

**ECOCRITICISM IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S NOVEL 'THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS'**

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**Abstract**

Ecology and eco-criticism are the significant aspects for the literary study and research. People are becoming conscious about the environment. Environmental balance is very important in this globalized world. Many poets and novelists have become eco-conscious or environment conscious. They have used Nature as landscape, as beautiful atmosphere/lively atmosphere such as Arundhati Roy, R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Kamala Markanday, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Jayant Mahapatra, Ramanujan and many more in whole over the world. The literature has become a mode of expression about environment and its importance in human life and universe. Due to the eco- imbalance and the environmental pollution, the whole world is under the curse of global warming. The healthy well balanced environment/atmosphere is the need of time. It is like the life blood for the Universe. The world needs eco-friendly atmosphere for the proper growth, development, sustainability and prosperity. Arundhati Roy has dealt the subject matter with the environmental concern. In her novel THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS, she has focused her attention on the value of eco-balance and environmental balance. She advocates the balanced co-relation between nature and mankind. She has dealt with nature in present and in the past that is twenty three years earlier in the novel. In my paper I will strive to find out ECOCRITICISM IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S NOVEL 'THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS' which she has dealt with exploitation of nature much beyond its limits of regeneration.

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism, Animals, History House, Meenachal, Nature, Ecological, Environment, Images, Expressions, Landscape, Pollution, Socio-Psychological, Eco- Balance.

### **What is Ecocriticism ?**

Ecocriticism" is a word on the recently published anthology entitled *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996), edited by Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Ecocriticism aims to bring a transformation of literary studies by linking literary criticism and theory with the ecological issues at large.

Ecocriticism is a new critical movement that attempts to link literary criticisms and theory with today's ecological issues. It studies the relationship between literature and the science of ecology by applying ecological concepts to literature. Its aim is to synthesize literary criticism and the Environmental matters by focusing on the literary analyses of the representations of nature in literary texts, and the literary constructions of the environmental crisis in eco-literary discourses.

Glotfelty defines in *The Ecocriticism Reader* that "ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment ", and one of the implicit goals of the approach is to recoup professional dignity for what Glotfelty calls the "undervalued genre of nature writing". Lawrence Buell defines "ecocriticism" ... as [a] study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis".

Simon Estok noted in 2001 that "ecocriticism has distinguished itself, debates notwithstanding, firstly by the ethical stand it takes, its commitment to the natural world as an important thing rather than simply as an object of thematic study, and, secondly, by its commitment to making connections".

In response to the question of what ecocriticism is or should be, Camilo Gomides has offered an operational definition that is both broad and discriminating: "The field of enquiry that analyzes and promotes works of art which raise moral questions about human interactions with nature, while also motivating audiences to live within a limit that will be binding over generations"

Now-a-days the literary critics pay attention on study and analysis of the strong bond between nature and society. Ecology and eco-criticism are the significant aspects for the literary study and research. Ecological or environmental study is the center of attraction for literary personalities as well as the need of time. People are becoming conscious about the environment. Environmental balance is very important in this globalized world. Therefore, so many plans/schemes are being launched for saving the environment and making the people environment-conscious. Many steps have been taken for stopping environmental pollutions.

People have been made to realize the importance and value of unpolluted environment. Through, the help of slogans, advertisements, documentaries and direct and indirect knowledge of the relations between man and nature. Industrialization and materialism are the main causes of environmental imbalance. They are responsible for disturbing ecological balance.

Literature is always the best medium for propagating any thought or value in the society. It always works as the best conveyor of ideas and messages. The issue of environment or nature or ecology and society can be found in the literature of the world. The Indian literature in English cannot be ignored in this connection. Though, the literary output in this aspect is not much, the intellectuals and the famous modern literary figures try to draw the attention of the society on these issues. The popular writers such as Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, and Amitav Ghose can be regarded as great environmentalists. Their works are the proof of this.

#### **ECOCRITICISM AND ‘THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS’**

Arundhati Roy won booker prize for her master piece work ‘The God of Small Things’. Her novel is a blend of nature and characters and she has written her novel in unique manner that they complement one another. In her novel she has tried to portray ecological exploitation of nature by human being in the name of progress and modernization. Through her novel she tries to describe exploitation of nature but through the character of Velutha shows us the way for

sustainable development. Arundhati Roy is socially aware intellectual with deep concern for the environment. She does not merely preach nice things from ivory tower but has shown her serious commitment to environment in her prize winning novel *The God of Small Things*. To justify this statements I will quote sentences from her fiction 'The God of Small Things'.

