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Metaphors of the Marginal: Nature's Small Lessons in Arundhati Roy

Dr. Sindhu V Jose
Assistant Professor of English
Sona College of Arts and Science
Salem -636005
Email ID: sindhubresi@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* intricately explores the relationship between nature, marginality, and human experience in postcolonial India. Through recurring natural metaphors, Roy foregrounds the lives of marginalized communities, particularly women and members of the untouchable caste. Elements such as the river, the surrounding landscape, and the idea of "small things" function as symbolic devices that critique both the exploitation of nature and the oppression of susceptible social groups. The novel draws striking parallels between ecological degradation and the commodification of women's bodies, revealing how environmental and social injustices are deeply interconnected. The novel exposes the pervasive violence of casteism and patriarchy through characters like Velutha and Ammu, whose transgressive identities and forbidden relationship lead to punishment and erasure. By intertwining human histories with natural landscapes, Roy highlights how systems of power regulate both bodies and environments. Ultimately, *The God of Small Things* presents love and empathy as transformative forces capable of challenging entrenched hierarchies. By emphasizing the significance of the "small things"—marginalized voices, brittle ecosystems, and overlooked relationships—the novel urges readers to recognize the value of care, connection, and resistance in sustaining both human and ecological life.

Keywords: Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, marginality, nature, ecofeminism, dark ecology, insects, pickle jar.

INTRODUCTION

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) marked a landmark moment by winning the Booker Prize in Indian English fiction when it was published to widespread international recognition. Setting of the novel is small village named Ayemenem in Kerala. The novel intertwines personal memory with broader political and social realities.

A central idea is the notion of **"small things,"** which Roy uses both literally and metaphorically. These "small things" refer to minute moments, ordinary objects, suppressed emotions, and forbidden relationships that shape the characters' lives in profound ways. The novel also discrepancies **"small things"**—personal desires, childhood experiences, whispered truths. The tragedy of the characters discloses through the accumulation of these small, often unnoticed contraventions on love and human connection. Thus, the "small things" become a powerful

narrative force, revealing how private lives are continually shaped—and often destroyed—by larger, domineering structures.

In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy turns the natural world into a subtle but powerful narrative device. Seemingly trivial elements—**insects, flowers, rivers, discarded objects, and even weather patterns** function as **ecological metaphors**. They articulate power, trauma, resistance, and interconnectedness in a postcolonial society. By entrenching human experience within the environment, Roy reveals how colonization, caste hierarchy, violence, and memory seep into the landscape itself.

THE "SMALL THINGS": A LENS FOR ECOLOGY

As Rajgopal Nidamboor, mentioned in *Sunday Observer*, "*The God of Small Things* has it all: the echoes, calls and the cries of the Earth. But more importantly, an intellectual daring. This … is not just an extraordinary novel, but an uncoiling spring of human foreboding and inevitability. It's quite simply unbeatable" (Review of The God of Small Things). Arundhati Roy employs "small things" not simply as narrative details but as **symbolic ecosystems** that reflect the lives of her characters and the social structures around them. Mosquitoes, the river, pickle-making, and other seemingly minor elements serve as metaphors that deepen the novel's engagement with caste, love, memory, and postcolonial trauma. Mosquitoes and insects did not have long span of life. Their temporary lives and easy annihilation ricochet through the perilous position of characters like Velutha, an untouchable and the twins Rahel and Esthappan. Despite their risky life these characters also killed easily and forgotten easily like mosquitoes and insects.

Vandana Shiva, an Indian environmental scholar and activist, examines the close relationship between ecology, feminism, and social justice. Her work critiques the effects of globalization and capitalist development on local ecosystems and aboriginal communities, particularly the ways in which these forces marginalize women and small farmers. Shiva advocates for alternative models of development that are rooted in sustainability, equity, and respect for local knowledge systems, highlighting the need for a more just and balanced relationship between humans and the natural world.

Roy's ecological vision tends to observe rather than intercede. The frequent imagery of insects—ants on Sophie Mol's coffin, moths drawn to light, trapped beetles—highlights the vulnerability of small lives that are easily ignored or destroyed. The insects flock around her coffin and the surrounding deterioration suggest how death and trauma enter average life. Nature becomes closely tied to the emotional and moral commotion that follows the tragedy. "It was hot in the church, and the white edges of the arum lilies crisped and curled. A be died in a coffin flower" (*The God of Small Things* 5). The miniature creatures are often present but seldom noticed, they symbolize Dalits—visible in daily life and essential to social functioning, yet unswervingly undervalued. They are easily destroyed without concern. These minor creatures delicately parallel those hard-pressed to the margins of society, particularly Velutha, whose name meaning "white" contrasts with his social invisibility under the caste system. Like insects crushed without recognition, Velutha becomes a victim of deep-rooted social power. In this way, nature does not protest openly but quietly reflects and records the biases endorsed upon marginalized lives. The

irony of his name lies in the contrast between its suggestion of visibility and his lived reality of social invisibility, as he is erased as quietly and easily as a crumpled insect.

