

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER

IJELLH

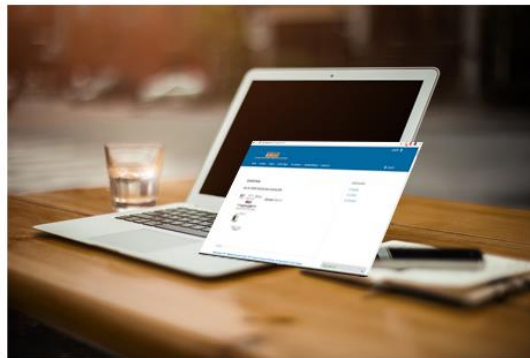
Crossref
INDEX COPERNICUS
INTERNATIONAL

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed) Journal

UGC Approved Journal

ISSN-2321-7065



**Volume 6, Issue 7
July 2018**

www.ijellh.com

Ankdeep Kaur Attwal
Assistant Professor in English
Sri Guru Granth Sahib World University,
Fatehgarh Sahib, Punjab

Arundhati Roy's Environmental Ethics: A Study of The God of Small Things

Abstract: The Paper focuses on a critical analysis of Arundhati Roy's environmental ethics in *The God of Small Things*. In *The God of Small Things*, Roy gives ample evidence of this systems view of life which emanates from her ethical stance toward environment. Arundhati Roy is a very important postcolonial Indian writer who has, after the success of *The God of Small Things*, become an activist espousing the cause of the people displaced from their original habitats on the pretext of mindless development which is often pitted against people and environment. Her concerns for the poor, women and environment form the stuff of most of her fictional and non-fictional writings. In order to understand her environmental ethics in *The God of Small Things*, it becomes imperative to look at the novel afresh and contextualize her concerns by taking into consideration her pronouncements about nature, environment and the skewed development agenda pursued relentlessly by the governments, the pronouncements which are scattered across the large spectrum of her articles in magazines, journals, books and on the internet, too.

Keywords: Environmental Ethics, Ecocriticism, Indian Writings in English, Arundhati Roy. This paper seeks to critically analyze Arundhati Roy's environmental ethics in *The God of Small Things* (1997) while casting sideways glances at her non-fictional prose writings about environment, environmental degradation, dispossession and displacement. The key term here is 'Environmental ethics' which according to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy "is the discipline in philosophy that studies the moral relationship of human beings to, and also the value and moral status of, the environment and its non-human contents." The basic

feature of such an ethical stance is that human being is not superior to non-human environment which he can exploit for his personal gains. This view also goes beyond the romanticization of nature and environment as we see it in the romantic literature. The right environmental ethic adopts a systems view of life in which there are no natural hierarchies either between human beings or between human beings and other animals and inanimate nature. This paper proposes to suggest that in *The God of Small Things*, Roy gives ample evidence of this systems view of life which emanates from her ethical stance toward environment.

Recent unprecedented rains in Chennai and Tamil Nadu, which inundated vast areas causing untold misery to many people, failure of rains in northern states of our country, global warming etc. are the issues which confront us today. Human beings feel vitally threatened in the ecologically degraded world. Over exploitation of natural resources and man's disregard of the air, water and soil that sustain us have given rise to the question of survival of both Human beings and the planet earth.

India is a vast country spreading from the Himalayas in the north to plateaus of the South, and from Sunderbans in the East to dry Thar of the West, a home to enviable biodiversity. The insatiable greed of mankind and the requirements of increasing population have changed the human attitude towards nature from reverence to destruction. If we trace the history of Indian literature in English, we find that nature is used as an important background and the environmental issues have been taken up again and again as serious issues.

Arundhati Roy is a very important postcolonial Indian writer who has, after the success of *The God of Small Things*, become an activist espousing the cause of the people displaced from their original habitats on the pretext of mindless development which is often pitted against people and environment. She not only champions the cause of the displaced

and dispossessed tribals, but also plays an active role against neo-imperialism and neo-liberal policies which lead to empowering just a few at the cost of millions who are impoverished and dispossessed by such policies. Her concerns for the poor, women and environment form the stuff of most of her fictional and non-fictional writings. In order to understand her environmental ethics in *The God of Small Things*, it becomes imperative to look at the novel afresh and contextualize her concerns by taking into consideration her pronouncements about nature, environment and the skewed development agenda pursued relentlessly by the governments, the pronouncements which are scattered across the large spectrum of her articles in magazines, journals, books and on the internet, too.