I will begin at a point in *The God of Small Things* where Chacko - Rahel and Estha's Oxford-educated Rhodes-scholar uncle- lectures them on history. Then, to give Estha and Rahel a sense of historical perspective.

...he told them about the Earth Woman. He made them imagine that the earth - four thousand six hundred million years old - was a forty-six year old woman.... It had taken the whole of Earth Woman's life for the earth to become what it was. For the oceans to part. For the mountains to rise. The Earth Woman was eleven years old, Chacko said, when the first single-celled organisms appeared. The first animals, creatures like worms and jelly- fish, appeared only when she was forty. She was over forty-five - just eight months ago - when dinosaurs roamed the earth. The whole of human civilization as we know it,' Chacko told the twins, 'began only two hours ago in the Earth Woman's life. As long as it takes us to drive from Ayemenem to Cochin. 'It was an awe-inspiring and humbling thought, Chacko said... that the whole of contemporary history, the World Wars, the War of Dreams, the Man on the Moon, science, literature, philosophy, the pursuit of knowledge - was no more than a blink in of the Earth Woman's eye....'And ... everything we are and ever will be - are just a twinkle in her eye,' Chacko said grandly.... (53-54)

The important point is that the late arrival and domination of the Earth by human beings, a lesson in humility towards her and all the living and non-living existence that she supports, would be necessary.

Right at the beginning of the novel, we find a world where nature and culture have remained integrated enough for years to perpetuate a stable, abiding and harmonious environment:

“by early June the south-west monsoon breaks and there are three months of wind and water with short spells of sharp, glittering sunshine that thrilled children snatch to play with. The countryside turns an immodest green. Boundaries blur as tapioca fences take root and bloom. Brick walls turn moss green, Pepper vines snake up electric poles. Wild creepers burst through laterite banks and spill across the flooded roads. Boats ply in the bazaars. And small fish appear in the...PWD potholes on the highways.” (*The God of Small Things -1*)

There are many significant instances of social, familial, sexual, religious as well as class and caste-based politics in the novel but degradation of the environment in various ways that is of particular focus to me here. Roy deliberately creates the picture of such a benevolent State as perceived by the children early in the novel. "According to Estha, if they'd been born on the bus, they'd have got free bus rides for the rest of their lives.... They also believed that if they were killed on a zebra crossing the Government would pay for their funerals" (*The God of Small Things -4*)

In a State undergoing the process of development and oblivious to their small world , their mother Ammu feels afraid for Rahel and Estha and their future: "To Ammu her twins seemed like a pair of small bewildered frogs ...lolloping arm in arm down a highway full of hurtling traffic. Entirely oblivious of what trucks can do to frogs"(*The God of Small Things -43*). Roy's choice of image reminds us of the insuperable distance(and potential danger due to their massively different dimensions)that exists between the truck roaring by, indicating commercial activities (made possible due to the existence of the road, indicative of development) and the tiny, insignificant creatures, evocative of the idea of both subaltern and natural modes of existence. It could be thought of as prophetic also in the sense of much of Roy's perception of, and activism to stall the danger of

State-sponsored acts of development for the insignificant, inarticulate citizens who are affected by them as in the case of the Narmada Bachao Andolan.

However, if we begin our analysis of the novel itself with "a sky-blue day in December sixty-nine (the nineteen silent)...when...[a] sky-blue Plymouth...sped past young rice-fields and old rubber trees, on its way to Cochin" (*The God of Small Things* -35) then the comparatively clear environment of Kerala in a bygone era is evoked. But there are still two elements to disturb this picture of serenity. The first comes from the reference to 'old rubber trees', thereby reminding us of the old colonial days when natural and human resources in India were held to be equally easy to exploit. The second disturbing idea comes a sentence later: "Further east, in a small country with similar landscape (jungles, rivers, rice-fields, communists), enough bombs were being dropped to cover all of it in six inches of steel" (*The God of Small Things* -35). Even though officially this was the postcolonial era, in this country being carpet-bombed there is every attempt on the part of the invading super power to destroy life and natural environment and ecology completely and irreversibly in a new phase of imperialist exploitation and aggression. Sandwiched between the global and the historical, Roy's fictional Ayemenem, even in 1969, is a place where natural environment and human culture strike a conflicting note mostly, anticipating and revealing a dissatisfaction that surfaces especially when there is an attempt to move forward at a furious pace, breaking off with tradition (as would become evident especially after Rahel and Estha's return to the place more than two decades later). In order to show how human beings arrive at this juncture, I will juxtapose two scenes from these early days.

