

Ecological Symbolism in Arundhati Roy's 'The God of Small Things'

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Abstract

Ecological symbolism plays a significant role in literature by reflecting the intricate relationship between nature and human existence. In many narratives, the natural world is more than just a backdrop; it serves as a powerful symbol that mirrors emotional, social, and cultural tensions, offering a deeper understanding of the human condition. Elements of nature, such as landscapes, flora, fauna, and natural forces are employed not only to depict the external environment but also to explore themes of identity, societal structures, and historical conflicts.

Through the use of ecological symbolism, nature becomes an active participant in the story, interacting with characters and influencing their decisions, relationships, and fates. The natural world often reflects the internal landscapes of the characters, offering a parallel to their psychological and emotional states. Furthermore, nature's portrayal can also serve as a critique of environmental degradation, social inequality, and cultural oppression, urging readers to consider the impact of human actions on both the environment and the marginalized communities within it. Ecological symbols, such as rivers, forests, and other elements of the natural world, are potent vehicles for exploring themes of loss, memory, resistance, and the complexity of human relationships with their surroundings. By drawing attention to the interconnectedness between human lives and the natural world, ecological symbolism challenges readers to reflect on the dynamic and often fraught interaction between humans and the environment.

Ecological symbolism in *The God of Small Things* intricately weaves the natural world into the fabric of the narrative, serving as a vehicle for exploring the socio-political, cultural, and psychological landscapes of the characters. In the novel, the environment is not merely a backdrop, but an active participant that mirrors the emotional, social, and historical tensions within the story. Through vivid representations of landscapes, flora, fauna, and elements of nature, ecological symbols are used to reflect the struggles of the human condition, the impact of colonialism, the rigidity of caste and social structures, and the deep interconnections between individuals and their surroundings.

The portrayal of the natural world, particularly the river, the palace, and the tropical setting of Kerala, serves as both a physical and metaphorical space where characters negotiate their identities, desires, and destinies. The presence of nature as a character itself challenges human domination and exploitation, offering a nuanced critique of environmental degradation, cultural stagnation, and the oppression of marginalized communities. This ecological lens highlights how the personal is intricately linked with the environmental, with nature often acting as a mirror to the characters' internal worlds and broader societal structures. By examining the use of ecological symbolism, it becomes clear that it deepens the novel's engagement with themes of loss, memory, identity, and resistance. By situating the natural world as a powerful symbol, the work calls attention to the interconnectedness between people and their environment, urging readers to consider the impact of human actions on both the natural world and human lives.

Keywords: *marginalization; environment; nature; memory; identity; resistance; ecological symbolism.*

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1. Introduction

The first novel of the author Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, gives a strong insight concerning the environmental degradation and how it crosses the societal imbalances. It does it by combining the natural environment and plot with its skillfulness. The setting is in Kerala, which is the backwaters of tropical and fertile India and the part of ecological symbolism used in the novel is to satirize the socioeconomic structures as it flips over time. The connection between the ecological and human narratives in Roy is posed by the use of intense use of pictures of nature to show how the environment fashions and determines human lives. Landscape of Ayemenem, its thick vegetation, river meanders and monsoon saturated landscapes are not merely a location they are also a breathing being which illustrates the social and emotional geography of the characters. To explain this, the Meenachal River is metamorphosed into a life-giving river into a stagnated and polluted river, this represents the moral and social decadence in the area. This change puts emphasis on the bad influence of the environment exploitation and the death of social values (Attwal 45).

The transformation of the Meenachal River from a life-giving water source into a stagnated and polluted river in *The God of Small Things* serves as a powerful metaphor for the moral and social decline in the region. Initially, the river symbolizes purity, vitality, and the promise of life, much like the natural environment before it becomes tainted by human actions. However, as the river becomes polluted and stagnant, it mirrors the decay of social values and the erosion of traditional structures within the community. This shift in the river's state reflects broader environmental exploitation, where natural resources are abused, and in turn, the social fabric begins to deteriorate.

