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Resistaura: The Subtle Atmospherics of Female Defiance in Postcolonial Fiction

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Abstract: *This paper explores the quiet, atmospheric forms of female resistance in Arundhati Roy's* The God of Small Things *and Anita Desai's* Clear Light of Day*, introducing the term* Resistaura *to describe the subtle emotional environments through which women articulate agency in postcolonial settings. Drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's reflections on the silencing of the subaltern and Sara Ahmed's analysis of affective circulation, the study argues that empowerment in these narratives is enacted through silence, memory, desire and everyday gestures that carry emotional weight. Ammu's clandestine love and her refusal to conform to caste and familial expectations reveal how longing becomes a form of defiance, while Bim and Tara's negotiations of guilt, care and reconciliation reveal emotionally grounded strategies that challenge domestic and social hierarchies. Both novels demonstrate how affect shapes the spaces the characters inhabit, creating atmospheres where resistance is lived rather than announced. The comparison highlights shared threads of understated agency, although the emotional registers differ: Roy's narrative centres on transgressive desire while Desai's focuses on endurance and relational healing. Together the novels show that* Resistaura *captures a significant pattern in women's writing, where power operates through the diffuse, persistent circulation of emotion within intimate and familial spaces.*

Keywords: *Resistaura; affect; postcolonial feminism; emotional agency; Indian women's writing*

In postcolonial Indian society, women often navigate subtle forms of resistance within the everyday pressures of family, tradition and social expectation. These forms of defiance are rarely dramatic but carry enduring emotional and social significance. Drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of the subaltern, which highlights the marginalised voices that are often unheard or mediated by structures of power and Sara Ahmed's work on the circulation of emotions, this article introduces the term **"Resistaura."** The neologism combines "resistance" and "aura" to describe the diffuse, pervasive atmosphere of female defiance in literature. *Resistaura* captures how women negotiate agency, memory and desire within postcolonial and patriarchal contexts, showing that empowerment can emerge through small, emotionally resonant acts rather than overt rebellion. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* exemplify this form of subtle resistance. In Roy's novel, Ammu quietly navigates familial and societal constraints while pursuing love and personal freedom. Her silences, choices and refusals create an intimate yet transformative aura of defiance. In Desai's novel, Bim and Tara confront the pressures of domestic life and the expectations imposed by family and tradition. Their understated acts of self-assertion and

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reconciliation demonstrate the persistence of female agency even in restrictive settings, highlighting how resistance can be lived and felt rather than openly declared. By examining these narratives through a combined framework of postcolonial feminism and affect theory, this study shows how female empowerment is enacted through emotional and narrative atmospheres. *It argues that in Roy's The God of Small Things and Desai's Clear Light of Day, female empowerment is enacted through subtle, atmospheric forms of resistance rather than overt rebellion and that these understated acts of defiance create a pervasive emotional and narrative aura that transforms both character and context, revealing the profound power of quiet, everyday forms of resistance.*

In the scholarship on Indian and postcolonial literatures, a variety of works foreground the themes of female agency, structural oppression and subtle defiance. Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* has drawn critical attention for its quiet but powerful portrayals of resistance among marginalised characters, especially Dina, whose refusal to bow to patriarchal or economic pressures has been interpreted as "a growing subaltern consciousness" (Koirala 45). Kamala Markandaya's novels, such as *Nectar in a Sieve* and *Possession*, have also been examined: *Nectar in a Sieve* is read through eco-feminist lenses, connecting gendered suffering to ecological exploitation and "silence as a motif" (Bhalla 112), while *Possession* is often discussed in relation to cultural hybridity and the postcolonial "possession" of identity across nations (Singh 87). Kamala Das's confessional works, *My Story* and her poem *"The Old Playhouse,"* have similarly generated feminist readings of domestic captivity, personal voice and bodily autonomy, showing how everyday marriage becomes a terrain of subtle revolt (Trivedi 63). Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream* stands out in this tradition as an early feminist utopian text that imagines alternative gendered power structures in a "manless world" (21). In a different register, Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine* interrogates the inner lives of women, exploring how familial and societal expectations "constrain selfhood" (54). These works, along with others such as Jhabvala's *The Householder* and Premchand's *Nirmala*, provide a multi-dimensional literary background in which resistance is not always loud but often internal, relational and emotion-laden. Against this backdrop, *The God of Small Things* and *Clear Light of Day* emerge as particularly fertile sites for applying the concept of *Resistaura*, since they similarly depict female empowerment through atmospheric rather than overt rebellion.

