



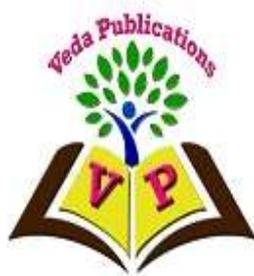
## ECOCRITISISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*

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### ABSTRACT



During the turn of century environment has emerged as a great threat to human beings as well as the earth. Attention of the writers is thus drawn towards the concern for ecology and the threat that the continuous misuse of our environment poses on humanity. This concern and its reflection in literature has given rise to paradigm shift in literary world as theory of Ecocriticism. Ecocriticism functions as a tool that draws the attention of the world to crucial environmental issues through analysis of literature. The present paper seeks to outline ecocritical examination to the relevance and presence of the entire ecological systems in Environmental issues in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. It draws attention of literary world to human responsibility towards our environment of which all human beings are an integral part. Arundhati Roy, being a socially aware intellect with a deep concern for the environment, expresses her thoughts that human beings need to express— a concern for the environment in order to make this earth liveable for generations to come.

**Keywords:** *Ecocriticism, Modernisation, Ecocritic, Urbanisation, Environmental movement, Environmental ethics.*

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The aim of this paper is to highlight how nature writing plays a significant role in depicting the beauty of nature, portraying the significance of the elements of nature and narrating how the various elements contribute for the well-being of humans. The paper highlights ecocritics as distinct breed of literary movement who being interested in nature have started to write about the impact of human activities on nature and the elements of nature with a purpose to create awareness about the conservation of the environment or to caution the readers about the impending dangers awaiting them. In consonance with spirit of ecocriticism, Arundhati Roy in her novel, *The God of Small Things* has expressed concern for nature which has been exploited by human beings in the name of civilisation, urbanisation and modernisation and how the detrimental effects of humans' exploitation of nature directly affect human life and living space.

Literature is a written record of the thoughts and feelings of creative minds. Fiction writers reflect society and deal with social issues in their works. Writers have been writing about nature and the elements of nature down through the ages. Human beings, in their hard chase to improve their standard of living, have brought in irreparable damages to the environment. Creative writers gave shape for the environmental movement. The environmental movement paved the way for ecocriticism, as a movement and as a literary theory. Ecocritical theory investigates the relationship between human activities and the natural world, particularly in terms of the influence of each upon the other. It pleads for a better understanding of nature, and it interprets and represents the natural world. It seeks to protect the ecological rights of nature. "Ecocriticism," to go by the words of Cheryl Glotfelty, who is a pioneer in this theory, "is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment". She goes on to say, "ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies" (xviii). She gives clarity on the fact that ecocriticism as a literary theory is different from other literary theories in the way the word 'world' is used. She says, "Literary theory, in general, examines the relations between writers, texts, and the world. In most literary theory 'the world' is synonymous with society-the social sphere.

Ecocriticism expands the notion of 'the world' to include the entire ecosphere" (xix). She throws light on the broader spectrum which ecocritics have to take into consideration when they speak about man and nature.

Suzanna Arundhati Roy (1961-) was born in Ayemenem, a village in Kerala. Arundhati Roy, a writer, an environmentalist and a social activist, is rightly recognized as a multifaceted personality by her compatriots. When she was two, her parents divorced. Being the child of a single mother, who sought financial and moral support from her brother, Roy had an unhappy childhood. So scarcity and destitution were not new for her. After her schooling at Ooty and Kerala, she studied Architecture at the School of Planning and Architecture, New Delhi. Roy worked as a Research Assistant at the National Institute of Urban Affairs, after getting the degree of architecture. She worked with great perseverance and she was awarded scholarship to go to Florence to study the Restoration of Monuments and Historical Urban Centers. Though trained as an architect, she dreamed of a writing career. She started her career by working for television and movies. Her skill in screenplay writing made her win the national film award for best screenplay in 1988. The publication of "The God of Small Things", which is not only her debut novel but also her only novel, catapulted Roy to instant international fame. The work was received with mixed responses. Roy has become recognized as an environmental activist. Although she is cynical about state-sponsored development projects, her criticism is focused not on the idea of development per se, but on the hierarchy of dualisms that legitimizes the exploitation of nature by the human. Arundhati Roy won Booker prize for her novel, *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, she shows us the way for sustainable development. As soon as the novel opens the reader is swept into Ayemenem's excessive lushness. The river Meenachal is described as it was



warm, the water green like reapplied silk with fish in it .With the sky and trees in it. And at night, the broken yellow moon in it.(123)