The pollution of the river underscores the impact of unchecked exploitation, both environmental and societal. Just as the river, which was once a source of life, becomes corrupted and incapable of sustaining life, the social and moral decay in the community is equally destructive. The river's transformation symbolizes the way in which the exploitation of nature leads to the degradation of human values, values that were once rooted in a sense of community, justice, and tradition. The river's stagnation mirrors the paralysis in the social structures, where the flow of life and progress has been stifled by external forces, such as colonialism, caste rigidity, and economic exploitation. This ecological shift emphasizes the interconnectedness between environmental health and social well-being. The pollution of the river serves as a direct commentary on how the degradation of the natural world mirrors the decay of cultural and moral values in the society. By emphasizing the death of the river's vitality, the narrative suggests that the exploitation of nature and the loss of respect for the environment are intrinsically linked to the deterioration of social and ethical principles.

Roy uses nature as a place and also as a narrative that influences and is influenced by the human activity. The importance of the river in the tragic events of the novel may be discussed as the illustration of how the surrounding world may impact the way people live their lives. This interaction between nature and narrative underlines the idea that human and environmental fates are connected and the death of one leads to the death of the other (Rani 144). It is on the basis of this ecological perspective that Roy condemns the social systems that support the social injustice and environmental degradation. The fact that nature is exploited is a manifestation of the exploitation of the underprivileged, particularly women and representatives of lower classes, and it is important to highlight the interrelation between social and ecological oppressions. Roy also manages to reflect on the greater environmental and social issues of her time by using ecological symbolism in her novel, in addition to telling a story of personal and family tragedy (Rani 145).

Ecocriticism, ecofeminism, and postcolonial ecocriticism provide the tools through which to analyse the connection between literature and the environment, and in the postcolonial context. These frameworks give us understanding of how narratives reflect and form our understanding of the ecological and social systems.

Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary field of study that explores the complex relationship between literature and the natural world. Emerging in the 1970s, this critical approach grew out of broader environmental movements and the growing awareness of ecological issues. The term "ecocriticism" was first coined by William Rueckert in his seminal essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* (1978), which is often credited with establishing the study of literature and ecology as a distinct academic field. Rueckert's work paved the way for scholars to examine how literary texts reflect, engage with, and shape perceptions of the environment, as well as how they address issues

such as environmental degradation, the exploitation of natural resources, and humanity's evolving relationship with nature.

Cheryl Glotfelty, another foundational figure in ecocriticism, further advanced the field with her influential work *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996). In this collection, Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment, positioning it as a means to understand how literary texts represent and interact with ecological concerns. Glotfelty emphasizes that ecocriticism is not merely a theoretical framework but an approach that encourages a deeper examination of how literature can help foster a more harmonious relationship between humans and the natural world. She argues that by analysing the ways in which literature portrays the environment, ecocriticism can illuminate the cultural, political, and social dynamics that contribute to environmental problems, and at the same time, it can suggest pathways for healing the relationship between humans and their surroundings.

Ecocriticism, in this sense, goes beyond the analysis of nature as a passive setting in a literary work. It seeks to explore the active role of the environment in shaping human experiences and societal structures. Scholars within this field examine how texts frame the natural world, whether as an idyllic or a degraded space and how these representations impact cultural attitudes toward environmental sustainability. By doing so, ecocriticism encourages readers and scholars alike to consider the ecological dimensions of literature and its potential for influencing social and environmental change.

As the field developed, it expanded to encompass a wide range of issues, including climate change, biodiversity, environmental justice, and the intersection of environmental issues with race, class, and gender. It draws on methodologies from literary theory, cultural studies, and environmental sciences to offer new perspectives on both canonical works and contemporary literature. Ecocriticism invites readers to engage with texts not only as aesthetic objects but also as vehicles for ecological reflection and action. Through its interdisciplinary nature, ecocriticism contributes to a broader understanding of how literature can illuminate the complex dynamics between humans and the environment and can inspire more sustainable and ethically responsible ways of living on the planet.

