

## **Environmental Ethics in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide***

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### **ABSTRACT**

During the last few decades environment has posed a great threat to human society as well as the mother earth. However, the concern for ecology and the threat that the continuous misuse of our environment poses on humanity caught the attention of the writers. It is this sense of concern and it's reflect in literature that have given rise to new branch of literary theory namely Ecocriticism. Ecocriticism functions as a tool that draws the attentions 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 Ethics in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*". It explores possibilities of ethical evaluation of human responsibility towards our environment of which we too are an integral part.

**Key words:** Ecocriticism, Eco-centric Environmental ethics, socio-centric Environmental ethics.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Ecocriticism is a new emerged contemporary remarkable phenomenon in the area of literary theory and criticism. It speaks through literature about the relationship of man and Nature. It concerned with nature writing and ecological themes in all literature. The challenge for ecocritics is keeping one eye on the ways in which nature is always culturally constructed, and the other on the fact that nature really exists. Similar to critical traditions examining caste, class,

and race, and gender, ecocriticism deals not only with the socially constructed, often dichotomous categories we create for reality, but with reality itself.

The word “Ecocriticism” first appeared in William Rueckert’s essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*” in 1978 (Barry, 249), where he focused on the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature (*The Ecocriticism Reader*, 107). Cheryll Glotfelty, who is a pioneer in this theory defines the term “ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment”. She goes on to say, ecocriticism takes earth-centered approach to literary studies (vii). 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”.

William Howarth in his critique, ‘*Some Principles of Ecocriticism*’, published in Cheryll Glotfelty’s *The Ecocriticism Reader*, discussed, ‘Ecocriticism’- the word’s origin as ‘Eco’ and ‘critic’ both derive from Greek, ‘oikos’ and ‘kritis’, and in tandem they mean ‘house judge’. Here ‘oikos/house’ suggests our widest home, Nature, a place as Edward Hoagland calls and ‘kritos/judge’ is just like a house-keeper. Thus, Ecocriticism means, a person who judges the merites and faults of writings that depict the effect of culture upon nature, with a view toward celebrating nature, berating its despoilers, and reversing their harm through political action (*The Ecocritical Reader*, 69).

According to Buell, Heise and Thornber’s seminal article ‘*Literature and Environment*’, Ecocritical Literary Theory has developed into an increasingly worldwide movement in two main waves or stages:

The FIRST wave marked by a commitment to preservationist, environmentalism, an eco-centric environmental ethics, an emphasis on place-attachment at a local or bioregional level, a prioritization of the self-nature relation, and forms of literary imagination that especially reflect these: first wave, rooted in deep ecology, tended to see nature and human beings as opposed to one another, and held that the proper response of environmental criticism should be to help protect the natural environment from the depredations of human culture.

The SECOND wave marked by a more socio-centric environmental ethics attaching special importance to issues of environmental (in)justice, to collective rather than individual experience as a primary historical force and concern in works of imagination, and increasingly to the claims of a global or planetary level of environmental belonging. This wave brought with it a redefinition of the term “environment”, expanding its meaning to include both “nature” and the urban out of this expansion has grown the ecojustice movement, one of the more political ecocriticism branches that is “raising an awareness of class, caste, race and gender through ecocritical reading of texts”(Bressler 236).

### **Eco-centric Environmental ethics in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things***

Suzanna Arundhati Roy (1961- ) is a writer, an environmentalist and social activist, is rightly recognized as a multifaceted personality by her compatriots. She is best known for her novel *The God of Small Things* (1997), which won the Man Booker Prize for Fiction in 1997. As a socially committed person, Arundhati Roy extends her concern for nature. Hence, environmental issues do not fail to grab her attention. She voices her concern for nature volubly in her fictional and non-fictional writings and expresses the same in her speeches.

In *The God of Small Things*, she has presented environmental problems as some of the small things which have been neglected for a long time in Indian society. She puts forth the idea that, like Indian women who remain silent against patriarchal oppression, environment has been enduring a wanton destruction for ages. With great skill, Roy integrates nature with her subject matter. She vividly presents how nature is being exploited by human beings in order to be modernised. She gives expression to her thought that nature is being made the silent victim of human greed and insensitivity and these, in turn, have reflexive effects on human life.

The story, which is a series of flashbacks and flash forwards, functions as a helping tool for the author to tell the readers how certain places were in the past and how they are at present. She opens the novel with the picturesque description of the month of May in Ayemenem, the place where the incidents in the story happen. The colours and smells of the season are painted in a wordy picture at the outset. Roy explains the kind of climatic conditions that prevail in Ayemenem. She narrates how people lead planned lives which go hand-in-hand with the changing seasons:

“...by early June the south-west monsoon breaks and there are three months of wind and water with short spells of sharp, glittering sunshine that thrilled children snatch to play with. The countryside turns an immodest green. Boundaries blur as tapioca fences take root and bloom. Brick walls turn moss green, Pepper vines snake up electric poles. Wild creepers burst through laterite banks and spill across the flooded roads. Boats ply in the bazaars. And small fish appear in the...PWD potholes on the highways” (1).