The mosquito appears constantly in the novel as a small but tenacious presence. Its constant invasion into everyday spaces reflects the way oppressive social structures enter and shape private lives. Mosquitoes move freely through bedrooms, funerals, factories, and police stations, suggesting how caste scrutiny and state authority cross personal boundaries and regulate desire and behavior. " In Pappachi's study, mounted butterflies and moths had disintegrated into small heaps of iridescent dust that powdered the bottom of their glass display cases, leaving the pins that had impaled them naked" (*The God of Small Things* 155).In a similar way, Velutha occupies an uneasy position within the family: he is skilled, loyal, and closely connected, yet remains socially unwelcome because of his caste. Like the mosquito, he is permitted propinquity but denied equality, reflecting the tension of cohabitation across caste lines. Velutha is repeatedly associated with insects, ants, and tools—elements that are necessary yet rarely acknowledged. His carpentry work, like the labour of insects in nature, is productive and skilled but remains largely unnoticed and easily dismissed. "Apart from his carpentary skills, Velutha had a way with machines.Mammachi (with impenetrable Touchable logic) often said that if only he hadn't been a Paravan, he might have become an engineer" (The God of Small Things 75). Even though his name means "white," suggesting clarity or conspicuousness, he is rendered socially invisible by caste prejudice. Like an insect whose destruction goes unrecorded, Velutha's body is coarsened until it is no longer decipherable, and his death is efficiently erased from official memory.

The mosquito's bite, which forces contact through blood, also gestures toward forbidden intimacy. This echoes the transgressive relationship between Ammu and Velutha, whose physical closeness challenges social rules that seek to deny such connections. In this way, the mosquito becomes a subtle symbol of ties that cannot be easily dismissed, even when they provoke discomfort. Through such imagery, Roy shows how seemingly minor elements of nature reveal larger structures of power, exclusion, and control. Natural details in the novel can also suggest subtle forms of resistance to rigid institutions. The steady growth of unwanted plant or the constant buzzing of insects counterattacks human control, reflecting the forbidden yet durable relationship between Ammu and Velutha. In this way, nature quietly challenges social rules, implying that life persistently presses against imposed boundaries of caste, class, and the so-called "Love Laws." Ecology thus functions as a muted form of resistance, recognizing connections that society seeks to deny.

Next comes The Meenachal River. "The river itself was dark and quiet. Anabsence rather than a presence, betraying no sign of how high and strong, it really was" (*The God of Small Things* 291) Though it was the place of playful and inviting at the beginning, gradually it becomes the spot of death. Roy entangles the natural environment with human lives, using the dilapidation of the local landscape, like the polluted Meenachal River, as a metaphor for the moral and social decay within the community. The exploitation of nature mirrors the mistreatment of the underprivileged and women. "Inspector Thomas Mathew came around his desk and approached Ammu with his Baton. ' If I were you', he said, I'd go home quietly'. Then he tapped her breasts with his baton. Gently,*Tap,tap.* As though he was choosing mangoes from a basket" (*The God of*

Small Things 8). The inspector purposely done this to humiliate and terrorize Ammu. It also functions as one of the novel's most important ecological metaphors, reflecting shifts in memory, desire, and experience. Its changing flow parallels the novel's non-linear structure, where memories move back and forth rather than following a fixed sequence. Time, like the river, appears unsolidified and wobbly.

The river is also a space of misbehavior and consequence. It becomes the setting for forbidden encounters between Ammu and Velutha as well as the spot of Sophie Mol's death. While it offers moments of freedom and escape, it also becomes associated with loss, suggesting how acts that cross social boundaries invite harsh punishment. As rivers naturally blur borders, the Meenachal reflects the way forbidden relationships challenge caste divisions. Society, however, responds by forcefully reinstating these boundaries, most clearly in the violence wreaked on Velutha. Over time, the river grows polluted and stationary, echoing how traumatic memories refuse to fade. The damaged ecosystem reflects psychological and social torpor, where pain remains unresolved. The river thus represents both the possibility of movement and the reality of entrapment within rigid social structures.