The merging of feminism and political ecology is referred to as ecofeminism or, as coined by French feminist Francoise dEaubonne in a 1974 work of that title, *Le Féminisme ou la Mort*, to explore how the oppression of women is tied to the degradation of nature. Ecofeminist critics argue that exploitation of women and nature is indicative of a larger problem; a patriarchal system that focuses on domination and control as opposed to caring and care. According to ecofeminist scholar Karen Warren (1997), ecofeminism acknowledges a profound connection between the exploitation and destruction of the natural world and the subjugation and oppression of women. In her work, Warren asserts that these two forms of oppression, gender and environmental are often intertwined and mutually reinforcing. Ecofeminism highlights the influence of gendered power relations on environmental degradation, arguing that the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women often occur in parallel within patriarchal systems. For ecofeminists, the fight for environmental justice cannot be fully realized without addressing gender inequality, suggesting that the subjugation of women and the exploitation of the natural world are part of the same systemic problem (Warren). This perspective brings attention to the need for more inclusive, equitable approaches to environmental justice, ones that consider both gender and ecological concerns together, instead of treating them as separate struggles.

Postcolonial ecocriticism, another key theoretical framework, focuses on the environmental consequences of colonialism. This lens critically examines how colonial powers exploited colonies by extracting their natural resources without regard for the ecological impact or the local knowledge systems in place. Postcolonial ecocriticism highlights the historical processes through which colonial powers interpreted nature as a resource to be mined, sold, and commodified, often ignoring indigenous practices that had sustained the environment for centuries. In this context, nature was not seen as a dynamic, living entity that should be cared for, but as a passive object of exploitation. By drawing attention to the intersection of colonial history and environmental degradation, postcolonial ecocriticism challenges traditional sustainability ideologies that perpetuate patterns of resource extraction and environmental destruction rooted in colonialism (Sustainability Directory). Furthermore, postcolonial ecocriticism argues that indigenous viewpoints and knowledge systems, which emphasize sustainable and respectful relationships with the

environment, must be included in contemporary environmental discussions to create more equitable and lasting solutions.

It is within these theoretical frameworks, eco-feminism and postcolonial ecocriticism that the novel *The God of Small Things* can be meaningfully analyzed. Arundhati Roy's portrayal of nature in the novel is not just a backdrop to the human drama unfolding, but an active participant in the story that reflects the complex histories of colonialism, sexism, and ecocide. The setting of the novel in the fertile, tropical region of Kerala, India, provides a rich context for exploring these themes. The region's lush environment, once vibrant and full of life, is depicted as a site of exploitation and degradation, both ecologically and socially. Roy's depiction of nature as entangled with the social and political fabric of Kerala highlights how deeply rooted the exploitation of both women and the environment is within the historical and cultural dynamics of the region.

In the novel, the exploitation of women and nature is shown as a product of colonial legacies, where both were commodified for profit. The idea that nature is something to be tamed, mined, and controlled, mirrors the historical treatment of women within a patriarchal colonial context. Both nature and women are portrayed as being subject to patriarchal forces that dictate their value, their bodies, and their destinies. The novel critiques this system of exploitation, emphasizing how these intertwined forms of oppression have long-lasting effects on individuals and communities. Roy's portrayal of the environment also underscores the concept of ecocide, the destruction of the environment for profit, which is a direct consequence of the colonial mindset that treated both the land and its inhabitants as objects to be controlled and used. By situating the novel within the context of Kerala's postcolonial history, Roy explores the legacies of exploitation that continue to shape both social relations and environmental practices. In doing so, she critiques the ways in which colonial power structures persist in shaping contemporary attitudes toward gender and the environment, calling for a more holistic and inclusive approach to both social justice and environmental sustainability.

Thus, *The God of Small Things* serves as an important text for analysing how the intersection of colonialism, sexism, and ecocide has shaped the environment and the lives of those living within it. Roy's work invites readers to reflect on the deeply embedded patterns of exploitation that have been inherited from colonialism and how these patterns continue to affect the world today. By foregrounding the exploitation of both women and nature, the novel offers a critique of the ongoing legacies of colonialism and calls for a more sustainable, just, and equitable relationship with both the environment and marginalized communities.