First we shall look at Baby Kochamma's garden and then, contrast it with Velutha's environment.

...Baby Kochamma [had] returned from Rochester [in America]  
with a diploma in Ornamental gardening.... [H]er  
father gave Baby Kochamma charge of the front  
garden of the Ayemenem House....

Baby Kochamma turned it into a lush maze of dwarf hedges, rocks, and gargoyles. The flower she loved most was the anthurium.... Their single succulent spathes ranged from shades of mottled black to blood red .... In the centre of Baby Kochamma's garden, surrounded by beds of canna and phlox, a marble cherub peed an endless silver arc into a shallow pool in which a single blue lotus bloomed. At each corner of the pool lolled a pink plaster-of-Paris gnome with rosy cheeks and a peaked red cap.

...Like a lion-tamer she tamed twisting vines and nurtured bristling cacti. She limited bonsai plants and pampered rare orchids. She waged war on the weather. She tried to grow edelweiss and chinese guava. (*The God of Small Things* -26-27)

Baby Kochamma's carefully cultivated garden (with the word 'cultivated' intended to remind us of 'culture') is a riot of colors and cultures. Bonsai plants prove the existence of an extreme instance of 'culture' or the kind of power that man exercises to control the natural world completely. And in the aggressively red anthurium juxtaposed with the single, oriental-looking blue lotus, there is a deliberate clash of cultures and natural environments belonging to different countries and origins and this is also evident in her attempt to bring edelweiss and chinese guava together in her garden. However, in the name of ornamentation, it is Baby Kochamma's peeing cherub, highly prominent in the proximity of pink rosy-cheeked gnomes and gargoyles that shocks us into a realization of many foreign elements competing for attention in the 'cultured' environment created by her and resulting in a hideous distortion of the simply natural environment that would have been beautiful enough with basic care. Aesthetically speaking, the ornamental garden appears to represent a state of existence where both natural and cultural environments have been undergoing corruption.

If money, lack of fulfillment in marriage in private life due to strictly observed religious and patriarchal rules and an acquired American diploma can induce Baby Kochamma to corrupt nature, then the opposite picture is presented in the situation where young Velutha ,a son of the soil, a *Paravan* or untouchable person, fosters nature and a natural way of living and also provides crucial service, taking care of the aesthetic environment of Ayemenem by means of carpentry and by tending to machines. Against the expensive foreign diploma of Baby Kochamma, we read of Velutha, "eleven then ...like a little magician. He could make intricate toys - tiny wind mills, rattles, minute jewel boxes out of dried palm reeds; he could carve perfect boats out of tapioca stems and figurines on cashew nuts."(*The God of Small Things* -74) With training from Johann Klein, a visiting expert carpenter from Bavaria, Velutha in his adolescence "had finished high school and was an accomplished carpenter... [with] a distinctly German design sensibility.... Apart from his carpentry skills, Velutha had away with machines. Mammachi ... often said that if only he hadn't been a Paravan, he might have become an engineer. He mended radios, clocks, water-pumps. He looked after the plumbing and all the electrical gadgets in the house"(*The God of Small Things* -75). So much so, that when Baby Kochamma's "garden cherub's silver arc dried up inexplicably ,it was Dr. Velutha who fixed its bladder for her", along with making angle's wings, cardboard clouds, an easily dismantled manger "for Christ to be born in" for her "annual Nativity plays" (*The God of Small Things* - 75). In other words, Velutha, an untouchable, belonging to the class diametrically opposite Baby Kochamma's, succeeds in bringing together the best knowledge of tradition and modernity to improve the environment at Ayemenem. "When Mammachi decided to enclose the back verandah, it was Velutha who designed and built the sliding-folding door that later became all the rage in Ayemenem" (*The God of Small Things* -75). I feel that as in Velutha's life and work, so in this act of crafting the sliding door, what emerges as significant to our discussion is the creation of a means of easy passage, back to nature, from the life of culture ,and vice versa.

