He flogged her with his ivory-handled riding crop (the one that he had held across his lap in his studio photograph). Ammu didn't cry. When he finished beating her he made her bring him Mammachi's pinking shears from her sewing cupboard. While Ammu watched, the Imperial Entomologist shred her new gum-boots with her mother's pinking shears. The strips of black rubber fell to the floor. The scissors made snicking scissor-sounds. Ammu ignored her mother's drawn, frightened face that appeared at the window. It took ten minutes for her beloved gumboots to be completely shredded. When the last strip of rubber had rippled to the floor, her father looked at her with cold, flat eyes, and rocked and rocked and rocked. Surrounded by a sea of twisting rubber snakes" (Chapter 8).

Concerning the paragraphs presented, Pumla Dineo Gqola's analysis of the novel reveals how caste oppression works closely alongside patriarchy. For example, Chacko is able to satisfy his desires with women from lower castes without facing consequences, while Ammu is harshly punished for engaging in a similar cross-caste relationship. The concept of *gender* refers to the ways in which societies and cultures construct ideas of femininity and masculinity; it is therefore inseparable from the cultural context in which it is formed. The following part reveals how the novel exposes the double standards of caste and gender, highlighting the very different consequences faced by men and women for the same actions. "Neither Mammachi nor Baby Kochamma saw any contradiction between Chacko's Marxist mind and feudal libido. They only worried about the Naxalites, who had been known to force men from Good Families to marry servant girls whom they had made pregnant. Of course, they did not even remotely suspect that the missile, when it *was* fired, the one

that would annihilate the family's Good Name forever, would come from a completely unexpected quarter" (Chapter 8). Unlike Western or so-called 'First World' feminism, the fight for women's rights in the 'Third World' must be understood in relation to both colonial histories and the gender dynamics within specific religious and regional communities. Responding to this complex reality, some critics have framed women's experiences in places like the Caribbean, Africa, and India through the lens of *double colonization*, a term introduced by Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford. It captures the dual oppression women face: both from colonial domination and from entrenched patriarchal structures within their own societies. This idea of double colonization is central to the historical and political context of Roy's *The God of Small Things* and continues to inform her later writings and public activism on women's rights (36-37).

This broader framework of double colonization finds a vivid personal expression in Roy's portrayal of Ammu, whose life is shaped by both patriarchal norms and socio-political marginalization. As a Syrian-Christian woman, Ammu is systematically excluded from equal rights, particularly in matters of inheritance and property. Roy subtly underscores this inequality by contrasting Ammu's legal vulnerability with the privileged position of her brother Chacko, who bluntly asserts his dominance with the line: "what's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine" (Chapter2). Through this dynamic, the author gestures toward a larger historical context of women's legal disenfranchisement and the ongoing fight for gender justice (38). This legal and social marginalization, however, is only one facet of the deeper constraints imposed on Ammu's identity.

Roy explores how caste, far from being a purely indigenous social system, is deeply intertwined with the legacies of colonial history, where European racial hierarchies and imperial ideologies strengthened and restructured existing caste divisions for their own political purposes. The word *caste* comes from the Portuguese *casta*, meaning "pure," revealing how European ideas about race were used to justify British rule in India (24–25). Even today, caste continues to shape Indian society, affecting politics, education, and employment, despite being officially banned by the Constitution (24). This intersection of gendered oppression with caste hierarchy is not coincidental; rather, it reflects how colonial modernity reinforced pre-existing

social hierarchies, producing a system in which women like Ammu face compounded marginalization at the intersection of patriarchal, caste, and colonial legacies. Caste, like race, is a concept created through social systems that assign power and meaning. For Dalits, it is often not a chosen identity but a label forced upon them, yet this very oppression can inspire strong collective resistance. Roy illustrates this tension through the character of Velutha, whose quiet refusal to accept his "place" in society challenges Kerala's rigid caste order (25). "Vellya Paapen feared for his younger son. He couldn't say what it was that frightened him. It was nothing that he had said. Or done. It was not *what* he said, but the *way* he said it. Not *what* he did, but the *way* he did it:

> Perhaps it was just a lack of hesitation. An unwarranted assurance. In the way he walked. The way he held his head. The quiet way he offered suggestions without being asked. Or the quiet way in which he disregarded suggestions without appearing to rebel.
>
> While these were qualities that were perfectly acceptable, perhaps even desirable, in Touchables, Vellya Paapen thought that in a Paravan they could (and would, and indeed, *should)* be construed as insolence" (Chapter 2).