2. Ecological Symbolism.

In *The God of Small Things*, nature is also strongly embedded in the story as it does not merely serve as the context of the story, but it is also a living thing that mirrors and influences the lives of the characters. The Meenachal River, which is the garden of Baby Kochamma and the elephant are all aspects of ecological symbolism, depicting the themes of purity, colonial intrusion, resistance of nature. The Meenachal River that was once a vibrant and life giving feature, is the quintessence of purity and cyclical nature of existence. When the river gets polluted with toxic materials, this indicates the moral and social degradation in Ayemenem. The decay of the river is a reflection of the weakening of the communal ideals and the prevailing foreign cultures in the natural and social environment of the community (Maral 41). The fact that a spring of life has changed into an inanimate pool of water accentuates the consequences of the use and non-use of the environment.

The garden of Baby Kochamma, which used to be symbolic of tradition and cultural pride undergoes transformation that is symbolic of the infiltration of colonialist and capitalism forces into the native lands. The decay of the garden, similar to the obsession of Baby Kochamma on Western media and consumerism, is an example of the substitution of traditional values and customs by the foreign ones. The marketability of her very space, as she dips into the world of consuming media, further solidifies the prevailing role of colonial and capitalist concepts on the personal lives (Comfort 3).

The Indian culture values the elephant, which is used to signify the strength of nature and its opposition to the intrusion of human beings. The fact that the death of the temple elephant happened due to an electric shock and that the society had to take it with cold blood symbolizes the disgust with the purity of nature and the consequences of human

negligence. The event depicts the general theme of environmental degradation and exclusion of the natural objects through industrialization and development (Yasin 196). Roy used these symbols as a criticism of how nature was exploited and the interconnection between ecological and social injustices. The novel highlights the importance of recognising and protecting the natural world as a vital part of the welfare of the society.

3. The Narrative Element of Role of Nature

Nature is in *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy not only a setting, but also a participant of the story, as it defines the events and expresses the unity of everything. The novel is an integration of human lives with nature, which means that environmental health is essentially linked to human health. The Meenachal River is an example of the impact of nature within the story. The river which was previously depicted as a vibrant and life-giving being is slowly becoming a symbol of the moral and social decay of Ayemenem. The pollution of the river is an indication that the community disrespected and exploited the environment and its people. The transformation of the river as the ground of purity to the representation of decay points at consequences of the environmental decline and impact on civilization (Maral 41). Similarly, a garden that used to be a place of aestheticism and cultural significance becomes flooded with weeds and neglect by Baby Kochamma. This shift is similar to the invasion of colonial and capitalist powers in the land of natives and the following decline of the old values and customs. The degradation of the garden is an indication of the broader socioeconomic changes and no attachment to the natural world (Maral 42).

The elephant in the story is used to represent the force of nature and its struggle with man. The obvious illustration of the attitude towards the innocence of nature and the effects of technology is the death of the elephant due to the electric shock. The phenomenon also puts a strain on human development and environmental protection focusing on the fact that it is the harmony that leads to successful living (Maral 43). In these situations, Roy reveals the interdependence of all that implies the fact that the abuse of nature results in the abuse of people and communities. The novel emphasizes the importance of recognizing and protecting the natural environment as a key to the welfare of the society.

4. Postcolonial Ecocritical Examination

Arundhati Roy in *The God of Small Things* takes the time to explore the history of colonialism and how it has left lasting effects in the environment and social system of postcolonial Indian society. Within the framework of postcolonial ecocriticism, the novel investigates the effect of colonial exploitation on the environmental and social environments, which causes persistent degradation and injustice. Researchers in postcolonial ecocriticism argue that the colonial spirit often viewed nature as an extraction and exploitation source without considering the consequences on the local populations and ecosystems (Yasin 132). The way Roy describes the previously untouched backwaters of Kerala and how they have been ruined is an indicator of the vast destruction of the environment that was brought about by colonization.

