

A Postcolonial Ecocritical study of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract:

In the contemporary world physical, social and cultural environmental issues are growing and prevailing everywhere. In such a scenario India is also witnessing huge degeneration in its physical, social and cultural environments. Hence, it becomes imperative to observe how much awareness regarding the continuous above-mentioned issues has been spread among the masses. The present study aims to investigate whether Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is acting as a vehicle to raise awareness concerning physical, social and cultural environmental issues. The critical tool applied in the paper is postcolonial ecocriticism.

Keywords: ecocriticism, capitalism and cultural degeneration.

Postcolonial ecocriticism has gained currency among critics in the last decade. It focuses on the side-lined people, places, plants, and animals as its subject of investigation. By and large, these marginalised groups play no role in triggering environmental issues; in fact, they suffer the most due to environmental damage. Postcolonial ecocriticism analyses the oppressive structural forces in society that are accountable for various environmental problems. In *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*, Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin point out: "one of the central tasks of postcolonial ecocriticism as an emergent field has been to contest- also to provide a viable alternative to western ideologies of development" (Huggan 27). Today in the globalised world capitalists encourage uniformity among local environments and cultures. Understanding the negative impacts of the capitalists' ceaseless desire for uniformity, as it supports mass production and provides a bigger market to sell products, postcolonial ecocriticism highlights the "alterity, difference, and rupture, which are vital methods of deconstructing the discourse of Enlightenment universalism" (Garrard, *Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* 321). Hence, postcolonial ecocriticism evaluates the present-day practices of capitalism and its effects on the marginalised world.

The present study aims to study Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* from the viewpoint of postcolonial ecocriticism. Arundhati Roy is a famous Indian author as well as a human rights and environmental activist. Environmental politics turns out to be a substantial theme in her writings. *The God of Small Things* also puts up questions concerning environmental justice. The novel is set in Ayemenem, which represents Aymanam or Ayamenem, a village in the Kottayam District of Kerala where Roy had spent many years. Discussing her novel in *The Chequebook and the Cruise Missile*, Roy herself writes: *The God of Small Things* is a book which connects the very smallest things to the very biggest. Whether it's the dent that a baby spider makes on the surface of water in a pond or the quality of the moonlight on

a river or how history and politics intrude into your life, your house, your bedroom, your bed, into the most intimate relationships between people – parents and children and siblings and so on (11).

The God of Small Things through its plot stresses the theme of suppression of nature in the modern world. On the one hand, the story depicts moments of celebrating the serenity of nature, on the other hand, it also highlights nature's defenselessness. The novel raises a conscious concern regarding the consequences of the oppression of nature in the capitalised milieu. The narrative of *The God of Small Things* begins in the childhood of Rahel and Estha, and it ends with their reunion in their thirties. Noticeably, this time frame also epitomizes the alterations that have taken place in the physical, social and cultural environment of Ayemenem. The portrayal of these changes represents the ongoing ecological changes in Kerala. Aijaz Ahmad points out:

A key strength of Arundhati Roy is that she has written [...] a novel that nevertheless remains realist in all its essential features. She knows what realist fiction always knows: love, grief, remembrance, the absolute indispensability of verisimilitude in the depiction of time, place and character, so exact that we who know it to be fiction nevertheless read it as the closest possible kin of fact (Ahmad 103).

Ayemenem witnesses the depletion of the natural environment in the pathetic condition of the river Meenachal. The river which stood for freedom and serenity in 1969, seems to struggle for its survival in 1993. Earlier the river “ was warm, the water, Greygreen. Like rippled silk. With fish in it. With the sky and trees in it. And at night, the broken yellow moon in it” (Roy 123). Here, the river was a part of the unharmed nature that prevails everywhere. It was an independent entity. The authority of the river can be felt when the novelist writes, “No one knows the Meenachal. No one knows what it may snatch or suddenly yield. Or when. That is what makes fishermen prey” (Roy 259). Contrarywise, years later Rahel encountered a dying river Meenachal. When Rahel “returned to the river, it greeted her with a ghastly skull's smile, with holes where teeth had been, and a limp hand raised from a hospital bed” (Roy 124). The consequences of capitalist-centric activities have altered the river's shape and strength. Through the description of the pitiful condition of the river Meenachal, the novel drags the attention of its readers towards the ground realities of the rivers in Kerala. In his book *Postcolonial Environments*, Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee raises the issue of deaths of rivers in Kerala, he writes:

The landmark 1982 Citizen's Report on the Indian environment highlighted the case of the pollution of the Chaliyar river by the Mavoor unit of the Gwalior Rayons company owned by another of India's leading industrial group – the Birlas. The rampant pollution of the river by untreated industrial chemical waste (including mercury) had serious adverse effects on the ecological health of an entire region and prompted a popular agitation that lasted from 1965–79 (Agarwal et al. 1982, pp. 26–7). The Kerala state government was finally forced to negotiate between the local citizens and the company, which, after 22 years, admitted to causing human and environmental damage, but got away with not having to undertake the appropriate compensatory actions (Mukherjee 92).

Arundhati Roy campaigned with activist Medha Patkar against Sardar Sarovar Project. In the novel, by portraying the wretched condition of the river Meenachal, Roy hints at what she finds is taking place throughout India. As she writes in the novel:

Downriver, a saltwater barrage had been built, in exchange for votes from the influential paddy-farmer lobby. The barrage regulated the inflow of saltwater from the backwaters that opened into

the Arabian Sea. So now they had two harvests a year instead of one. More rice, for the price of a river (Roy 124).

