

An Eco-Feminist Reading of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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ABSTRACT

*Ecofeminism as a literary theory has got immense relevance in the contemporary world where both ecology and women seem to go through a hazardous period of exploitation in spite of continued attempts of laws made and awareness programs conducted to protect nature and to eradicate gender discrimination. Arundhati Roy with her debut work *The God of Small Things* has perhaps realized the undercurrents of commonalities between the conditions of women and environment that the novel seems to present a potential space for an eco-feminist reading of it.*

Key words: Eco-feminism, *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy, Environment, Third wave feminism, Meenachal and Ayeyanar.

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The term 'ecofeminism' in its very form combines the two hitherto divergent notions of ecology and feminism. Ecology as a term in its relation to nature and life in the environment seems to have nothing in common with a theory like feminism which is of cultural origin. But such dichotomies get evaporated with the coinage of the term 'ecofeminism' that evidently places ecology and feminism on inter relational plane. Arundhati Roy's maiden novel, *The God of Small Things* that bagged her The Man Booker Prize for literature in 1997 seems to demand for a reading that reveals its eco-feminist concerns.

The French Woman writer Francoise d' Eaubonne is often credited as being the writer who coined the term 'eco feminism' in 1974. But according to ecofeminists like Gaard and Saller 'eco feminism' as a term appeared informally, in the 1970's mostly in response to the so called development activities. The Indian ecofeminist, Vandana Shiva cites the Chipko movement which began when village women of Himalayan India organized in the 1970's to protect their forests, as the beginning of ecofeminism.

Colleen Mack-Canty in her essay, "Third-wave Feminism and the Need to Reweave the Nature/Culture Duality," is of the opinion that ecofeminism emerged as one of three strands in the third wave of feminism. The third wave in feminism questions the notion of dualism thereby recognizing diversity. Hence the traditional duality between nature and culture is rewoven in this

new approach which gains importance in this environment conscious era. Ecofeminism claims the female body and includes non human nature in its fold, an inclusion that enables it to engage in a more thorough going analysis of nature/culture dualism than other forms of feminism. “The body is one aspect of the ‘natural sphere’ which has been reanalyzed in the third wave” (Arnel 200).

Ecofeminism as a movement also includes such obvious environmental issues like toxic waste, deforestation, military and nuclear weapons in politics, reproductive rights and technologies, animal liberation, agriculture etc, as it tried to relook the nature/culture dualism. As a theory, ecofeminism incorporates principles from both ecology and feminism in its efforts to create equitable and environmentally social life-styles. From ecology, it has imbibed the value of interdependence and diversity of all life forms; from feminism, it gains the insights of a social analysis of woman’s oppression which is related to other oppressions in the society like racism, casteism, colonialism and so on. Ecofeminism puts forward ecology as a model for human behaviour, and ask us to act by recognizing our interdependence with others both human and nonhuman. “In many ways an ecofeminist style of politics represents Foucault’s (1980) notion of ‘local resistance’ against power relations” (Mack Canty 170).

The God of Small Things has got wide critical acclaim from its day of publication to date and the text seems to cast a magical spell over the readers and hence continues to harvest new ways of readings. According to Jason Cowley, one of the five judges for the Booker Prize,

The God of Small Things fulfils the highest demand of the act of fiction: to see the world, not conventionally or habitually but as if for the first time. Roy’s achievement and it is considerable, is not have to forget about the small things in life; the insects and flowers, wind and water, the outcast and the disposed. She deserved to win.

(Cowley qtd in Prasad 139)

Born in Kerala, India on November 24, 1961, Arundhati Roy has set her debut novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997) in the small village of Ayemenem which is her native place. But she has shifted from her interest from novel-writing to more political issues which is revealed in her nonfiction works like *Power Politics* (2001) and *War Talk* (2003). Her dedication to social and political issues of India has made her join such organizations like Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA). Her collection of essays entitled *An Ordinary Persons’ Guide to Empire* (2004) is yet another work in this light.

The Narmada Bachao Nadolan (NBA) believes that big dams are obsolete. It believes there are more democratic, more local, more economically viable and environmentally sustainable ways of generating electricity and managing water systems. It is demanding more modernity, not less. It is demanding more democracy, not less.

(Roy 2005).

