

# Ecological Concerns and Arundhati Roy: A Special Reference

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## ABSTRACT

The God of Small Things', set in 1960s, reflects the mentality and socio-cultural environment of Ayemenem, an actual town in Kerala, an Indian state which is full of natural grandeur and opulence. Roy herself spent a greater part of her childhood days in this village, in the harmonious relationship with nature. Arundhati Roy's ecological concerns find expression in The God of Small Things, a novel for which she won Booker prize. She picks up the Meenachal river from her childhood days and entwines all the big and small characters of the novel in its encircling heart. River Meenachal narrates the story of Ayemenem, the people living on its bank and their lives revolving around its abundant water. Arundhati Roy clearly shows the river as an inseparable component in the lives of the characters Velutha, Ammu, Chako, Pappachi, Rahel, Estha and others where they learnt the invaluable lessons of life. Velutha, a born Paravan- an untouchable, is 'The God of Small Things' in the novel. He is a man of ecology who makes small pretty things from the materials gained from nature. River is more than an amenity; it is a treasure. It offers a necessity of life that must be rationed among those who have power over it. The image of life as a flowing river abounds in literature and philosophy. Rivers serve as symbols of identity not only of one's self but also of a nation too. As the river suffers, we hear the echoes of the socially committed, eco-conscious, ecofeminist's anger in the dreary depiction of the fouled river Meenachal.

**Keywords:** Ecological, Environmental, Ecofeminist, Pictographic, Eco-conscious, Patriarchal, Subjugation.

"The work of the poet," as rightly said by Sri Aurobindo, "depends not only on himself and his age but on the mentality of the nation to which he belongs and the spiritual, intellectual, aesthetic tradition and environment which it creates for him. It is not that he is or need be entirely limited or conditioned by his environment or that he must regard himself as only a voice of the national mind or bound by some past national tradition and debarred from striking out a novel and original road of his own." (p.41)

Arundhati Roy is no exception to it. 'The God of Small Things', set in 1960s, reflects the mentality and socio-cultural environment of Ayemenem, an actual town in Kerala, an Indian state which is full of natural grandeur and opulence. Roy herself spent a greater part of her childhood days in this village, in the harmonious relationship with nature. She furnishes a pictographic portrayal of the village greenery and the river Meenachal:

"The nights are clear but suffered with sloth and sullen expectation. But 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 roots. Boats ply in the bazaars.” (p.1)

Arundhati Roy’s ecological concerns find expression in *The God of Small Things*, a novel for which she won Booker prize. Jason Cawley, one of the five Booker Judges writes:

“Roy’s achievement ...is never to forget about small things in life, insects and flowers, wind and water, the outcaste and despised.”

She picks up the Meenachal river from her childhood days and entwines all the big and small characters of the novel in its encircling heart. River Meenachal narrates the story of Ayemenem, the people living on its bank and their lives revolving around its abundant water. Arundhati Roy clearly shows the river as an inseparable component in the lives of the characters Velutha, Ammu, Chako, Pappachi, Rahel, Estha and others where they learnt the invaluable lessons of life. Velutha, a born Paravan- an untouchable, is ‘The God of Small Things’ in the novel. He is a man of ecology who makes small pretty things from the materials gained from nature. He has been described as making “tiny wind mills, rattle, minute jewels boxes out of dried palm reeds; he could carve perfect boats out of tapioca stems and figurines on cashew nuts.” (P.74) When driven out of his house by his mother, he takes shelter in the trustworthy company of nature near the bank of the river Meenachal. He catches fish from the river, cooks it in open fire and sleeps on the bank of river. Being betrayed by his family and comrade Pillai, he unintentionally moves towards the river to find solace. He belonged to the river Meenachal as much as it belonged to him. Velutha exhibits an affinity with his surroundings. He acquires a ‘river –sense’ which he passes on to the twins- Rahel and Estha- for example by teaching them how to fish. He made Rahel her luckiest ever fishing rod. River Meenachal’s complacent exterior with a turbulent spirit beneath, characterized itself in Velutha’s personality. There is a lot which runs common between Velutha and the river. The reckless spirit of the river turning him into a muscular River God, drives him to make love to an upper-class woman, Ammu. Velutha possessed by the wild spirit of the river satirizes on the demarcation of race and culture so apparently practiced in Ayemenem. Meenachal is the witness of his thirteen nights physical relationship with Ammu. In other words, Meenachal is lifeline for Velutha.

Estha and Rahel dreamt of the river in their childhood. The river Meenachal is described as:

“It was warm, the water. Grey green. Like rippled silk. With fish in it. With the sky and trees in it. And at night, the broken yellow moon in it.” (P.123)

The children also dreamt of the coconut trees finding reflection in the river. They also come to know about the variety of fishes found in the river. Besides, they dream of the dull, sullen sound of the boatmen’s bamboo poles as they thudded against the dark and oiled boat-wood. Most of their childhood adventures were facilitated by the river. While going to Cochin in the company of their mother, uncle and grandmother Rahel and Estha look at the scenic and beautiful countryside of Ayemenem:

“It was a sky-blue day in December 69...A sky-blue Plymouth, with the sun in its tailfins, sped past young rice-field and old rubber trees, on its way to Cochin. Further east, in a small country with similar landscape (jungles, rivers, rice-field) ... It was peace time and the family in the Plymouth travelled without fear or foreboding.” (P.35)

The people of Ayemenem harboured a sense of satisfaction and happiness residing amidst the serene foliage of the place and having the proximity of the river which flows through a broad landscape that has meadows, hills, hillocks, narrows water-ways, swamps, and marshes.