The industrial pollution of the Meenachal River parallels the moral decline and fractured relationships within Ayemenem's social order. This damage occurs gradually, much like caste-based violence, which operates through every day neglect rather than sudden, visible acts. The slow worsening of the river reflects the long-term effects of postcolonial capitalism on both the environment and marginalized lives. Decay, in this sense, becomes a way of revealing truths that remain hidden within polite social narratives and caste anathemas.

The stagnant stretches of the Meenachal River mirror the inner lives of Ammu and the twins, whose unresolved grief arrests emotional movement and growth. Like sediment settling in polluted water, sorrow accumulates slowly, leaving enduring traces. Grief thus emerges not merely as an individual psychological state but as an ecological condition—embedded in both the landscape and the lives shaped by it. Ammu, a divorced woman, and Velutha, an Untouchable, transgress rigid social boundaries through their relationship on the banks of the Meenachil River. Their love, however, provokes violent social retaliation. When Mammachi learns of the "illegal" relationship, she, with the encouragement of Baby Kochamma and Kochu Maria, confines Ammu to her bedroom. Baby Kochamma, motivated by her desire to restore the family's social respectability, deliberately distorts the truth before Inspector Thomas Mathew. She constructs a calculated narrative, suggesting that Velutha came to the house at night, threatened the family, and took advantage of the absence of Chacko. By pausing strategically, she allows the police to fill in the implications themselves. Mammachi reinforces this fabricated account by claiming to have seen Velutha among protestors and repeating rumours that he was a Naxalite. Against this backdrop of fear and prejudice, Sophie Mol's death and the disappearance of the twins intensify the urgency for scapegoating. Consequently, an FIR is filed against Velutha, sealing his fate.

Meanwhile, the tragedy unfolds on the river itself. Rahel, Estha, and Sophie Mol attempt to cross the Meenachal in a small boat at night. Disoriented in the darkness, they drift into the wrong channel and collide with a floating log. The boat overturns, and Sophie Mol is drowned. The

river thus becomes both a literal and symbolic site of loss, absorbing personal grief and social violence into its polluted, stagnant waters. The Ayemenem landscape carries emotional and historical traces of suffering. The Meenachal River, closely tied to the novel's central tragedy, functions as a metaphor for suppressed pain. Initially linked to childhood play and freedom, it later becomes associated with death and guilt. Its stationary and polluted state reflects the moral stagnation of a society shaped by caste orders and persistent colonial influences. Trauma, therefore, is not confined to human memory alone but is also implanted in the surrounding ecology.

Roy's ecological metaphors place individual lives within a broader postcolonial context. Elements of colonial history appear through natural imagery: the polluted river suggests economic manipulation, while rubber plantations reminiscence systems of colonial withdrawal. The landscape thus reflects the lasting impression of imperial capitalism. At the same time, this environment enables relationships among children, lovers, and workers, indicating that human lives are closely connected to the ecological world around them. Trauma and survival, therefore, take shape not in isolation but within shared social and environmental spaces.

In Roy's novel, ecology is closely connected with politics and emotion. The "small things" of the natural world function as metaphors that reveal social hierarchies, recollect hints of ordeal, offer subtle resistance, and highlight interconnectedness. By giving attention to the minor and the unnoticed, Roy critiques a postcolonial society in which the unnoticed often carry significant meaning. The ecology of Ayemenem thus emerges as a quiet record of human vulnerability and endurance, suggesting that even small things hold considerable importance. In each instance, Roy exemplifies how personal desires, emotions, and individual lives remain susceptible under inflexible systems of caste, gender, and sexuality. Industrial waste and human carelessness damage the natural landscape, symbolically reflecting how social corruption—such as caste violence and political manipulation—seeps into and distorts private lives.

In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy employs ecological metaphors such as the river, mosquitoes, and pickle-making to foreground the intimate entanglement of human and non-human worlds. These images can be productively read through Timothy Morton's concept of Dark Ecology, which resists idealized notions of "nature" and instead emphasizes uncomfortable coexistence, decay, and interconnectedness. Roy's narrative reveals how human lives are inseparable from ecological processes, echoing Morton's argument that humans are embedded within a complex "mesh" of relationships that includes social, political, and environmental forces.

The Meenachal River, often polluted and stagnant, embodies this dark ecological vision. Rather than functioning as a romantic symbol of purity, the river absorbs social violence, grief, and historical trauma. Similarly, mosquitoes—small yet pervasive—signify ecological imbalance and the consequences of colonial and capitalist neglect. Even pickle-making, a domestic and seemingly benign activity, reflects processes of preservation, fermentation, and decay, linking everyday human labour to material ecological cycles.

