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Postcolonial Ecologies: Nature as Witness in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract

This paper examines how, in Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things*, nature is not merely a background setting. It is an active witness. Nature sees the violence caused by postcolonial development. It sees the violence of patriarchal capitalism and social injustice. This paper attempts to explore postcolonial, ecocritical and ecofeminist ideas associated with incidents and characters. These are frameworks that connect environmental issues with colonialism and gender. Roy positions nature as a silent testifier. This assertion is especially true for the river, the animals, and the landscapes of Kerala**.** The novel presents the natural world as a witness. It shows that the oppression of women, the oppression of marginalized communities, and the harm done to the environment all share a common root cause.

Keywords: Postcolonial, Ecofeminism, Environmental Witness, Development, Neocolonialism

Literature has long served as a repository for human experience, but in the era of escalating ecological crisis, its role in documenting the relationship between society and the environment has become crucial. Postcolonial literature—that is, writing from countries that were once colonized—offers an especially powerful viewpoint. The legacy of colonialism does not simply end. It often continues as social injustice. Now, the exploitation targets both people and the land itself. The God of Small Things is set in a village called Ayemenem. This village is in Kerala, India. On the surface, it tells the tragic tale of twins Estha and Rahel, their mother Ammu, and her secret lover, Velutha, a carpenter from the lowest "Untouchable" caste. The strict, unyielding rules of caste, gender, and class in post-Independence India tear apart their personal lives.

However, Roy brilliantly shows that this social tragedy cannot be separated from the fate of the environment. The novel makes a clear point. The same forces that destroy human lives also destroy the natural world. These forces are greed, rigid social hierarchy, and a blind faith in destructive development. The river running through Ayemenem shows this. It becomes poisoned. The poison comes from pesticides funded by large agricultural loans. This version of progress has direct consequences. It causes the fish to die. It makes the air become foul and contaminated. In the novel, nature is not just a pretty setting. It is a silent witness. It is also a victim. Its fate is

deeply tangled with the suffering of the characters. Through this link, Roy makes a reader see the truth. There is a connection between ecological destruction and social oppression. They are two sides of the same coin. Both come from the same mindset. The result is a mindset that seeks to dominate and control. Her novel is an important testament. It shows the consequences of inequality. It reveals how all living beings depend on each other. Roy creates a world where the river's fate is as important as Velutha's, where the smell of pesticides is as bad as betrayal.

This paper investigates that in *The God of Small Things*, nature functions as a central witness. It observes, records, and ultimately testifies to the multifaceted violence of the postcolonial condition. As Laura Pulido asserts, environmental movements uncover "structural forces that produce conditions of environmental degradation" (14). Roy's novel performs a similar act of revealing truth. It does this through literary storytelling. The story shows how powerful structural forces operate. These forces are global capitalism, state-sponsored development, and patriarchal caste society. They leave their mark on the physical land. They also leave their mark on the human body.

This perspective aligns with the emerging field of postcolonial ecocriticism, which, as Pablo Mukherjee notes, shares with postcolonialism a "comprehensive critique of European modernity, in particular its core components of capitalism, colonialism/imperialism and patriarchy" (145). Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin further argue that a key task of this critique is to "contest western ideologies of development" (27). Roy's novel is a literary execution of this task. The novel strongly connects different forms of oppression. It links the oppression of women, lower castes and the poor. It connects all of this to the exploitation of nature. This connection aligns perfectly with ecofeminist philosophy. Ecofeminism argues that these injustices share the same root. They come from a mindset that seeks to dominate both people and the natural world. Karen Warren defines this connection as central to ecofeminism, which claims "there are important connections between the unjustified dominations of women, people of colour, children, and the poor and the unjustified domination of nature" (1).

The Meenachal River in Ayemenem is far more than a setting in Arundhati Roy's novel; it is the ecological and symbolic heart of the story. Its slow, tragic transformation over the 23-year span of the narrative—from a living waterway to a toxic dump—serves as the novel's most powerful and sustained testimony against the false promises of postcolonial development. Roy uses the river's visible degradation to document a hidden history of violence, one that the official, optimistic narratives of national progress seek to erase. Social divisions, with separate bathing areas for touchables and untouchables, already mark the river during the twins' childhood in 1969. Yet, the river remains a source of life. It is a source of beauty and secret freedom. Velutha moves through this element to reach Ammu. He swims across its currents. This act mirrors his other transgression. He is breaking the rigid social laws that forbid their love. In this earlier time, the river is an ally to the marginalized. It is a natural space.