When his relationship with Ammu is revealed, figures like Vellya Paapen and Mammachi react with outrage, reinforcing caste divisions through exaggerated expressions of shame and anger. The novel also invites readers to examine caste both historically and critically. Velutha, as an untouchable character, is initially considered as a representation of the subaltern, a term that was first used by Antonio Gramsci to describe people who are socially and politically oppressed and lack access to power, especially since the social structures around him limit the ways he can 'speak.' Often, he appears more as a physical presence or as an object of other characters' fears and desires rather than as a fully articulated individual. Some critics, however, view this limited portrayal as a shortcoming in Roy's writing, ignoring Velutha as little more than a stereotypical, good-hearted working-class figure without depth. However, we can instead argue that Roy's choice to represent Velutha in this way is intentional and creative. It highlights the political constraints placed on subaltern figures, emphasizing their lack of agency in oppressive social systems. In this light, Velutha's momentary appearances, quiet gestures, and his bold, skillful craft can be seen as

subtle acts of resistance against the rigid 'touchable logic' that confines him (82-83).

In *The God of Small Things*, Roy vividly depicts the intense caste inferiority experienced by older untouchables like Velutha's father, Vellya Paapen, because of Kerala's deeply entrenched caste rules. She refers to the "Crawling Backwards Days" before independence, when paravans (a low-caste group) faced harsh restrictions: they were forbidden from walking on public roads, covering their upper bodies, or carrying umbrellas. This list of caste prohibitions is historically accurate; at the start of the twentieth century, Kerala had one of the most complex and rigid caste systems in India (27).

The novel expands the decolonial framework by focusing on the intersections of caste, gender, and coloniality in India's socio-political landscape. Through her portrayal of Ammu and Velutha's doomed love and the novel's innovative narrative form, Roy emphasizes how failure and refusal expose the fragility of oppressive systems and open spaces for reimagining identity and agency. When read alongside Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the novel contributes to a transnational discourse on coloniality, resistance, and the redefinition of the self beyond racial and caste boundaries. Both works demonstrate that failure, rather than simply representing defeat, can serve as a potent form of resistance and a refusal to be confined by dominant power structures, revealing new possibilities for understanding identity, agency, and liberation across different colonial and postcolonial contexts.

Comparing these novels helps us understand how power works across race, caste, gender, and capitalism, and more importantly, how people resist it. Characters like Invisible man, Ammu, and Velutha don't follow the usual paths of progress or liberation. Their stories are fragmented, emotional, and deeply personal. This challenges traditional ideas of national identity and development. In this way, comparative literature becomes a decolonial act, linking global struggles without ignoring their differences and helping us imagine new ways of being beyond the systems that try to define us.

Conclusion

In revisiting failure through the novels of Ellison and Roy, this article has shown that what may appear as defeat within dominant frameworks of success can, in fact,

function as a deeply political act of resistance. The characters in *Invisible Man* and *The God of Small Things* reject the imposed expectations of capitalist, racial, caste-based and patriarchal systems, not by assimilating or revolting in conventional terms, but by choosing invisibility, refusal, and love on their own terms. These forms of failure unsettle the binaries of visibility/invisibility, success/failure, and voice/silence, revealing instead the quiet strength and radical creativity of the marginalized.

By engaging with decolonial theory, reconceptualizing failure, and subaltern studies, the article has argued for a broader understanding of failure as epistemic disobedience, a refusal to measure value by Eurocentric, patriarchal, or neoliberal standards. This reading not only disrupts the normative frames that dictate what counts as resistance or success but also offers a way to think relationally across geographies, connecting Black experiences in the United States with Dalit and gendered subalternities in postcolonial India.

Ultimately, this comparative approach enacts its own decolonial gesture. Rather than erasing differences, it makes visible the shared fractures of colonial modernity and the diverse ways in which literature offers strategies for surviving, resisting, and reimagining life beyond its structures. In both novels, failure is not an end but a beginning, an opening toward new narratives, new identities, and new forms of collective and individual being.

Statements and Declarations

Thesis Declaration

This article is derived from the PhD dissertation entitled “Revisiting Failure in Postcolonial Narratives: A Decolonial Reading of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man and Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things”, currently being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Amirhossein Vafa in the field of English Language and Literature at Shiraz University.

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AI Use Declaration

The use of artificial intelligence was limited exclusively to language editing and proofreading. All stages of the research process, including data collection, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation, were conducted independently by the authors.

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