Viewed through the frankly evaluating eyes of young Rahel and Estha, Velutha appeared to be a special person because of his 'green' knowledge, or his ability to



shape their world in keeping with the natural environment: "They would ... wonder how he always seemed to know what smooth shapes waited inside the wood for him. They loved the way wood, in Velutha's hands, seemed to soften and become as pliable as plasticine. He was teaching them to use a planer"(*The God of Small Things* -78-79). Velutha was not only, merely by himself, living in harmony with nature even as he continued to work confidently in the Machine Age and follow its cultural parameters; at the same time, through Rahel and Estha, he was also planting in the next generation the values that made such an integrated mode of life possible. The way in which Roy describes the twins' eagerness to learn these things from him, even though it means an act of rebellion against the restrictions imposed, in the name of class, caste and culture, by their own family, makes it evident that the interest is mutually shared. It is also a form of comment on the artificiality of life at Ayemenem House, a reflection of which had already been seen in Baby Kochamma's garden: "They were forbidden from visiting his house, but they did. They would sit with him for hours, on their haunches - hunched punctuation marks in a pool of wood shavings.... It was Velutha who made Rahel her luckiest ever fishing rod and taught her and Estha to fish"(*The God of Small Things* -78-79).The children also feel at home, even in the impoverished, disease ridden hut of Velutha: "His house (on a good day) smelled of fresh good shavings and the sun. Of red fish curry cooked with black tamarind. The best fish curry, according to Estha, in the whole world"(*The God of Small Things* -79). In other words, Velutha's "little laterite hut, down river from the Ayemenem House" (*The God of Small Things* -78) is a near-perfect instance of eco-conscious living or living in constant touch with one's natural environment in stark contrast to the grand design, money and colonial mentality represented in the *anglophile* culture of the big house . Mukherjee in *Postcolonial Environments* compared the 'big' houses of Ayemenem with Velutha's hut:

The location of the Ayemenem House also speaks of the continuities between old and new colonialisms. Like the History House, it is supported by lands and rubber plantations purchased during the nineteenth century which contributed to the economy of

British colonialism.... In the new world of post-independence India, it houses Chacko's pickle - factory (wrested and expanded from Mammachi's more modest local enterprise) which seeks to be a small part of the national effort to integrate the country into a globalized economy. The logo of paradise Pickles and by extension, that of Ayemenem house, is now a crudely painted *Kathakali* dancer with the legend' emperors of the realm of taste' emblazoned beside it. Its products represent the commodification of exotic regional flavours for international markets....

In contrast, Roy gives us a glimpse of a 'small house' that speaks of a distinct environment and a habitation that opposes the politics of 'largeness'.... Velutha's hut speaks of and enables practices of integration, inclusion and equity. Next to the river and hemmed in by a huddle of trees, 'it nestled close to the ground, as though it was listening to a whispered subterranean secret'.... (96)

Living in and with nature, Velutha comes to represent a certain kind of power that remains unappreciated by the typically snobbish majority of adult inhabitants of Ayemenem House.

Mukherjee in *Postcolonial Environments* blames the process of globalization firmly for this state of both environmental and cultural degradation by pointing out that:

with Estha and Rahel's return in 1991, we are ushered into the next stage of Kerala and India's development in the era of the post-Fordist global capitalism often crudely known as 'globalization' (as if this had not always been the tendency of historical capital over

the past five or six hundred years). Within and outside India, the neo-liberal mantra endlessly circulated without much critical analysis presents this as a kind of utopian border-crossing available to all the citizens of the world who sign up to its prescription of 'structural adjustments' and the corporatization of economic and political process. Roy's novel punctures this myth by showing it to be a continuation of the despoliation and degradation of the Indian environment and peoples that had accelerated under colonialism and has now taken on an unprecedented velocity. (98-99)

To Mukherjee then, the environmental degradation of Ayemenem in 1991 is a direct result of the process of global capitalism and I think that in Roy's novel this is proved by various situations of foreign economic and cultural domination that are projected prominently. For instance, in 1991, when the silent Estha goes on long walks along the local Meenachal river (reminding us of the meaning of 'meen' as fish in Indian culture and in this sense, signifying that the river is the natural habitat of fish), this is what greets his senses: "Some days he walked along the banks of the river that smelled of... pesticides bought with World Bank loans. Most of the fish had died. The ones that survived suffered from fin-rot and had broken out in boils" (*The God of Small Things* -13). In the highly sarcastic naming of a chapter as 'God's Own Country', Roy gives us another view of Ayemenem in 1991, this time seen through Rahel's eyes: "Years later, when Rahel returned to the river, it greeted her with a ghostly skull's smile....Downriver, a saltwater barrage had been built, in exchange for votes from the influential paddy-farmer lobby.... More rice, for the price of a river" (*The God of Small Things* - 124). As a result, the river had turned into "a swollen drain" (*The God of Small Things* -124). The poor and dispossessed had made a slum by its side, adding to the pollution. While upstream, "clean mothers washed clothes and pots in unadulterated factory effluents" and "people bathed", downstream at Ayemenem, slum- "children hung their bottoms over the edge and defecated directly onto the