Hence the views and opinions she revealed in her interviews and nonfiction works are pertaining to the cause of environment and to the need for an ecologically balanced life style. A reading of *The God of Small Things* in the light of these concerns provides ample scope for an ecofeminist perspective. “The cover photo, a grey green lily pool with three luminously pink water lilies, compel you to pick up the book almost as you would pick a flower.” (Menon, 1997)

From cover to end the emphasis in the nature seems to be sustained as an alternative system with better standards of value for women than the civilization and culture laid by men under patriarchy. The novel begins with a description of a hot day in May in Ayemenam which sets the tone for the entire text.

May in Ayemanem is hot, brooding month. The days are long and humid. The river shrinks ... dust green trees, Red bananas ripen. The nights are clear but suffused with scorn and sullen expectations.

(*GOST* 1)

The novel engages in looking at the patriarchal society as an encroachment upon the primal, innocence of nature. It looks at the world from the innocent view point of a child where the patriarchy unfolds its varied socializing institutions that hinder the child to grow into a life in its real essence and fullness. The nature/culture dualism which is a major concern in ecofeminism hence is treated in a new hue and colour in the novel.

Roy displays a “feminine sensibility” in the subtle descriptions of appearance, textiles, social nuances, linking character and background representing the restrictive effects of environment and home on a girl’s psyche. She possess the power to render the external world so that it becomes itself a character rather than a setting.

(Pandey 146)

The cultural institutions through which patriarchy mobilizes its hold on society and the lives of the people are marriage, family, education, religion, caste and so on. In these institutions certain

unwritten laws govern the smothering and taming of individuals against natural tendencies of wilderness and spontaneity. Children in such a society are the group who still retain their original innocence before being merged to the large scale dictates of patriarchal system. Women turn out to be the worst sufferers in this system where they are asked to play out artificial and mechanical roles invented by patriarchy to control what is natural in them.

The God of Small Things pretty well fits into a feminist text foregrounding many invisible barriers. Patriarchy has continued to raise in women's way to gain parity with men one of the key issues which very often figures in contemporary feminist discourse is the patriarchal powers within the household, the society and the economy. ... The *GOST* deals with the transgression of "Love Laws" which has been operating within the family and the society since time immemorial and its terrible consequence.

(Pandey 142)

The novel reveals the failure of marriage as an institution to cater to the inner yearnings of a woman. All female characters end up in wrong men through marriages. From mammachi to Rahel marriage proves to be a knot that mechanically binds a woman to an artificial relationship out of which few are able to emerge safe. As Fay Weldon says in her work *The Female Eunuch* (1970), "Romance has been one of the adventures open to women and how it is over. Marriage is the end of the study" (186).

As weeds and natural vegetation succeed in over powering the artificial, mechanical and ornamental garden of Baby Kochamma, relationships that are unwelcome, blasphemous and unsanctified by the society and culture too surface in marriage thereby breaking the cultural institution from within.

Marriage as a social institution has lost its sanctity and relevance in the post-1980 era. ... Lack of faith in religion and declining moral standard and behaviour are some of the predominant themes in post modern novel.

(Das 57)

For the smooth functioning of the family women often prove to be the scape goats to carry the burden of morality whereas men are given exceptions in the name of "men's needs". In the novel both Ammu and Chacko return to Ayemenem after their marriage break. But Chacko's libertine relationships with women labourers in the pickle factory is nullified in a light-mannered way by their mother mammachi whereas when Ammu transgress the love laws by loving Velutha, who is a

paravan, is taken as a mortal sin and leads to her death. But nature seems to be an ally in all these so called transgressions for it is the primitive and natural urge for a woman's need of a man that gets gratified when Ammu meets Velutha.

She moved quickly through the darkness like an insect following a chemical trail ... She didn't know what it was that made her hurry through the undergrowth ... That made her arrive in the backs of the menachal breathless. Sobbing As though she knew he would be there waiting. As though he knew she would come.

(*GOST 332*)

It is incest that gratifies Rahel and not her relationship with her husband. She leaves her husband to return to Ayemanem after twenty three years to meet her twin brother, Estha. Incest is natural but culturally it is blasphemous. "Only that once again they broke the love laws. That lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much" (*GOST 328*).

Incest is also hinted at when mamachi shifted her love and loyalty from Pappachi to her son, Chacko, when she was saved by Chacko from one of Pappachi's assault on her.

The day that Chacko prevented Pappachi from breaking her (and Pappachi had murdered his chair instead), Mamachi packed her wifely luggage and committed it to Chacko's care. From then onwards he became the repository of all her womanly feelings. Her man. Her only man.