The river has become a glaring casualty. Roy's description is brutally forensic: "The river smelled of shit and pesticides bought with World Bank loans. Most of the fish had died. The ones that survived suffered from fin-rot and had broken out in boils"

(14). This information is not just scene-setting; it is evidence. The specific mention of "World Bank loans" is a direct accusation, pinpointing the machinery of neocolonial globalization as the source of the poison. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin opine that state-run development in postcolonial settings often involves "top-down forms of economic management [which are] bound to the neocolonialist imperatives of global corporate commerce and the post-independence state" (52). The poisoned river is the physical manifestation of this binding—the local environment absorbing the toxic consequences of distant economic decisions.

A traditional family home is transformed by commercialization and polluting tourism. The historic "History House" is renovated into "God's Own Country," a luxury hotel for wealthy tourists who speed in, leaving a "rainbow film of gasoline" (119) on the water. A wall is built to hide the poor community's slum from the guests' view, "but there wasn't much they could do about the smell" (119). Roy labels this neighborhood a "smelly paradise" (120), capturing the hollow core of a development model that creates isolated pockets of luxury amidst widespread ecological and human ruin. The river testifies to this inequality; its pervasive stench is a truth that cannot be walled off.

Furthermore, Roy links the damage to specific, politically-motivated projects. A saltwater barrage is built "in exchange for votes from the influential paddy-farmer lobby" (118). The project was meant to help farmers and boost agriculture. Instead, it upset the natural balance of the estuary. This left dead fish on the riverbanks. This death is a clear sign of ecological damage. The damage was caused by poor management. This management was driven by the politics of winning votes. Thus, the river becomes an archive of failed policy and corrupt governance. In its silence, the polluted Meenachal River delivers Roy's most potent critique: that the era of postcolonial development has often merely continued the colonial practice of exploitation, now with the environment and the poor paying the deepest price.

The development shown in Ayemenem is shallow. It leaves people out. The old "History House" is a relic from colonial times. It once symbolized a painful past. It is not torn down. Instead, it is commercially repackaged for profit. It is renovated into a luxury hotel ironically named "God's Own Country," a glossy tourist destination. The guests arrive by speedboat, carving through the water and leaving behind a "rainbow film of gasoline" (Roy 119), a visually stark symbol of the new pollution that has replaced the old politics. To protect the tourists', view and illusion of paradise, a wall is constructed to screen off the adjacent slum, "but there wasn't much they could do about the smell" (119). Roy sardonically captures this entire hollow enterprise with the label "smelly paradise" (120). This phrase sums up the main contradiction. It describes a model of progress. This progress creates isolated, fortified pockets of privilege. This happens even as the surrounding ecology and human conditions worsen. The river is a constant witness to this. It bears clear proof of this brutal inequality through its persistent, foul decay. The river's toxicity is a powerful equalizer. It cannot be contained by a physical wall. Its poison seeps into the air of the slum. It also seeps into the air of the hotel. This mocks the very idea of segregated development.

The specific politically-engineered projects partially bring environmental decay. Rahel observes that "a saltwater barrage had been built, in exchange for votes from the influential paddy-farmer lobby" (118). This sentence shows what is wrong with the political system. The system trades care for the environment in exchange for votes. The barrage upsets the delicate balance of the estuary's ecosystem. It was built to control the water's salinity. Its goal is to increase farm output in the short term. This project benefits a powerful and influential group. The result is not increased prosperity but death, visible in the "dead fish" scattered on the mud banks (118). Here, nature itself reveals a truth. It testifies to the corruption of politics focused only on winning votes. This system sacrifices the long-term health of the environment. It does this for short-term political and economic gain. The river becomes a living record. It is a record of poor policy and wrong priorities. Its dead fish are like silent evidence. They are the physical proof of the crime committed against the land.