Though Roy does not explicitly deal with environmental issues in *The God of Small Things* yet the novel explores “the effects of unseen development, resource extraction, environmental pollution, and different definitions of nature on the physical world”(Sarah Harrison Unit 8). Roy highlights the devastating effect of government policy on the nature. *The God of Small Things* interrogates the way the Indian authorities and business houses exploit natural resources. Youngsuk Chae in “Postcolonial Ecofeminism in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*” (2016) writes: “Roy’s critique of environmental exploitation in postcolonial India reveals the interconnectedness of ecological deterioration and oppression based on gender, class and race.” (519) The novel not only highlights the effect of colonization on environment but also the indifference of Indian authorities to these issues.

Despite her active interest and participation in environmental issues, her only novel *The God of Small Things* has not been studied yet as a document on environmental concern. Nature in Roy’s novel does not come forth as a different entity but is an integral part of the wider biosphere. Roy has presented nature on two different time scales in the novel. When Rahel returns to Ayemenem after the gap of twenty three years, she noticed a change not only in the lives of characters but also in the natural resources and the natural infrastructure. Nature

though is not used as it is in Hardy's novels yet it is an important part of the lives of various characters in the text.

In her essay "The Greater Common Good" (1999) Roy argues that the nuclear bombs and the big dams represent "the severing of the link, not just the link- the understanding – between human beings and the planet they live on. They scramble the intelligence that connects eggs to hen, milk to cows, water to rivers, air to life, and the earth to human existence" (80-81). She raises her voice against the displacement of population due to Narmada dam project. In "The End of Imagination" (1999) she condemns the nuclear test in the Pokhran desert. She argues that the devastation caused by nuclear war will be indiscriminate. In "Walking with Comrades" (2011) she shares her experience with Maoists who have waged war against government over land, the environment, the resources and ideology. In another essay "We are all Occupiers" (2011) Roy recommends public ownership of natural resources and essential infrastructure.

In *The God of Small Things*, Roy laments the exploitation of natural resources for the development of human race. The transformation of History House into a hotel which is "the centerpiece of an elaborate complex, crisscrossed with artificial canals and connecting bridges.....Toy Histories for rich tourists to play in" (126), the polluted river Meenanchal where "the barrage regulated the inflow of salt water from the backwaters that opened into the Arabian Sea" (GST, 124), endangered species of Moth discovered by Papachi whose "pernicious ghost...haunted" him everywhere(49), the wretched garden of Baby Kochamma which the "gloom swallowed"(191) and the tragic death of temple elephant who is not "Kochu Thomban (Little Tusker), the Ayemenem temple elephant who came to the Ayemenem House once a month for a coconut" (154) demonstrate the exploitation of natural resources in the name of development. Roy shows how the hotel people, Papachi, Chacko, Baby Kochamma who represent the authority and power are not concerned about the

preservation of natural resources rather they are more concerned about their own interest and benefits. Roy sensitizes the readers about the issue of disregard of nature by the capitalist society through these characters and the incidents in the novel.

Apart from these some other incidents in the novel support Roy's sensitivity toward natural resources and natural habitat of the animals as well as her concern for human life getting mechanized in the modern world. In her essay "How deep shall we dig" (2004) she mocks at the development policies of the government: "India Shinning, feeling good". (n.p.) The rich sections of the society own all the natural resources. She writes that the corporate sector "will control this country, its infrastructure and its resources, its media and its journalists, but will owe nothing to its people. They are completely unaccountable- legally, socially, morally, politically." (n.p.) She laments that natural climate is exploited for "creating a good investment climate." (n.p.) The scenario is the same everywhere whether in India or South Africa or the United States. In her essay "When the Saints Go Marching Out" (2003) she remembers the trinity- Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela who dreamt of a free world but their mantle was not inherited by the new leaders. She gives account of the predicament of landless farmers whose lands have been snatched for national development and are not given due compensation. The farmers have to face economic downfall due to faulty policies of the state. Graham Huggan in "Greening Postcolonialism: Ecocritical Perspectives" (2004) locates her work within the burgeoning genre of postcolonial eco-criticism, alongside writers such as J. M. Coetzee and Barabara Gowdy who "offer insight into ecological issues and relationships" (701).