Roy's fragmented narrative structure reinforces the thematic emphasis on "small things." The non-linear movement of the text mirrors ecological interdependence, where no event exists in isolation and meaning emerges through accumulation rather than linear progression. This fragmentation reflects Morton's idea that ecological awareness dislocates conventional storytelling and challenges human-centered perspectives.

Overall, Roy's novel brings into line with Dark Ecology by exposing how colonial histories, caste hierarchies, and capitalist practices shape both human suffering and environmental degradation. The focus on minor details and marginal lives underscores the novel's insistence that ecological and social realities are inseparable, deeply entangled, and resistant to neat moral resolutions.

Finally, the Pickle – making comes in the next position. Mammachi's pickle is famous. Pickle making craft needs precision and care. If any small mistake happens, it will spoil the entire jar. Similarly, The single act of flouting that is the illicit love affair between Ammu (an upper-caste woman) and Velutha (a Dalit or "Untouchable" man), ruins the life of entire families. Under the lapse of the strict "Love Laws" that govern society, their relationship challenges established social norms, leading to overwhelming consequences. Roy clearly portrays how small slipups lead to tragic significance by using the Pickle- making metaphor.

Pickle-making, overseen by Mammachi, represents domestic tradition, economic survival, and cultural continuity. Roy uses the pickle jar as a metaphor for what society chooses to preserve and what it confines out of sight.

Pickles are stored to last, much like social customs upheld through strict "Love Laws" that regulate whom one may love and in what ways. While presented as tradition, these practices also sustain caste and social hierarchies. The pickle originality further reflects unsatisfactory power relations: Mammachi controls ownership and knowledge, while Velutha, a Dalit, contributes essential skill and labour. In this sense, the conservancy of food equivalents the prolongation of inequality, where success depends on work that remains largely unrecognized.

The pickle jar also suggests how difficult experiences are contained rather than addressed. Ammu's desires, the twins' guilt, and Velutha's death are not openly processed but stored within the family's memory, becoming more intense over time. Pickle-making thus signifies not only cultural safeguarding but also the quiet withholding of pain.

As a divorced woman, Ammu occupies a marginal position within her family and society. She is treated as socially superfluous, prevailing on the superiorities of respectability and belonging. Her desires and grief cannot be well-maintained or legitimized in the same way as Mammachi's traditions. Instead, society attempts to confine and silence them, viewing her emotions and sexuality as turbulences that must be meticulous.

The pickle-making inventiveness depends on the labour of factory workers like Velutha, revealing how domestic industry is closely knotted to caste-based mistreatment. Economic activity and private life are therefore deeply unified. Through such motifs, Roy suggests that

human relationships, social ladders, and ecological processes exist within a shared network, where injustice does not remain isolated but spreads outward, much like pollution in a river.

While pickling sanctuaries food, it also limits it within glass containers. In a similar way, certain lives and memories are controlled, hushed, and set apart. Ammu's desires, Velutha's capabilities, and the twins' ordeal are conserved yet socially hidden. By focusing on such small and ordinary objects, Roy shows how society determines what is valued and remembered and what is ignored or discarded, turning apparent insignificance into a means of control.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, *The God of Small Things* demonstrates how ecological metaphors grounded in "small things" function as powerful tools for exposing social injustice and postcolonial trauma. Through images of mosquitoes, pickle jars, decaying spaces, and the polluted Meenachal River, Arundhati Roy redefines the non-human world as an active participant in human history rather than a passive backdrop. These minor details carry disproportionate symbolic weight, revealing how fragile lives are erased under rigid caste structures and patriarchal norms. Roy's ecological vision insists that injustice does not remain confined to human bodies or social institutions but permeates landscapes, domestic spaces, and even the smallest forms of life. The novel thus challenges human-centered readings of oppression by showing how grief, violence, and memory become embedded in soil, water, and everyday material objects. In doing so, Roy expands the scope of environmental literature, suggesting that ecological storytelling must attend to marginality, decay, and invisibility as much as to beauty or preservation. By foregrounding the political life of "small things," Roy urges readers to recognize the environment as a living documentation that absorbs power, remembers trauma, and resists deletion. This conclusion reinforces the novel's broader ethical claim: that attending to what is overlooked—whether marginalized people or minor ecological details—is essential for understanding the deep entanglement of social hierarchies and environmental harm in postcolonial contexts.

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