The theoretical foundation of this paper draws upon the intersecting insights of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Sara Ahmed, whose work illuminates the subtle emotional registers through which women in postcolonial contexts express defiance. Spivak's influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is essential for understanding how power structures govern the intelligibility of subaltern expression. Her claim that "the subaltern cannot speak" does not deny the subaltern's capacity for resistance but rather critiques the epistemic conditions that refuse to recognise her speech as legitimate (Spivak 308). She further describes the subaltern woman as caught in a "triple bind," constrained simultaneously by colonial discourse, patriarchal norms and elite representation (Minh-ha 6). These overlapping pressures help explain why female resistance in postcolonial fiction frequently takes understated forms such as silence, emotional withdrawal and secret longing rather than direct confrontation. Spivak's observation that "representation has not withered away" (Spivak 308) encourages attention to the gestures, atmospheres and emotional undercurrents through which subaltern agency endures. In this context, the term *Resistaura* can be understood as a conceptual tool for recognising the subtle yet persistent aura of defiance that pervades the experiences of characters

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such as Ammu, Bim and Tara, whose resistance operates at the thresholds of visibility and audibility.

While Spivak elucidates the structural suppression of subaltern voice, Sara Ahmed's affect theory provides a lens through which to understand how emotions circulate within those silences, producing forms of resistance that are atmospheric, embodied and relational. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed observes that emotions "stick to some bodies more than others," attaching themselves to individuals in ways that either reinforce or challenge social hierarchies (13). She further contends that emotions "do things; they align individuals with communities or bodily space with social space through the very intensity of their attachments" (*Affective Economies* 119). This perspective shifts attention away from overt speech towards the emotional textures that shape agency, such as the withheld tear, the quiet refusal and the desire that persists against prohibition. These subtle affective movements give rise to what Ahmed terms "affective economies" (*Affective Economies* 117), patterns of emotional circulation capable of quietly destabilising normative expectations. When interpreted through Ahmed's framework, *Resistaura* becomes legible as a dispersed, atmospheric mode of resistance, enacted not through declarations but through the shifting emotional climates surrounding the characters. This study examines these phenomena through qualitative textual analysis to trace how such gestures, silences and emotional nuances operate within *The God of Small Things* and *Clear Light of Day*. The combined insights of Spivak and Ahmed thus allow female agency in these novels to be recognised not as overt rebellion but as a quiet, persistent reorganisation of affect and atmosphere.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is set in the Indian state of Kerala and revolves around the lives of fraternal twins, Rahel and Estha, and their extended family. The novel traces their childhood experiences and the events that shape their adulthood, particularly the forbidden love of their mother, Ammu, which brings social ostracism and personal tragedy. Through non-linear storytelling, Roy explores themes of caste, family loyalty and the enduring effects of personal and societal constraints. The narrative captures both the intimate rhythms of domestic life and the broader socio-political context in which the characters live. Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* follows the lives of siblings Bim, Tara and Raja in Old Delhi, reflecting on their childhood and the passage of time within a changing India. The novel emphasises the tension between personal desire and family obligations, focusing on the quiet routines, emotional entanglements and reconciliations of its characters. Bim, in particular, embodies the struggle for independence and self-definition within the confines of domestic expectation. Through evocative descriptions of memory, domestic spaces and ordinary interactions, Desai highlights the enduring bonds of family alongside the subtle forms of resistance and self-assertion that shape the characters' lives. Both novels foreground the ordinary moments of life while revealing how personal choices, emotional connections and small acts of defiance interact with larger social and cultural forces, offering a nuanced portrait of women navigating postcolonial Indian society.