The endangered species of moth discovered by an Imperial Entomologist Papachi brings an important turn in the life of the family: "To taxonomic attention and, he hoped, fame" (Roy, GST 49). Though the discovery is accidental, yet the rejection by PUSA institute to acknowledge the discovery by Papachi frustrates him to the extent that he starts transferring

his frustration on his wife and children. “In the years to come, even though he had been ill-humored long before he discovered the moth, Pappachi’s moth was held responsible for his black moods and sudden bouts of temper. Its pernicious ghost—gray, furry and with unusually dense dorsal tufts—haunted every house that he ever lived in. It tormented him and his children and his children’s children”(49). The incident changed the lives of almost all the family members. He gets more frustrated when years later after his retirement, the moth is acknowledged and named after his junior. Despite this important discovery of a moth belonging to an endangered species, the PUSA Institute and its acting director are more concerned about the money and fame than the conservation of the insect which was till then unknown. Roy cites the study and classification of insects to show how the colonizers want to write history on their own terms. They want to define every aspect of the country in a way that may justify their supremacy over the country, whether it concerns representation of culture or the environment. As Harrison suggests, Roy shows “the colonial approaches to classifying, mapping and farming the Indian landscape express an exploitative attitude to the non-human world, which pays scant regard to ecological sustainability or the interdependence of humans and their physical surroundings.” (Unit 8)

We came across another example of colonization of nature in Baby Kochamma’s passion for gardening and her attempt to grow those varieties of flowering plants that have very little chance of survival in the weather of Ayemenem. Baby Kochamma’s attempt to grow exotic varieties of flowering plants in the native soil is a parody of colonization in two ways: the colonial enterprise to transport indentured Indian labour as slaves to other lands to grow plantations there; the colonial enterprise to violently colonize the natives through foreign born imperial masters. Kochamma’s attempt and the colonizing missions lead to disasters only. Her passion for ornamental gardening stands in stark contrast with her relationship with twins and Velutha. Baby Kochamma cultivated her ornamental garden through botanical

knowledge acquired at the University of Rochester. It demonstrates the colonial attempt to control and tame the Indian environment:

“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” (Roy, GST 26-27).

Her garden becomes so famous that people from Kottayam visit it. But the mechanized way of life and technological development shift her focus from her beloved garden to the dish antenna and TV. The abandoned garden exemplifies the effect of technological development on the natural environment. Kochamma’s abandonment of her garden is a telling comment on the colonizers leaving India in a state of wilderness and chaos despite their protestations that they were in India on a civilizing mission. It also reveals how technology can play havoc with natural environment. Gardens are regimented spaces created through acts of enclosure and ordering of wilderness. Gardens like colonies are disciplined into order through artificial arrangements. Nature abhors colonization. Once the colonizers leave, the gardens (like colonies), go back into wilderness. In Kochamma’s abandoned garden, the native weed Patcha overruns her exotic plants. Roy does not romanticize nature at all but presents it as a primordial, irrepressible force which cannot be controlled or owned. It is in these examples that we get glimpses of Roy’s environmental ethics which conflates with postcolonial politics.

Twenty three years later when Rahel saw the abandoned garden she compared it to her busy life in Washington. The garden has “grown knotted and wild, like a circus whose animals have forgotten their tricks” (27).