When Rahel and Estha, along with their family members, went to receive Margaret, Chacko’s former wife, and Sophie Mol, his daughter, they stayed at a hotel and that night, they dreamt of ‘their river’, Meenachal (122). Thereby, the author says how the river was once. River Meenachal “was warm...Grey green.... With fish in it. With the sky and trees in it. And at night, the broken yellow moon in it” (123). The river was rich with fishes. The river was so pristine that the sky and the trees were reflected in it. But the present condition of the river is presented by the author with great remorse and she writes:

...raining the river was no more than a swollen drain now. A thin ribbon of thick water that tapped wearily at the mud banks on either side, sequined with occasional silver of a dead fish. It was choked with a succulent weed, whose furred brown roots saved like thin tentacles under water. Bronze winged lily-trotters walked across it. Splay-footed cautious. (124)

The river which is said to evoke fear is now “a slow, slugging green ribbon laws that ferried garbage to the sea now” (124). Estha found that the river “smelled of shit 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 “the smell of shit lifted off the river and hovered over Ayemenen like a hot” (125)

The novel gives a vivid description of harmful effects of modernization on animals. In the novel a temple elephant dies due 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.

In her novel Roy 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 shows us the way for sustainable development. Velutha has “a light brown birthmark, shaped like a pointed dry leaf” (73). The author makes Velutha connect his birthmark with nature. He claims, “it was a lucky leaf, that made the monsoons come on time” (73). But the mark does not bring him good luck. In spite of being so skilled and talented, he ends up doing only manual labour. When he has a difference of opinion with his father, he avoids going home and he leads a life that harmoniously blends with nature. The author describes, “He caught fish in the river and cooked it on an open fire. He slept outdoors, on the banks of the river” (76-77). When he does not have a home to live, he very comfortably becomes part of nature. When he makes himself homeless, Meenachal river bank becomes his home.

Roy has tried to depict nature through trees, river, mountains, animals and insects. 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.

### **Socio-centric Environmental Ethics in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*.**

Ghosh focuses on the ongoing tensions between humanity and nature in the Sundarbans. The novel considers the conflicts between the nature and its tenacious residents and between those residents and the global conservation groups who intent on preserving the Sundarban’s unique aquatic life and tiger population at the expense of its residents. Ghosh usually depicts those historical incidents which never appear in history. He reconstructs history and uses it as a tool to focus on the present sufferings of the tribal people.

Ghosh interlaces together two narratives: one unfolding through Nirmal’s journal narrating the Morichjhapi episode and the second through Piya’s expedition, revealing the contemporary situation of the humans, the flora and fauna of Sundarbans. Ghosh acts as a social

ecologist as he advocates the understanding of the role of hierarchy and domination as the root cause of ecological crisis. The police deprive the settlers of food and water. They are tear-gassed, and their tube wells, huts, boats and all possession is destroyed and submerged. Annu Jalais in the article “Dwelling on Morichjhapi” maintains that the settlers are not only made ecological refugees but also reduced to tiger food:

It was often expressed that the government was happy as long as the tigers thrived and that in contrast, whether the islanders lived or died, as with the refugees, made no difference, because they were just “tiger food.” It was also said that earlier both animals and humans lived in harmony and the animals did not harm the human beings. But after the incident of Morichjhapi, the tigers became “man eaters”. (176)

The incidence is full of killings wherein natures as well as tribal people are considered marginalized in front of more powerful or centralized people. At that period of military occupation, Kusum, the mother of Fokir, a victim of Morichjhapi incidence presents the extreme hostility and injustice that could be imposed on hungry and helpless, “she had subsisted on a kind of wild green known as *jadu-palong*. Palatable enough at first, these leaves had proved deadly in the end, for they had caused severe dysentery. The latter, on top of lack of proper nutrition, had proved most debilitating” (261).

Ghosh uses Kusum’s voice to apprise the readers of how the government steps up pressure on the poor settlers. The island is patrolled by police, preventing the refugees from obtaining the basic necessities of life like food. The starved people are ruthlessly attacked and killed. The police harass the locals. Several people are arrested, several hundreds die and their bodies are thrown into the river, “thirty police launches encircled the island thereby depriving the settlers of food and water; they were also tear gassed, their huts razed, their boats sunken, their fisheries and tube-wells destroyed, and those who tried to cross the river were shot all” (279).