sqelchy ,sucking mud of the exposed river bed" and the net result would be that " on warm days the smell of shit lifted off the air and hovered over Ayemenem like a hat" and naturally, even the History House transformed into a luxury hotel was not exempt from either the stench or the "thick and toxic" water(*The God of Small Things* -125). In a really concise manner ,Roy points out how both farming and factories pollute nature and also hinted at the unholy nexus between the globalization, greed and lack of far-sight in post-colonial India. And added to this was pollution of the cultural environment: the hotel, called 'Heritage', "had bought" "smaller, older, wooden houses -ancestral homes...from old families and transplanted" them "around the History House in attitudes of deference" (*The God of Small Things* -126). The "oldest of the wooden houses...had been the ancestral home of Comrade E.M. S. Namboodiripad....The furniture and knick-knacks that came with the house were on display... with edifying placards..."(*The God of Small Things* -126). So much for 'heritage '.We learn soon that "Comrade Namboodiripad's house functioned as the hotel's dining room, where semi-suntanned tourists in bathing suits sipped coconut water (served in the shell)..."(*The God of Small Things* -126).Commodification of both nature and culture, it seems, is complete. This was 'God's Own Country' (according to the highly ironical allusion to the way Kerala is promoted in the tourism sector by the State in real life and in Roy's fictional work, by the hotel administration "in their brochures" (*The God of Small Things* -125), with a polluted, stinking environment ,already sold in an abridged version (like the Kathakali dance performances)to the foreign visitors. It is this state of environmental decay that Rahel and Estha return to and Mukherjee whole heartedly criticizes. Roy intended to show that there are elements in our culture and tradition that have remained eco-friendly and worthy of appreciation even in 'developed' countries .For the possibility of finding the ways of redemption and rectification ,of environment degradation caused by industrial developments ,in Roy's work, I return to two scenes that take place after Rahel's return to Ayemenem. The first is a description of Baby Kochamma's garden in 1991.

Recently, after enduring more than half a century of relentless, pernickety attention, the ornamental garden had been abandoned.... The reason for this

sudden, unceremonious dumping was a new love. BabyKochamma had installed a dish antenna on the roof of Ayemenem House... in Ayemenem... now whole wars, famines, picturesque massacres and Bill Clinton could be summoned up like servants. (*The God of Small Things* -27)

Though there can be a debate around the concept of famines ,massacres and Bill Clinton being switched on and off with the help of anything like a TV remote by an obscure Indian woman, in contrast to the more likely economic and cultural subjugation that she unknowingly undergoes in a putative real life, what is to be noted is the way in which Roy presents this phase of history: "...while her ornamental garden wilted and died, Baby Kochamma followed "baseball, cricket, tennis, *The Bold and the Beautiful* and *SantaBarbara* (*The God of Small Things* -27). In other words, the cultured gardening is replaced with another system of culture absorbed via the artificial visual and auditory environment generated by means of American soaps and league games. It is a way of life that a satellite-dependent global technological culture helps to transmit literally everywhere, including Ayemenem. It seems as if all Baby Kochamma has succeeded in doing is to replace the corruption of the natural environment in her garden earlier with the pollution of the cultural space that she inhabits in 1991. But what happens to Baby Kochamma's garden after it was abandoned and more importantly, why does Roy devote half a-page to the description of it in 1991? One ostensible purpose could be to show how culture is relative and how the ornamental gardening of the 1960s and the satellite TV of the 1990s could generate equally artificial environments so as to create between them, at least at some conceptual level, some parity. But I think the description points towards a regeneration of nature after the prolonged torture that it had been subject to in the name of culture.

In the other instance of Roy's subtle treatment of the nature-culture equation, we re-read the description of vines climbing up telegraph poles and fish swimming in the rain-drenched, waterlogged potholes on PWD-made roads on the opening page of Roy's novel. This is the phase that comes, chronologically, at the end of the sequence charting the story of Rahel and Estha.

The short-lived poles and roads(signs of human effort, development and culture) that seem to compete with the everlasting elements of nature, gradually tend to merge with them to present a picture of a harmonious co-existence

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