(*GOST 168*)

The river and fishing is an integral part of the life of people living in the coastal areas. The climate of a particular place determines the food habits and clothing. The people cultivate their food habits according to the crops grown in a particular area and are fond of food items made from banana, fish, coconut and so on. But people like Baby Kochamma are representative of individuals who estrange oneself from one's environment for their own destruction.

The civilizing mission through education also meets with sarcasm in the novel. Chacko, the Rhodes scholar from oxford, is laughed at for his unpractical ways whereas Velutha is presented as one whose elementary education has not destroyed the innate sweetness of character and originality of intelligence. Chacko's absurd ways to modernize the pickle factory have in fact brought loss to the factory which, under mamachi, was running well.

Apart from his carpentry skills, Velutha had a way with machines. Mamachi (with impenetrable Touchable logic) often said that if only he hadn't been a paravan, he might have become an engineer.

(*GOST 75*)

Gender based disparity in providing education also reveals how patriarchy tightens its grip on women and obstructs her from developing into independent self. Ammu was negated higher education whereas her brother Chacko was sent to Oxford. "Pappachi insisted that a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl, so Ammu had no choice but to leave Delhi and move with them" (*GOST 38*).

Yet Ammu proves to be sharper in her brains than even the university groomed Chacko.

Because Ammu had not had the kind of education, nor read the sorts of books, nor met the sorts of people that might have influenced her to think the way she did. She was just that sort of animal.

(*GOST 180*)

Caste and religion that divided humans into water tight compartments also come in for sheer criticism and are shown to destroy whatever that is innate and spontaneous in human. Religion is yet another edifice that can estrange woman from her natural responses. Ammu belonging to the high class and touchable caste finds her Syrian Christian religious identity as the source of her existential crisis. She as a divorcee from an intercaste marriage is most unwelcome person to her mother's house.

Though Ammu did as much work in the factory as Chacko whenever he was dealing with food inspectors or sanitary engineers, he always referred to it as 'my' factory, 'my' pineapples, 'my, pickles.... The case because Ammu, as a daughter, had no claim to the property.

(*GOST 57*).

It is when Ammu unpeels herself from her Christian identity and looks into herself with the originality of a real woman that she is able to live out her love life with its completeness though it is short lived. Then she could perceive in Velutha, the real man of her dreams and not as an untouchable paravan.

Biology designed the dance. Terror timed it. Dictated the rhythms with which their bodies answered each other. And they knew already that for each tremor of pleasure they would pay with an equal measure of pain.

(*GOST* 335)

Pappachi, Ammu's father is another figure that stands for male chauvinism hence far away from nature. Even after his death, the moth, which he discovered in his capacity as the imperial entomologist but could never be named after him, became the symbol of his cruel power over his daughter and wife who had suffered inhuman tortures from him. He behaved as a perfect, benevolent and polite individual in the public but proved to be a jealous husband and father. Ammu could not get rid of this moth even at a time when she is making love with Veluaha.

The novel also finds space to include the aftereffects of modernization on natural surroundings on which life depends. One could see pollution everywhere. "Years later, when Rahel returned to the river, it greeted her with a ghostly skull's smile" (*GOST* 124). Pollution is so conspicuous that it can be smelled in the very air of Ayemanem "on warm days the smell of shit lifted off the river and hovered over Ayemanem like a hat" (*GOST* 125). But it should be noted that ecology lost its child-like innocence and imbibed the pollutants when children like Rahel and Estha lost their innocence and entered into the inevitable contaminated adult life.

In spite of all the stifling practices that the main stream society (mostly patriarchal) done to women and the other deprived groups like children and dalits instrumented by the artificial and anti-human laws favouring few high class caste men, nature indeed has a higher hand in the deal with men. As the novel ends nature has taken over the Ayemanem house for its own treatment with time. "The walls, streaked with moss, had grown soft, and bulged a little with dampness that seeped up from the ground" (*GOST* 1).

The ecofeminist concerns that are steeped in the novel get voiced in Roy's own view of a female god whose imminent visit to the world she can sense. She opines in *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire* that,

The time has come, the walrus said. Perhaps things will get worse and than better. Perhaps there is a small god up in heaven readying herself for us. Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. May be many of us wont' be here to greet her, but a quiet day, if I listen very carefully, I can hear her breathing.

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