Roy’s attempt to highlight the exploitation of Indian landscape by the trade of plantation crops for European profits suggests uneven relationship between India and the West. It is not

only the West that takes its toll on Indian environment but the Indian authorities are also indifferent towards Indian ecology. When Rahel returns to Ayemenem, she observes how the estate of Karri Saipu- The History House has been transformed into The Heritage Hotel. This is how commercial concerns make us use everything as a resource in the service of the Mammon. The River Meenachal welcomed Rahel with a “ghastly skull’s smile, with holes where teeth had been, and a limp hand raised from a hospital bed”(124). The river has got a saltwater barrage in exchange for votes from influential paddy farmer lobby. The influential farmers and the government have benefitted at the cost of the river which is a source of livelihood to the small and marginal farmers and the people like Velutha. The river has shrunk to a swollen drain even in the month of June. “A thin ribbon of thick water that lapped wearily at the mud banks on either side, sequined with occasional silver slant of a dead fish. It was choked with a succulent weed, whose furred brown roots-waved like thin tentacles under water. Bronze-winged lily-trotters walked across it. Splay-footed, cautious” (124) . The spirit of the river that once had “the power to evoke fear” is spent. The plastic bags, defecation and toxic waste have polluted the river.

In fact, the death of the river marks Roy’s trenchant criticism of the disastrous consequences of the Green Revolution for the environment. K. Thangaraj and Dr. M.H. Mohamed Rafiq in their paper “Environmental Issues in Booker Winning Indian English Novel” (2014) also suggest that the Green Revolution is responsible for the deterioration of environment. “The Green Revolution in India has promoted the use of pesticides, weedicides and fertilizers. Pesticides and heavy metals leech into the water table and then find their way into our bodies through farm produce, poultry and dairy products.” (219) Roy attacks the government policy of development which is devoid of concern for the ecology of the country. Aarthi Vadde in her paper “The Backwaters Sphere: Ecological Collectivity, Cosmopolitanism, and Arundhati Roy” (2009) analyzes the manner in which Roy’s “Narratives of Connection” are

utilized as biological weapons against global capitalism and state control (523). When Estha walks along the banks of the river, the river “smelled of shit and pesticides brought with World Bank loans. Most of the fish died. The ones that survived suffered from fin-rot and had broken out in the boils” (Roy, GST 13).

A study conducted by Prof. Malviya in *Environmental Pollution and Its Control under International Law* (1987) reveals that over 170 million litres of effluents are discharged into the river, containing suspended solid, metals, urea, ammonia, fluorides, chlorides and other toxic chemicals. The polluted river Meenachal is unfit for aquatic creatures. The flora and fauna are not safe for its actual owners. The animals, birds and aquatic creatures have been deprived of their natural habitat. The temple elephant in the novel dies due to high tension electric wire that falls on his body. Roy explores the ecological interpenetration of human and animal life and reveals the hidden ties that connect the minute with the mighty. She juxtaposes the burning of an electrocuted elephant with a song Ammu hears in which a fisherman, his wife, her lovers, and a shark die at a sea.

Ben J. Richardson in “Anthropocene Micro-narratives: Arundhati Roy and the Ecology of Small Things” (2013) foregrounds the symbolic function these vignettes perform in the text. He writes that through the scene Roy establishes a textual network in which diverse scenes are related through metonymic transference. She traces the biological mesh which comprises this circle of life and reveals the degrading complicity of capital within such flows of organic matter: a point comparable to her earlier observation of the nearby river.

“The engineers of the concerned municipality sawed off the tusks and shared them unofficially. Unequally..... Pariah kites dropped into nearby trees, to supervise the supervision of the last rites of the dead elephant. They hoped, not without reason, for

pickings of giant innards. An enormous gallbladder, perhaps. Or a charred, gigantic spleen. They weren't disappointed. Nor wholly satisfied." (Roy, GST 219)

The technological development and capitalist interest not only dispossess the elephant from its natural habitat and take away its life and even the tusk after its death, but also deprive the kites of their food. Through the scene Roy exemplifies how the government has ignored its responsibility to maintain the ecological balance, only for monetary benefits. Roy also indicates this propriety attitude towards natural world in the Imperial Entomologist Papachi's effort to pin down and claim as his own, a new species of Lepidoptera, and the spectacle of Chacko attempting to modernize the family fruit preserving business- which he claims as "my factory, my pineapples, my pickles" (57).