Velutha is the God of small things in the novel. He is a man devout to nature who makes small things from wood and other materials gained from it. Roy describes him 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.” (74) He is a man of nature and for him the most trustworthy companion is nature. He trusts nature because anybody in this world can betray you but nature will never betray you. When he is thrown out of his house by his mother, he takes shelter in realms lap of nature near the bank of the river Meenachal. He catches fish from the river and cooks it in open fire and he sleeps on the bank of the river. He enjoys swimming in the river and when he is convicted in a false case and betrayed by his family and Communist leader Pillai, he seeks refuge near the bank of the river. He is not able to realize how unintentionally his feet move towards the river after the betrayal of Comrade Pillai. His thirteen night physical relationship with Ammu starts and progresses near the bank of the river. Nature is the witness of their relationship. It can be said that the river Meenachal is life line for Velutha. In the novel, Velutha's hut, located near the river, represents the disenfranchised status of the dispossessed subaltern Velutha, his half-paralysed brother and their father all live in a small laterite hut, downriver from the Ayemenem house, that stands low to the ground except for four corners: “One corner for cooking, one for clothes, one for bedding rolls, one for dying in” . Downtrodden and discarded low caste untouchables like Velutha and other lower-class groups in society do not have access bare essentials in life. Roy interrogates development- and progress-oriented views of history supported by Christian ideology through her depiction of the impoverished condition of Velutha's family and a parodic image of Jesus in the calendar hanging on the wall of their tiny hut which was his abode. That he belonged to it. That it belonged to him. The water. The mud. The trees. The fish. The stars. (Roy 1997, 315–316). For Ammu and Velutha, small insects, the river and natural environments are allies that forge

reciprocal links between human beings and nature. Indeed, Ammu's and Velutha's shared view of the interconnected world and their resistance to social and economic injustice in postcolonial Indian society become ways of solidifying their inter-caste relationship. However, as the deaths of Velutha and Ammu imply disenfranchised people and small things in society and nature have been “bullied all their lives by Someone Big” (Roy 1997, 173), and the destruction of nature has been justified as an inevitable sacrifice in the process of development. Velutha's and Ammu's resistance to the oppressive Big system through their inter-caste relationship may be understood as a challenge to the hierarchy of dualisms that justifies the exploitation of nature and subordinated people.

But when Rahel returns to Ayemenem after twenty three years river greeted her with a ghostly trickle of water. The flow and fluidity of Meenachal got curtailed and its glow vanished. Though it was June and Raining, the river was no more than a swollen drain now just like a thin ribbon of thick muddy dirty water that tapped wearily at the mud banks on either side, sequined with occasional silver of a dead fish. It ferried garbage to the sea now. Estha found that the river smelled of sewage and pesticide brought with World Bank loans. Most of the fish had dried. The ones that survived suffered from fin –rot and had broken out in boils. (13) The river is polluted by defecation by children living in huts on the other side of the river. The flow of unadulterated factory waste and washing of clothes and pots by women pollutes the river. In summer when there was no water left in river it smelled of putrid sewage which lifted off the river and hovered over Ayemenem like a hot cloud. In this novel natural habitat is disturbed by increase in population which has grown in size .The growth in population means more pressure on natural resources and their exploitation. The calmness and natural beauty which plants, river and marshes gave twenty three years earlier has been lost. The population of village swelled to the size of a little town. Estha now finds the new, freshly baked iced, Gulf money houses built by nurses masons, wire benders and bank clerks who worked hard and unhappily in faraway place. (13)The estate of Karri Saipu known as History House is changed into



a hotel called Heritage. The locality is described as "God's Own Country" in hotel brochures. But it is described as The view from the hotel was beautiful; but here too the water was thick and toxic. They had built a wall to the screen off slum and prevent it from encroaching on Karri Saipu's estate. There was not much they could do about the smell... they knew those clever Hotel people's poverty was merely a matter of getting used to it. (125-126). Through this novel, she has tried to show how in the name of modernization has led to ecological degradation of animals and plants due to greed of money.