Therefore, the Meenachal River transcends its role as a mere setting. It evolves into a historical agent, a biological entity that absorbs and physically displays the traces of political corruption, global economic policy, and profound social neglect. The ecological devastation in Ayemenem can be read as a direct consequence of the mechanistic worldview Carolyn Merchant historicizes. Merchant argues that the Scientific Revolution transformed nature from a nurturing mother into "inert, passive matter to be manipulated" (xx). The river's poisoning is a delayed, incremental testimony that starkly contradicts the glossy, instant-need narrative of "God's Own Country." It forces the reader to confront the critical question posed by postcolonial ecocritics Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin: when examining development plans, we must ask "whose interests are served" (27). The Meenachal River provides the visceral, undeniable answer. It is written not in official reports or political manifestos, but in the water's putrid smell, in the rainbow sheen of gasoline, and in the sight of fish covered in boils—a tragic testament to who ultimately pays the price for someone else's paradise.

Roy's critique makes a clear connection. It links the exploitation of the environment to the exploitation of women. It also links it to the exploitation of lower-caste workers. This happens within a system of patriarchal capitalism. This combination of issues is where her ecofeminist view is most powerful. The novel applies the same desire to dominate and profit from nature to people. It targets the bodies of women. It targets the bodies of lower-caste individuals.

The Ipe family is the fractured heart of the novel. They act as a small-scale model. They represent the social, political, and historical tensions in postcolonial India. They are a Syrian Christian family in Kerala. This places them in a complex social position. They are not part of the Hindu caste system. They are also not part of the former British ruling class. Despite the changing world, they remain deeply committed to maintaining their own status and power. The exploitation of Velutha within this system is even more stark. Despite being the most skilled mechanic and carpenter—the one who keeps the machines running—he is paid less than a touchable carpenter because of his Paravan identity. Mammachi believes he "ought to be grateful" to be allowed to touch things that touchables touch (74). His body and skills are instrumentalized for maximum profit at minimum cost, a direct parallel to the exploitation of natural resources. Velutha is an "Untouchable." This social status

creates a cruel irony. His labour becomes the most "touchable" aspect of his identity within the capitalist system. His work is considered cheap. He wants his labour and his humanity to be recognized. This demand for justice is not accepted. The system interprets this basic demand as a direct threat. His participation is an attempt to be seen. He wants his labor and his humanity to be recognized. This demand for justice is not accepted. The system interprets this basic demand as a direct threat. Spivak opines, "The subaltern is not simply silenced but is constituted as such by discourse; as Spivak argues, the speaking subject is shaped by the very systems it might oppose" (75).

The police who beat Velutha to death are not portrayed as evil men. They are described as "agents of history that strayed into Ayemenem. They were there to administer a warning" (292). This means they are the tools of a larger force—the combined weight of history, caste law, and state power—acting to enforce the status quo. Their brutality serves a function. The narrator explains that by violently crushing Velutha, they were "exorcising a fear of being subverted, civilization's fear of nature, men's fear of women, power's fear of powerlessness" (292). This one sentence connects all the forms of oppression in the novel. Nature represents all that is wild, free, and uncontrollable. This includes the natural love between Ammu and Velutha, the unrest of the poor (the Marxist march), and even the physical river itself, which refuses to be clean and orderly. Their love embodies a natural force that the "civilized" world must eradicate. Second, "men's fear of women." This is the patriarchal fear of a woman like Ammu who claims her desire. She refuses to be controlled by her father, her husband, or her brother.

Velutha is a symbol of a powerless untouchable and worker. Ammu's attempt to tell the truth at the police station is met with a humiliating tap of the baton on her breast, a gesture meant to remind her of her place as a woman. This shows that the system protects itself not just by killing the rebel man, but by silencing and shaming the rebel woman. Ultimately, Velutha and Ammu are sacrificed so the old order can feel secure. Their deaths send a message: the "Love Laws" that say who can love whom are not just social norms; they are laws that the state will use all of its power to enforce. Their story proves that the personal is political and that challenging the system's smallest rule can bring its heaviest fist down upon you. This, interconnected oppression is what ecofeminists like Vandana Shiva identify as the core pathology of patriarchal development. She calls development a "new project of western patriarchy" leading to both "ecological destruction" and the "marginalization of subjugated women". *The God of Small Things* is a novel of witnessing, it also implicitly calls for a form of listening and, ultimately, resistance. Roy does not offer a simplistic, romanticized alternative but points toward a politics grounded in the solidarity of the oppressed and the acknowledgment of interconnectedness, a politics that begins by attending to the testimony of the small and the silenced.