Unlike Papachi and Chacko, Velutha unveils a kinship with the natural world. As Harrison puts it, Velutha has a River Sense which he passes on to the twins. He lives in a low hut, closer to the ground where he may listen to the secret calls of the earth. The river is a source of income and refuge for him. He is the God of small things – the things that are ignored by authorities whether it is Ammu and her twins or the natural surroundings. He is a man of natural world who can make small things from wood and other materials gained from nature without destroying its ecological value. He can make "tiny wind mills, rattle, minute jewels box out of dried palm reeds; he could carve perfect boats out of tapioca stems and figurines on cashew nuts" (74).

Priyanka Maral in "Ecocriticism in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*" (2013) quotes Wordsworth's poem "Tintern Abbey" that applies to Velutha. When Velutha is driven out of the house by his father, he takes refuge near the bank of the river. He catches fish for food, he swims in the river, and he sleeps on its banks. The river bank is the only witness of his thirteen night physical relationship with Ammu. When Velutha is betrayed by his family and

the Communist leader Pillai, he seeks refuge near the banks of the river. His feet take him unconsciously towards the river. For Velutha, nature is his home. He is connected to Nature. The character of Velutha exemplifies Roy's notion that the bigger is not better, and the local, the small and these seemingly insignificant hold qualities which have more relevance and universality than the big and the exotic.

It is through Velutha's relationship with his environment, a relationship which is non-exploitative, that Roy makes a comment on how the current economic paradigms are utterly exploitative, treating nature only as an object-resource for furthering of commercial gains. Richardson compares her methodology with what Bruno Latour describes as the practice of "taking account", whereby the members of a social collective "speak for" those entities- whether sentient or otherwise- that cannot represent themselves. Thus, Roy speaks for those voices that are "deemed unimportant or too insignificant to matter within the grand unfolding of history, capital and global warming." Her writings, fiction as well as non-fiction, seek to relocate the intimate connections between disparate species. After the success of *The God of Small Things*, Roy has dedicated herself completely to the realm of explicit political engagement. She has given almost all of her profits from *The God of Small Things* to Narmada Bachao Andolan and faced imprisonment also.

On the surface level *The God of Small Things* is a story that centers on the drowning of Sophie Mol, Ammu's love affair with the untouchable Velutha, and the story of the twins- Estha and Rahel, yet it explores the important events such as Communist uprisings in 1970s and the transformation of agricultural landscape of Kerala to a commercial tourist hub. In 'The Greater Common Good' Roy argues, "We have to support our small heroes...we have to fight specific wars in specific ways...who knows, perhaps that's what the twenty-first century has in store for us. The dismantling of the big. Big bombs, big dams, big ideologies,

big countries, big wars, big heroes, big mistakes. Perhaps right now, this very minute, there's a small god up in heaven readying for us" (12).

Roy reiterates the need of thinking for small to bring a big change. She highlights the problems of the small insignificant things of the bigger world and emphasizes that these small things are vital for the balanced development of the country. She is not against national development. What she is concerned is the cost that the small things pay for the greater achievements. What she objects is the profit driven approach of the capitalist society adamant to earn at the cost of environment. Her writings raise questions against the national development which hinges on industrialization, which goes against the grain of the human instinct for survival. Roy is a socially aware intellectual with deep concern for environment. She is not the one who merely preaches nice things from ivory tower. Her only novel *The God Small Things* foregrounds her environmental ethic and serious commitment to the cause of environment.