Roy describes Baby Kochamma's passion of gardening gives way to her new pastime of watching TV when a dish antenna is installed, thanks to perils of modernization. Twenty three years ago her passion for gardening was well known in Ayemenen and led her to apply for diploma in ornamental gardening. For days together she experimented in planting variety of flowering plants and trees which had very little chance to bloom in hot humid weather condition of Ayemenen. Her garden became so famous that it attracted people from nearby districts to come and appreciate. But as the garden is abandoned beautiful plants are overrun by a weed called patcha. "Like a lion –tamer she tamed twisted 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". (26-27) But after twenty three years it has grown knotted and wild, like a circus whose animals had forgotten their tricks. "The weed that people call communist patcha (because it flourished in Kerala like communism) smothers the more exotic plants". (27) Through these lines Roy has tried to highlight problem of interference in the ecology of an area. Rahel compares abandoned garden, watching toads and snakes with calm atmosphere and her busy life in Washington, where she worked late night, and smoke of vehicles and industries spreading pollution.

The novel gives a vivid description of harmful effects of modernization on animals also who are so intimately ingrained in nature. In the novel a temple elephant dies due to electrocution due to fall of high tension electric wire on his body. His death is mourned by the people. Roy has tried to show that electricity has become a part of our life but

it is harmful for an animal, when by an accident he comes in contact with it. The description of a puppy that follows Estha when he returns after Twenty three years to Ayemenen and tries to show his intimacy but Estha is indifferent towards him. In the novel indifference of Chacko is also shown when he sees an electrocuted dead elephant. He enquires if the elephant is Kochu Thomban, an elephant of Ayemenen temple when he came to know that he is not he moves on his way back to Ayemenen. The discovery of an unknown species of moth by Pappachi, who is an imperial Entomologist at the Pusa Institute. His discovery is due to an accident when a moth falls in his drink. The moth dies and he dries it, to check its species. He gets angry because it is only after his retirement that the moth is described as a new discovery and is named after his junior whom he disliked, now acting Director of the Department of Entomology. Here Roy describes human nature which thinks only of money and glory and not about conservation of an insect which was unknown till now. Roy has tried to depict nature through trees, river, mountains, animals and insects.

Globalization has brought about environmental damage and violent exploitation of nature. Arundhati Roy has portrayed the destructive impact of global capital on Indian society, whose ongoing toxic development causes disaster to the environment and calls for environmental justice for nature. Similarly population explosion and better financial conditions are two major factors which lead to the conversion of agricultural and pastoral land into residential and commercial areas posing a threat to the ecosystem. New suburban areas are formed at the cost of the natural environment in name of urbanization. With less number of trees and minimal greenery, air pollution increases drastically. Breathing impure and polluted air leads to a number of health issues. Arundhati Roy presents every minute information about Ayemenem from the viewpoint of a person who laments the human exploitation of nature and its elements. The parts of Ayemenem that are being damaged by human intervention and mishandling are carefully interwoven with the story. Roy tries to make the readers realize the impact of the damage caused to the environment.



In this regard, the developing national states are not only linked by the common thread of profound ecological loss, the loss of forest and river as foundation of life, but also plagued by the complicity, however apparently remote, of the power lines of local developers with the forces of global capital. Those displaced from the polluted river and adjacent land are mostly the economically dispossessed, and Roy makes it clear that environmental issues are also about the lack of economic justice. Through her novel she has tried to suggest that there should be sustainable development. Human beings should exploit natural resources but to such an extent that it can regenerate itself for future needs of our coming generations. Roy has tried to create awareness among people towards nature so that we may conserve our ecology and save our future. *The God of Small Things* poignantly portrays the strong bond between human beings and nature and irrational economic logic that have been used to legitimize the exploitation of the natural environment.

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