Ghosh also focusses on the issues of habitations. While Lusibari flourishes as a settlement, Morichjhapi’s attempt to establish as a habitation is opposed harshly and brutally. Lusibari and many other islands are explored and established owing to the efforts of an English man, Daniel Hamilton. The intrusion of an Englishman is considered as a part of the civilized mission, but when poor environmental refugees try to establish a settlement, they are evicted and resisted by the government calling the place Morichjhapi, a reserve forest belonging to a project to save tigers. They justify their move of ruthless eviction of poor people from a small and inhospitable island on the grounds of environmental conservation.

Despite the well known fact that the human-eating tigers in the Sundarbans claim a death-toll of several dozens of people per annum, the preservation of this endangered species has constantly taken priority over the protection of the local population. It is because of the international funds available for the protection of the former but not of the latter.

The novel explores the plight of displaced people, their struggle for settlement and survival in an endangered ecosystem. These poor settlers undergo environmental injustice, undue pain and discrimination which elicit an outburst from Kusum, a poor settler:

. . . the worst part was not the hunger or the thirst. It was to sit here, helpless, and listen to the policemen making their announcements, hearing them say that our lives, our existence, was worth less than dirt or dust. "This island has to be saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals, it is a part of a reserve forest, and it belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid for by people from all around the world."  
(261)

Ghosh as such presents the case of environmental injustice and environmental racism. He urges the need for reconceptualization of the notion of habitat preservation and endangered species as it ignores and threatens the life and dwellings of the poor and minority communities. One of the major issues of the novel is preservation and conservation of flora and fauna at the cost of lives of innocent and poor human lives. It is a case of unequal justice; we cannot put the human beings in an unknown corner in the vast stage of ecosphere.

In the scene of a mob, killing a tiger, Piya is awestruck to see the horrifying cruelty shown by human beings towards a ferocious but mute animal when it strays into human habitat. The tiger wanders into a village at night, drawn by the sounds of a buffalo giving birth. It follows the sounds to the animal's pen and claws its way in through the roof. The villagers seize on their opportunity against the tiger as it had killed two of their people and countless heads of livestock. The angry villagers blind it by piercing a sharpened bamboo pole into its eyes and burn it alive. Piya raises her voice against this act. Being a deep ecologist, she hints about the fact that humans with their monstrous ego are always in a continuous trial of dominating and destroying other fellow creatures. Deep ecologists believe that once humans destroy all other species, they start killing their own fellow beings.

Ghosh introduces the voices of different characters like Kanai, Piya and Fokir. Piya, being a deep ecologist holds up her ideology of protecting the animals at any cost, while Fokir



joins the mob as he belongs to the community of people who are marginalized by the state to live in the environmentally challenging terrain. Kanai seems to be sympathetic with the crowd saying that it has killed two people of the village and has long been preying on their livestock.

Actually the victims of the village are not paid compensation for loss of livestock or life by wildlife enthusiasts and government agencies. Their voice is unheard. They are presented as environmental injustice victims, as environmental justice protects the right of victims to receive full compensation and reparation for damages as well as quality health care. Ghosh uses this pretext to raise questions:

It happens every week that people are killed by tigers. How about the horror of that? If there were killings on that scale anywhere else on earth it would be called genocide, and yet here it goes almost unremarked: these killings are never reported, never written about in the papers. And the reason is just that these people are too poor to matter. We all know it, but we choose not to see it. Isn't that a horror too-that we can feel the suffering of an animal, but not of human beings? (300-01)

Here Ghosh again makes the readers aware that the conservation of animals should not be done on cost of human lives since humans are an integral part of the whole ecosphere. He provides an interesting ecological perspective about the human-animal dynamics in the tide country. He asserts that the authorities are providing water for tigers in a place where nobody cares about human beings who go thirsty. It is a matter of pity that animals are prioritized over humans.

## CONCLUSIONS

One of the most important perspectives of FIRST wave Ecocritical Literary Theory is the theme of 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. The suitable example of this type of Ecocritical work is Arundhati Roy *The God of Small Things*, being a socially aware intellect with 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.



One of the most important perspectives of SECOND wave Ecocritical Literary Theory is the theme of scientific investigation of the natural world with indigenous forms of knowledge. The suitable example of this type of Ecocritical work is Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004). Set in the Sundarbans, in the Bay of Bengal, *The Hungry Tide* highlights the potentially catastrophic cost to people of prioritizing animals and the many ambiguities of human-nonhuman interactions. Piyali, an American marine biologist and an Ecologist of Indian descent comes to study endangered species of the Sundarban archipelago on the Bay of Bengal. She contracts a local guide, named Fokir, who is illiterate but intimately familiar with local topography, flora, and fauna through lifelong inhabitation and experience.

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