In *The God of Small Things*, Ammu's silences function as acts of subtle resistance, a refusal to comply with both familial and societal dictates. Her quiet withdrawal and measured responses operate as protective strategies, signalling defiance without confrontation. Roy notes that Ammu "withdrew into herself like a withdrawn tide" (56), capturing how her internal resistance manifests physically and emotionally. These silences serve to navigate the strictures of caste, gender and patriarchal authority, reflecting Spivak's notion of the subaltern woman, who is constrained not only by external power structures but by the "epistemic limitations"

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imposed upon her capacity to speak (283). Simultaneously, Ahmed's conception of affective circulation illuminates how Ammu's moods, her subdued frustrations and tender interactions with her children, create subtle emotional currents that influence the household (Ahmed, *Affective Economies* 121). Through these silences, Ammu asserts agency, shaping her environment through presence and restraint. As critics have argued, such understated forms of rebellion exemplify the "small, enduring acts that resist the structures surrounding the subaltern," suggesting that empowerment often resides not in dramatic gestures but in the sustained, quietly orchestrated management of emotion and selfhood (Minh-ha 8). Thus, Ammu's silences emerge as both shield and weapon, generating a pervasive aura of resistance.

Further, Ammu's desires, particularly her forbidden love for Velutha, illustrate how affect can serve as a site of resistance against caste and familial oppression. Roy portrays their intimacy as both tender and transgressive: "Ammu kissed him as though she were trying to erase centuries of shame" (211). This act defies not only social conventions but also entrenched hierarchies, demonstrating how personal longing can become a subtle instrument of subversion. Memory plays a critical role in sustaining Ammu's defiance; recollections of lost love and childhood freedom circulate throughout the narrative, shaping both her self-conception and her interactions with others. Spivak's notion of subalternity is instructive here, as Ammu's voice is constrained by social power, yet her desires and memories constitute forms of agency that cannot be entirely silenced. Ahmed's framework of affective circulation further clarifies how Ammu's emotions ripple through her domestic environment: the longing, shame and joy she experiences attach to the bodies of those around her, subtly influencing the household's emotional climate. Scholars have noted that such emotional persistence "creates alternative spaces of autonomy within structures that otherwise marginalise" (Minh-ha 12). Through her desires and memories, Ammu enacts a quiet, emotionally resonant defiance, extending the concept of *Resistaura* into the realm of intimate, affective experience.

In Roy's novel, the household functions as a microcosm where emotions circulate, creating an intricate ecology of feelings that both constrains and empowers the characters. Fear, shame, desire and tenderness interact in subtle patterns, shaping behaviour and social interaction. Roy writes that "the air in the house was heavy with unspoken words and restrained gestures," illustrating how the unexpressed yet felt emotions form a pervasive atmosphere (78). Ahmed's notion of affective economies is particularly relevant, as these emotions are not contained within individual bodies but circulate among family members, aligning them or producing tension through attachment and repulsion. This circulation transforms ordinary domestic space into a site of subtle resistance, where the emotional climate itself can challenge authority. Spivak's analysis of subalternity also informs this reading, since Ammu's defiance manifests less through "overt speech" than through her presence and emotional influence, negotiating space within a system that seeks to silence her (285). This also emphasised that the shared circulation of affect enables subaltern subjects to exert influence in ways that remain largely invisible to dominant structures. Thus, the household becomes a site of *Resistaura*, where the quiet, emotionally charged interactions of women generate an enduring, atmospheric defiance that shapes both character and context.

Ammu embodies the subaltern woman whose defiance is enacted primarily through presence, emotion and subtle gestures rather than explicit speech. Roy portrays her internal and external struggles vividly: "She would sit by the window and watch the river, letting her thoughts drift to places where she was free" (34). These moments of solitude reflect both introspection and quiet resistance, demonstrating that spatial and emotional withdrawal can

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constitute a form of agency. Her defiance is further evident in her interactions with Velutha, where tender, forbidden intimacy becomes a political act: "Ammu put her hand on his, feeling the warmth of rebellion against all that sought to restrain them" (212). Even small acts of care for her children, such as guiding Rahel and Estha through moral and emotional labyrinths, reveal her capacity to shape familial dynamics despite societal constraints. As Spivak notes, subaltern women often exert agency in ways that are mediated through the body and affect, rather than through "authoritative speech" (287). Through these interplays of emotion, desire and attention, Ammu manifests *Resistaura*: a persistent, atmospheric defiance that both sustains her dignity and subtly disrupts the hierarchical structures surrounding her. Her resistance demonstrates that the subaltern can act meaningfully even when direct speech is denied or constrained.