The Meenachal River which was once symbol of purity and life has been even more polluted and stagnant a symbol of colonial exploitation. The river that used to be a source of income and life represents moral and social decadence of the Ayemenem community. Roy observes that the river was turned into a lifeless dead thing and as such, this can be likened to the destruction of the normal social structures (Roy 27). This metaphor shows the perennial impacts of colonialism that leaves a scar on the soil and the humans present in the land and establishing a culture whereby economic activities tend to override the environment.

This search of modernization contributes to the environmental slaughter in the novel. It is a development versus ecological conservation clash, which is common in post colonial societies such as the one illustrated in the god of Small Things. The incorporation of western capitalistic ideology in the colonialism has continued to the postwar period and as a result has made them pursue rapid industrialization and urbanization at any cost to the environment.

The struggle in *The God of Small Things* is articulated in terms of the intrusion of the capitalistic world in the community through the introduction of foreign companies and commodifying land and labour (Comfort 4).

The land and the river are victims of pollution and exploitation, and this is similar to the situation of the marginalized individuals, especially the lower-caste individuals, and women, whose plight echoes in the general environmental degradation.

Roy assaults the long-standing ignorance to the issue of environmental concerns in the name of modernity. Postcolonial critics have argued that the force behind modernization, a legacy of colonialism, is often destructive to the environment and eroding of the habits of traditional ways of doing things, which were balanced with nature. According to environmental historian Ramachandra Guha, the colonial era in India was marked by exploitation of the natural resources to the benefit of the empire with minimal regard on how to use them in a sustainable way and whether it was beneficial to the locals (Guha 58). This colonial attitude of viewing nature as an asset that has to be conquered and exploited is still present in shaping the postwar development agendas.

In *The God of Small Things*, Roy takes a swipe at the development agenda but it is a way of showing how modernity is interfering with the physical landscape as well as the social fabric of Ayemenem. This is shown by Roy when he describes the garden of Baby Kochamma that used to signify the cultural heritage and nature, but is now deserted and full of weeds. The degradation of the garden indicates the intrusion of colonial and capitalistic ideology in the native lands, whereby cultures are replaced by the commoditization and shallow engagement with the natural world. The obsession of Baby Kochamma with western media and materialism is a depiction of the demise of traditional norms that once regarded a harmonious relationship with the nature. According to Roy, the fact that the garden falls into ruins signifies the colonial and capitalist invasion into the nation, as it is reflective of the demise of native traditions (Roy 98). The move highlights the nature of tension between cultural conservation and modernization processes.

These symbolic visualizations bring out the consequences of colonialism where Roy focuses on the looting of nature as well as the systematic oppression of the poor populations.

Postcolonial ecocritics argue that exploitation of natural resources is often associated with exploitation of the marginalized groups, in particular, the racially, socially, or economically marginalized ones (Yasin 135).

In the story, the oppressed, represented by such characters as Velutha and Ammu, are symbolically linked to nature, which is also exploited. The interaction between environmental and peripheralization of human beings underlines that there is need to have an ecological set up in which social and environmental justice are viewed to be inseparable. The criticism of modernity of Roy transcends past the damage it inflicts in the environment, as it also brings to light of how this project promotes the social economic injustices. The colonial history that viewed nature and marginal others as sources that could be utilized is still present in the postcolonial world especially in the development paradigms which put more emphasis on economic growth at the expense of nature and social sustainability.

5. Conclusion

Within the ecological issues, Arundhati Roy used the symbolism of the environment in *The God of Small Things* in analysing environmental and social problems. The complicated nature, culture, and the society in postcolonial India which Roy describes using the symbols of the river Meenachal which is being polluted, the shattered garden and the miserable death of the elephant. These representations portray the irreparable damage that the colonial exploitation of the land and the marginalized individuals had on the land and the people. The novel is an interesting challenge to the need to strike a balance between modernization and environmental sustainability and social justice. Having stressed the mutual reliance between environmental and social justice, Roy makes the readers think of how they treat nature and see the negative effect of colonial and capitalistic activities on the environment and society. The story promotes a less aggressive co-existence between the man and nature where the reader is left with many questions to ask to either perpetuate or prevent these forms of injustices.

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