The novel's greatest act of resistance is the love affair between Ammu and Velutha. The significance of their bond lies in its foundation. It is built on a shared recognition of injustice. It is also built on a shared appreciation for the small, natural world. Ammu is drawn to Velutha when she senses in him a "living, breathing anger against the smug, ordered world that she so raged against" (167). Their relationship transgresses the most sacred social boundaries of caste and gender, and it is

consummated in a space—the "History House"—that is itself abandoned by history, being reclaimed by nature. Their love is an ecological act, a re-wilding of human relations according to desire rather than law. When Velutha swims across the river to Ammu, she sees that "the world they stood in was his. That he was its. That it was his. The water and the mud were his property. The trees. The fish. The stars" (315-316). This is a vision of non-possessive belonging, a radical contrast to Chacko's "my factory, my pineapples." It embodies an ecofeminist ethos of reciprocity rather than domination.

The twins, Estha and Rahel, are the primary vessels for the reader's understanding of this testimony. As children, they are attuned to the language of small things. Their trauma stems not only from what they see (Velutha's murder) but from being forced to betray that testimony, to lie about what nature witnessed. Their adult lives are shattered because they carry a truth that the official history has violently suppressed. Rahel's return and her reunion with Estha represent a painful attempt to reclaim that truth, to piece together the story from the fragments of memory and the enduring, altered landscape. Amitava Kumar states, "Home is not a place you return to, but a story you keep rewriting. Each telling adds a room, removes a ghost, changes the light in the windows" (52). They are the reluctant archivists of the crime, their very beings a testament to the lasting damage.

Roy's own authorial voice, often interjecting with a fierce, ironic commentary, models the activist stance that arises from such witnessing. The novel's famous refrain about the "Love Laws" that dictate "who should be loved, and how. And how much" (33) is a direct indictment of the man-made laws that govern caste, gender, and property. Her non-fiction activism against dams and corporate globalization is the logical extension of the novel's ethos. In "The Greater Common Good," she calls for the dismantling of the "Big"-"Big bombs, big dams, big ideologies, big contradictions, big countries, big wars, big heroes, big mistakes" - and wonders if the future might belong to the "Century of the Small" (Roy 12).

This is the political vision emerging from the ecological testimony of *The God of Small Things*. It asks us to redirect our gaze from the grandiose projects of the powerful to the suffering and resilience of the small—the marginalized person, the endangered species, the polluted river. Roy's novel, therefore, is not a tragedy of defeat but a complex act of bearing witness. By giving narrative form to the testimony of nature and the subaltern, she preserves a counter-history, one that insists on the value of every small thing and calls for a justice that is as comprehensive as the exploitation it seeks to end.

The God of Small Things shows a world where people and nature are tied together. In her story, the environment is more than just scenery. It silently sees the pain and violence people endure. Roy uses this link to point out the problems in Indian society after colonial rule. The river in the story acts like a living record. Its pollution tells the real story of "development." This development comes from projects paid for by foreign loans. These projects poison the water and harm the poor. The dying fish and the bad smell are proof of a system that is failing. Even the smallest details are important. The insects, the heavy monsoon rains, and the thick heat are not just background. They show the hidden stresses of caste and gender. They see the love

that is not allowed and the violence that is kept secret. The night itself watches when Velutha is beaten. The air grows heavy with the shame forced upon Ammu.

Ultimately, Roy shows that the same force that exploits the land also exploits people. The greed that pollutes the river is the same greed that treats Velutha's labour as cheap and Ammu's body as property. The novel draws attention of readers that the destruction of nature cannot be separated from the oppression of human beings. The novel makes an argument. Justice must also be connected. In the novel, both nature and marginalized people are seen as resources. They are to be dominated, used up, and thrown away. This logic leads, inevitably, to ruin for everyone.

Roy offers a fragile seed of hope through the twins, Estha and Rahel. Their minds are shattered, yet deeply perceptive. They represent an alternative way of being. They see the world in minute, interconnected detail. To "see as the twins do" means rejecting the desire to control. It means adopting a practice of attentive care. Roy suggests the only sustainable future requires this radical shift in perception. This requires heeding the testimony of a wounded world. An understanding is necessary: the river's poison becomes everyone's poison. Another world is possible, based on respect rather than domination. But this world is only possible by learning to listen. It requires listening to the voices society has been taught to ignore. Therefore, the novel is not just a sad song. It is a call to action. It demands a new politics and a new ethics. This new ethic must be worthy of the small, the silent, and the sacred things in life.

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