In *Clear Light of Day*, Bim exemplifies quiet autonomy, enacting resistance through her decisions regarding family obligations and personal life. She consciously refuses marriage, choosing instead to shoulder the household responsibilities, asserting control over her own life while navigating the expectations imposed by society. Desai writes, "Bim never married. She had no time for such things, not when the house and its memories demanded her attention" (23). Her refusal is not dramatic but constitutes a persistent form of atmospheric resistance; by quietly asserting her priorities, she reshapes the domestic space around her. This aligns with Ahmed's observation that affect circulates in relational spaces, producing subtle forms of influence and agency even in "constrained circumstances" (Ahmed, *Affective Economies* 120). Bim's autonomy extends beyond action to presence; she influences the emotional climate of her family, negotiating tensions and maintaining boundaries through attention and care. Scholars have noted that such understated strategies reveal the "power of everyday acts in asserting selfhood within limiting social frameworks" (Minh-ha 15). Through these small yet enduring gestures, Bim generates a form of *Resistaura*, in which the quiet management of emotion and duty becomes a tool of resistance against societal and familial pressures. Her autonomy is atmospheric, relational and deeply affective.

Tara's trajectory in the novel illustrates how internal conflicts, guilt and memory operate as affective acts of agency. Returning to the childhood home after years away, she confronts unresolved emotions and familial obligations, navigating her own desires alongside expectations of care and reconciliation. Desai writes, "Tara felt the house pressing on her, bringing memories that were both tender and accusing," highlighting the emotional weight that shapes her decisions (47). Her guilt over perceived failures and her attentiveness to her siblings' needs constitute subtle forms of resistance, allowing her to reassert presence and moral authority within the domestic sphere. Ahmed's theory explains this dynamic through the concept of affective circulation: emotions such as shame, tenderness and responsibility attach to bodies and spaces, influencing relationships and producing atmospheric effects. Tara's navigation of memory and emotion is a deliberate, embodied negotiation that alters the household's affective climate. As Minh-ha notes, the subaltern or marginalised can exercise agency through the "management of affect and relational presence" (18). Tara's acts of attention and care thus exemplify *Resistaura*, demonstrating how personal reflection and emotional labour can subtly recalibrate power within domestic and social hierarchies.

Desai's depiction of the family home emphasises its role as a space where affect circulates, shaping both individual and collective agency. The house, with its accumulated histories, becomes a repository of memory, emotion and relational dynamics, influencing characters' actions and moods. Desai writes, "The walls seemed to absorb their quarrels, their

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laughter, their silences, holding them in a still, listening way" (56). These circulating affects, ranging from tension to affection, structure the interactions among Bim, Tara, Raja and other family members, demonstrating how domestic space can mediate forms of subtle resistance. Ahmed's concept of affective economies illuminates this circulation, showing that emotions "operate relationally, producing atmospheres that both constrain and empower" (*Affective Economies* 121). Bim's and Tara's management of household routines, care and attention subtly reshapes the emotional ecology, creating pockets of autonomy and influence. Such nuanced control over affect and spatial dynamics allows women to assert agency in otherwise limiting contexts. Through their presence, attentiveness and emotional responsiveness, the sisters cultivate *Resistaura*, a diffuse yet persistent aura of resistance embedded in the very fabric of domestic life.

Throughout *Clear Light of Day*, subtle emotional shifts allow the characters to negotiate memory, reconcile past conflicts and transform relational power dynamics. Tara's return and engagement with her siblings, Bim's steadfast care and their shared reflections on childhood experiences collectively generate spaces of moral and emotional authority. Desai writes, "It was not words, but the silences between them, the remembered gestures, that built understanding" (91). This emphasises that affective presence and memory can enact significant influence without overt confrontation. These negotiated intimacies exemplify how emotional labour becomes a form of agency, enabling the characters to resist imposed hierarchies and familial expectations. Ahmed's framework clarifies that such affective negotiations circulate; creating an atmosphere that both sustains and challenges social norms. As Minh-ha notes, the capacity to reshape relational and emotional landscapes, even subtly, is a central mode through which "marginalised subjects exercise power" (22). In the novel, the sisters' quiet reconciliations, attentive gestures and reflective engagements illustrate *Resistaura*: resistance enacted through care, presence and affective awareness, demonstrating that empowerment can emerge in the unspoken, relational textures of everyday life.