Pondering over the significance of the river, Dr. C. Vijayalakshmi writes,

“Meenachal river is the part and parcel of the life of the rural areas as it is the source of water in wells and for vegetation on the banks. It is the source of water supply to the urban centres in Kottayam Taluk also. In November and December rural people from Karnataka region come and settle here for a few days. They have traditional system of preparing net on a large scale which is merged in the river. They usually get big catch and will sell it in the market. Thus, the Meenachal River literally means “river of meen” (fish). There are 78 varieties of fish in the river.”

In the chapter entitled, “God’s Own Country”, Roy depicts how after a considerable gap of 23 years, when Rahel returned to the Meenachal river, she is hailed by the deplorable condition of the river “with a ghastly skull’s smile, with holes where teeth had been and the limp hand raised from a hospital bed.” (P.124)

Despite the fact that it was June, a time of rain, the river was no more than a swollen drain.

“A thin ribbon of thick water that lapped wearily at the mud banks on either side, sequined with the occasional silver slant of a dead fish. It was choked with a succulent weed, whose furred brown roots waived like thin tentacles under water,” and the river was no more than “a slow slugging green ribbon lawn that ferried garbage to the sea.” (P.124)

Shit and pesticides are the two elements to pollute the river. Roy realistically portrays how the polluted Meenachal is the woeful consequence of human insensible act. Children of the shanty hutments on the other side of the river defecate directly onto the river bed and by evening “the river would rouse itself to accept the day’s offerings, and sludge off to the sea, leaving wavy lines of thick white scum in its wake. Upstream clean mothers wash clothes and pots in unadulterated factory effluents.” (P.125)

River is more than an amenity; it is a treasure. It offers a necessity of life that must be rationed among those who have power over it. The image of life as a flowing river abounds in literature and philosophy. Rivers serve as symbols of identity not only of one’s self but also of a nation too.

Roy also criticizes the indiscreet governmental policy to build a salt water barrage down river in exchange for votes from the influential paddy farmer lobby. It is true that people are now getting two harvests and more rice but they are getting them at the expense of the river as it eventually killed the river. The river suffers and we hear the echoes of the socially committed, eco-conscious, ecofeminist’s anger in the dreary depiction of the fouled river Meenachal.

Arundhati Roy strongly opposes the projects to build big dams in Narmada Valley, considering its vicious adverse impact on the environment, and the misery it will fetch to the lives of people. “The Narmada Valley Development Project”, she informs, “will alter the ecology of the entire river basin of one of India’s biggest rivers. For better or for worse, it will affect the lives of twenty-five million people who live in the valley. It will submerge and destroy 4000 square kilometers of natural deciduous forest. Its impact on the environment and the people living along the valley is already severe.” (Roy, *The Greater Common Good*, p. 18)

Women and nature have been bonding well from time immemorial. Women are closer to nature than men and somehow have a special association with nature due to their physiology and social role. There is, men believe, some deep-rooted instinctive relation between women and nature. Mother nature which is the recurrent manifestation of nature, focuses on the life giving and nurturing features and embodies itself in the form of the mother. Ecofeminism emerged in the 1970s at a time when consciousness of the connection between woman and nature increased. The term ‘ecofeminism was coined in 1977 by the French writer, Françoise d’Eaubonne, who called upon women to lead an ecological revolution to save the planet. Arundhati Roy has shown her sincere social commitment through her writings and activities by joining like-minded people on important issues related to environment. During a seminar on the Hiroshima Day

in 1998, she said, “if there is a nuclear war, our foes will not be China or America or even each other. Our foe will be the earth herself. The very elements- the sky, the air, the land, the wind and water will all turn against us. Their wrath will be terrible...” (The End of Imagination, P.12-13)

Several other Indian writers have also taken into their stride the task of exploring the environmental issues through their writings. Ruskin Bond’s writings replete with ecology as the central theme and depict his concerns about depletion in natural environment. In *An Island of Trees* (1992), he delineates his concern about the reckless actions of man towards nature. In another short story ‘No Room for a Leopard’ (2007) describe the pitiable conditions of the animals because of deforestation. Another veteran writer Kiran Desai in her ‘Inheritance of Loss’ (2006) illustrates the inhumanity of the human world towards the other creatures. Amitav Ghosh’s ‘The Hungry Tide’ (2005) presents the interrelationship among man, nature and animals world. He portrays the wrath of nature and the susceptibility of humans, only to be redeemed by the benevolence of the former. But, *The God of Small Things* perceives the natural environment as a victim of the human avarice and viciousness.

Arundhati Roy has presented environmental issues as one of the “Small Things” which have been continually overlooked for a long time in Indian society. Like the Indian women who taciturnly bear the patriarchal social subjugation. Environment has also been braving out the sluttish destruction for ages which stirs the blood and agitates the eco-conscious mind of Arundhati Roy.

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