The God of Small Things, beyond question, exposes the uncontrolled exploitation of nature that has been taking place in the camouflage of development. Furthermore, the novel also highlights a capitalist phenomenon that encourages the disregard of depleting ecological conditions by crafting synthetic environments. It has been told in the novel that in Ayemenem, the hotel provides the tourists with a very clean and good-looking atmosphere and hides the heaps of garbage and the dirty river by raising high boundary walls. This kind of replicated ambience, on the one hand, may take people away from the reality of the polluted physical surroundings for a short period. So on the other hand, it also promotes the tendency of closing one's eyes to the problem of increasing pollution. *God of Small Things* offers an understanding of some harsh realities of the modern commercialised world. Roy describes the milieu of the hotel in the following words:

Guests in the hotel were warned against swimming in the toxic water of the river. A tall wall had been built to hide the slum and to protect the hotel from encroachment. Nevertheless, regarding the smell the hotel was helpless (Roy 125).

Adamson writes in *Environmental Justice Reader*:

We define environmental justice as the right of all people to share equally in the benefits bestowed by a healthy environment. We define the environment, in turn, as the places in which we live, work, play, and worship (4).

The God of Small Things delineates how different types of environments were available for the tourists and the dwellers. The situation in other parts of Kerala is not very dissimilar from Ayemenem. The “–rampant pollution of the river by untreated industrial chemical waste (including mercury) had serious adverse effects on the ecological health of an entire region and prompted a popular agitation that lasted from 1965–79 (Agarwal et al. 1982, pp. 26–7)” (Mukherjee 92).

The present novel offers the readers an understanding of the necessity of environmental responsibility in the political system. Unless ecological consciousness becomes a part of the political agenda, any working solution to the ecological crises is impossible.

Looking through the lens of postcolonial ecocriticism further it has been found that today, multimedia has already displayed its undisputable power by captivating the masses. Television connects people with the world and slowly disconnects all its imprisoned viewers from their immediate surroundings. Mukherjee writes;

Globalization climbs out of the ether and into the satellite dishes that have mushroomed all over Ayemenem. The colonization of minds that Chacko had spoken about in the 1960s is now performed through the agencies of American soap operas, wrestling and fashion shows. This worlding has a literally paralysing effect on Ayemenem as seen most spectacularly in the case of Baby Kochamma (Mukherjee 100).

Baby Kochamma, because of her new liking for television, gives up gardening. “Recently, after enduring more than half a century of relentless, pernickety attention, the ornamental garden had been abandoned. Left to its own devices [...] like a circus whose animals had forgotten their tricks [...] the reason for this sudden, unceremonious dumping was a new love. Baby Kochamma had installed a dish antenna on the roof of the Ayemenem house. She presided over the world in her drawing-room on satellite TV” (Roy 27). Baby Kochamma and her servant Kochu Maria take pleasure in television watching together. They forget their realities in the glamour and attraction of the programmes brought by TV to them. And it was not only

they but the whole Ayemenem that was living under the mesmeric umbrella of TV. Arundhati describes the situation in these words:

The sky was thick with TV. If you wore special glasses, you could see them spinning through the sky among the bats and homing birds – blondes, wars, famines, football, food shows, coup d'état, hairstyles stiff with hairsprays (Roy 188).

The novel proposes that the modern culture that is based on excessive materialism has played is responsible for increasing the gap between human beings and their natural surroundings.

Roy is an expert in connecting “the link [and] – the *understanding* – between human beings and the planet they live on ... The intelligence that connects eggs to hens, milk to cows, food to forests, water to rivers, air to life and the earth to human existence” (Roy, *The Cost of Living* 101). Through the depiction of the compressed form of the cultural dance of the region, Kathakali, *The God of Small Things* drags the readers' attention towards the relationship between the regional culture and the changing environment of Ayemenem. In Kerala, Kathakali is not only a dance form but it is also a performing art that beautifully presents mythological stories in front of audiences. “The traditional themes of the Kathakali are folk mythologies, religious legends and spiritual ideas from the Hindu epics and Puranas” (Kathakali). And as, “Indian epics and classical literature attribute humanness to the natural phenomenon” (Rajeev 53). However, as McGuigan writes that in the globalised market, “anything can be commodified and packed up for a wider audience by marketing these days” (McGuigan 234). The novel portrays that in the commercialised environment, the artists reluctantly slash the performance of four to five hours into a twenty-minute entertainment as recommended by the hotel management. Roy points out:

In the evening (for the Regional Flavour), the tourists were treated to truncated kathakali performances (‘Small attention spans,’ the Hotel people explained to the dancers). So ancient stories were collapsed and amputated. Six-hour classics were slashed to twenty-minute cameos (127).

The novel also expresses how anguished these Kathakali artists feel as they do not do justice to the dance form. The Kathakali artists every time while coming back from the hotel after their twenty-minute performance seek pardon in a temple. They perform the full dance as a gesture of repentance in front of the idol of the god. The novel portrays how in the presence of the prevailing modern culture, ancient art forms have lost their form and essence.

To conclude, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* in the light of postcolonial ecocriticism spreads awareness regarding the pathetic conditions of the rivers in Kerala. It commendably analyses how commercialisation and the spread of technology are responsible for the increasing gap between humans and their surroundings. The novel also informs its readers about the adverse effects of capitalism on regional art forms and artists. No doubt, *The God of Small Things* drags the attention of its readers towards the untoward effects of modern culture on the natural world.

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