Both *The God of Small Things* and *Clear Light of Day* foreground forms of resistance that unfold quietly and are charged with emotional significance. In each narrative the female protagonists inhabit social worlds that limit their choices, yet they carve out spaces of agency through silence, memory, desire and daily gestures of refusal or care. Ammu's quiet defiance is evident when she "held her peace and watched the world close in around her" (Roy 112), a moment that captures her refusal to surrender to the expectations that imprison her. Bim, in contrast, enacts her resistance through steadiness and preservation, deciding that "the house would remain hers, whatever storms passed through it" (Desai 29). Both characters operate in domestic spaces that are dense with history, emotional residue and unspoken conflict, which creates conditions for subtle but persistent defiance. The home becomes a primary site where resistance takes shape, not in grand gestures but in the rhythms of daily life. In both novels the women resist through acts that may appear ordinary but carry deep emotional weight, such as the way Tara negotiates her guilt or the way Ammu holds on to forbidden love. Together these narratives show that female resistance in postcolonial settings is often embedded within the intimate, everyday environments that shape women's lives. This shared focus demonstrates how *Resistaura* emerges as an atmospheric force that moves through silence, memory and affective presence.

Despite these similarities, the two novels diverge in the emotional registers and narrative strategies through which resistance is expressed. Roy foregrounds transgressive intimacy, presenting Ammu's relationship with Velutha as an act that challenges caste, family

and morality. The intensity of their connection is captured when Roy writes, "She touched him as though she had always known him," showing that desire becomes a radical gesture (204). Desai, however, focuses on relational endurance and the slow labour of emotional negotiation. Bim's strength lies not in transgression but in persistence; she remains anchored even when others drift away. Desai notes, "Bim stayed behind, the quiet guardian of memories" (54). Tonally the novels differ as well. Roy's narrative carries a tragic undercurrent, where acts of tenderness risk destruction. Desai's tone is more meditative and reflective, centring on healing rather than catastrophe. These contrasts lead to different manifestations of *Resistaura*. In Roy's work it appears as a charged emotional atmosphere, shaped by desire, secrecy and the threat of punishment. In Desai's it emerges through patience, forgiveness and the slow reshaping of relationships. While both texts present quiet defiance, the emotional textures vary significantly, revealing the breadth of subtle resistance across women's experiences.

Comparing the two novels highlights the multiplicity of understated resistance in postcolonial women's narratives. Ammu and Bim demonstrate that *Resistaura* travels across contexts and takes diverse forms, shaped by caste, family structure, memory and personal inclination. Their struggles reveal that resistance does not need to be loud in order to be meaningful. Ammu's atmosphere of rebellion is rooted in longing and refusal, as when she "turned away from the world that demanded her compliance" (Roy 156). Bim emerges from steadfast presence and the courage to hold a fractured family together, expressed when Desai writes, "It was in her nature to bind what was breaking" (Desai 87). The comparison reveals how subtle defiance may arise from passion, endurance, or moral responsibility. These variations expand our understanding of female agency in postcolonial literature, showing that quiet resistance is neither singular nor uniform. Instead it adapts to the emotional landscapes and social constraints each woman faces. The differences also emphasises that affective atmospheres carry transformative potential, whether born from desire in Roy's world or from care and reconciliation in Desai's. Collectively the novels suggest that *Resistaura* is not a fixed mode of resistance but a flexible, relational force that illuminates the power of small acts in reshaping emotional and social realities.

To conclude, this study has shown that female empowerment in *The God of Small Things* and *Clear Light of Day* unfolds through subtle, atmospheric modes of resistance shaped by silence, memory and affect. By attending to the emotional undercurrents that guide Ammu, Bim and Tara, the analysis demonstrates that agency often resides in quiet gestures rather than overt acts of rebellion. The term *Resistaura* captures this diffuse yet persistent form of defiance that circulates through domestic and relational spaces. Drawing on the insights of Spivak and Ahmed, the study has illustrated how emotions create the very atmospheres through which women negotiate constraint and assert presence. The comparative reading reveals the multiplicity of such resistance across different emotional and narrative registers. Acknowledging this subtlety enriches postcolonial feminist criticism and draws attention to the transformative potential of everyday acts. *Resistaura* thus offers a valuable lens for interpreting other Indian and postcolonial texts where female agency is similarly understated. Future research may extend this framework to wider literary traditions or explore interdisciplinary approaches that consider the links between affect, space and gender.

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