Works Cited

- Brennan, Andrew and Lo, Yeuk-Sze. "Environmental Ethics". *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. (Winter 2015 Edition). Edited by Edward N. Zalta.
www.plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2015/entries/ethics-environmental/ Accessed on 05 March 2017.
- Chae, Younsuk. "Postcolonial Ecofeminism in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*". *Journal of postcolonial Writings*. Vol.51, issue v, 2015, pp. 519-530.
www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17449855.2015.1070010. Accessed on 03 February 2017.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "The Climate of History: Four Theses." *Critical Inquiry*. Vol.35, issue i, 2009, pp.197-222.
- Cohn, Elisha. "Radical Aesthetics: Arundhati Roy's Ecology of Style." *ARIEL: A Review of English Literature*. Vol. 40, issue ii, 2009, pp.161-181.
- Gupta, Arun. "Arundhati Roy: The People Who Created The Crisis Will Not Be the Ones That Come Up With a Solution". *The Guardian*. Op-Ed. 12/8/2015.
www.theguardian.com/world/2011/nov/30/arundhati-roy-interview. Accessed on 15 December 2016.
- Harrison, Sarah. "Environment". A Program of the Center for the Humanities, University of Wisconsin-Madison. www.humanities.wisc.edu/assets/misc/Unit_8_-_Environment.pdf. Accessed on 26 December 2016.
- Huggan, Graham. "Greening Postcolonialism: Ecocritical Perspectives." *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies*. Vol.50, issue iii, 2004, pp. 701-733.
- Latour, Bruno. *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*. translated by Catherine Porter. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2004.
- Malviya, R.A., *Environmental Pollution and Its Control Under International Law*. Chugh Publication, 1987.
- Maral, Priyanka. "Ecocriticism in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*". *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*. Vol.10, issue iv, May-June 2013, pp. 40-42.
- Maxwell, Anne. "Postcolonial Criticism, Ecocriticism and Climate Change: A Tale of Melbourne under Water in 2035." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*. Vol.45, issue i, 2009, pp.15-26.
- Richardson, Ben J. "Anthropocene Micro-narratives: Arundhati Roy and the Ecology of Small Things". www.sites.fhi.duke.edu/anthropocene/files/2013/03/Anthropocene-Micronarratives1.pdf. Accessed on 08 March 2017.
- Roy, Arundhati. *Listening to Grasshoppers: Field Notes on Democracy*. Penguin, 2009.
- "Come September." *War Talk*. Cambridge, MA: South End, 2003, pp. 45-71.

- “How deep shall we dig?”. *The Hindu*.
www.thehindu.com/2004/04/25/stories/2004042500041600.htm. Accessed on 25 November 2016.
- “The End of Imagination.” *The Cost of Living*. The Modern Library, 1999.
- *The God of Small Things*. Flamingo, 1997.
- “The Greater Common Good.” *The Cost of Living*. The Modern Library, 1999.
- *Walking with the Comrades*. Penguin, 2011.
- “We are all Occupiers”. *The Guardian*. www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2011/nov/17/we-are-all-occupiers-arundhati-roy. Accessed on 03 February 2017
- “When The Saints go Marching Out”. www.countercurrents.org/us-roy020903.htm. Accessed on 08 March 2017.
- Sheikh, Farooq Ahmad. “God of Small Things A Reader Response” *Indian Review*.
www.indianreview.in/god-small-things-readers-response-farooq-ahmad-sheikh/. Accessed on 16 March 2017.
- Straus, Tamara. “Arundhati Roy: A Life Without Rules”.
www.alternet.org/story/836/arundhati_roy%3A_a_life_without_rules. Accessed on 15 December 2016.
- Thangaraj, K. & Rafiq, Dr. M.H. Mohamed. “Environmental Issues in Booker Winning Indian English Novels”. *Research Journal of English Language and Literature*. Vol. 2, issue ii, 2014, www.rjelal.com/2.2.14/217-222.pdf. Accessed on 03 February 2017
- Vadde, Aarthi. “The Backwaters Sphere: Ecological Collectivity, Cosmopolitanism, and Arundhati Roy.” *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies*. Vol. 55, issue iii, 2009, pp. 522-544.
- Yousefi, Baharak. “Five things to know about Arundhati Roy”. www.thetyee.ca/Books/2014/03/29/Arundhati-Roy/. Accessed on 23 November 2016.
- Zizek, Slavoj. *Living in the End Times*. Verso, 2011.