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Environmental Constructions and Ecocritical Observation in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Thing*

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Abstract:

Environmental deterioration and ecological devastation have become the hallmark of the 21st century. Modern technology has reduced the planet to the reservoir of resources and in the sway of consumerism, humans are committing barbaric practices against spiritual and ecological aspects of nature which are causing a deleterious impact on its air, water and soil. Man's decayed moral mentality has gone beyond all limits to satisfy his appetency. The earth is being plundered savagely through industrial and other forms of exploitations. We have become a consumer society at the cost of non humans. Quality of life is assessed within the paradigm of economic development. The ecological balance of the globe has been fractured due to anthropocentric activities. The present paper explores the environmental issues in Arundhati Roy's Booker Prize awarded novel, *The God of Small Thing* (1997). The paper highlights how the indiscriminate use of pesticides affects the ecosystem, especially concerning the river Meenachal. This study accentuates the issues of environmental injustice. It examines how increasing density of population mars ecological health. It analyses that modern technology is isolating man from nature and destroying the age old visceral and spiritual relations with nature. By disregarding ecological development in the frenzy of economic development, man is inviting his ruin. Man is ignoring the fact that he is just a strand in the web of life and what he does to the web he does to himself. The paper contends to shift our interest from anthropocentrism to biocentrism.

Keywords: Ecosystem, Ecological crisis, Biodiversity, Planet, Environment.

Introduction

Our earth is ailing because it is being befouled by the irresponsible treatment of homo sapiens. There is nothing in our environment that is pure. Everything from air to water and from food to fruit is adulterated. The toxins and hazardous elements released by modern industries as by-products are being dumped into the environment and badly affecting the lives of land, air and water community. Post-industrial society in the name of progress, dragging mankind to a cosmic catastrophe. Our blind faith in technological upliftment is making our ecosystem feeble and fragile. The paradigm of economic progress is creating an ecological crisis and pushing us to the brink of mass extinction. The frightening nature and current environmental scenario drew the attention of the literary scholars and they began to give voice to muted nature over her exploitation. The collective efforts of eco conscious writers for environmental study in the texts gave birth to the genre of 'Ecocriticism' or 'Green criticism.'

Ecocriticism term derived from Greek oikos and kritis. "Oikos" means "household," a nexus of humans, nature and the spirit. "Kritis" means judge. Nature writing has been regarded as the nascent state of ecocriticism. Nature writing is not just mentioning the flora and fauna and depiction of landscapes. It arises out of the keen observation of nature with an attitude of awe and respect. It explains the interdependence and mutual relatedness that forms the universe. Transcendentalists like Emerson, Fuller and Thoreau are the pioneers of ecocriticism in American literature. Emerson's *Nature* (1836), Fuller's *Summer on the Lakes* (1843) and Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) are foundational books of ecocriticism. Aldo Leopold's has been regarded as the father of modern environmentalist. He unveils the beauty of wilderness in its physical, aesthetic, and spiritual sense in his *A Sand Country Almanac* (1949). Rachel Carson has become a legendary name in environmental writing as her herculean effort brought an exemplary change in the laws and policy regarding the environmental issues in America. Carson's magnum opus and most debated book *Silent Spring*, published in 1962 drew the attention of the people and then President of America Mr. Kennedy to the aftermaths of indiscriminate use of pesticides in agriculture. Cheryll Glotfelty in 1989 at Western Literature Association conference urged to employ the term ecocriticism for the scattered environmental writings. In 1992 at the annual meeting of the Western Literature Association, a new association for the study of literature and environment, ASLE

was formed with Scott Slovic elected as its first president in October 1992 in Reno, Nevada. It is a professional association started in America but now has branches in Korea, Canada, India, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Europe, and the British Isles. It organizes regular conferences and publishes journal ASLE that includes literary essays, articles on environmental education and activism. In 1993, Patrick Murphy established a new journal *ISLE* (Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment). By 1993, Ecocriticism appeared as a recognizable critical school. The formerly dispersed scholars associated with younger scholars created a strong interesting group with ambitions to provide ecocriticism a respectable place in the literary field. Thus, ecocriticism observes, ponders, analyzes, explores and exposes the environmental oriented ideas employed in a literary text, signaling the ecological problems and suggesting their solutions.

The term ecocriticism is an umbrella term and it has no central doctrine. This term is being redefined daily by the thousands of literary scholars. It has no single theoretical apparatus. No single definition can be employed to describe it. It was William Rueckert who coined the term ecocriticism in 1978 in his essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism.” In his view, employing the ecological principles to the study of literature is ecocriticism. According to Glotfelty and Fromm:

Simply put ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading text. Ecocriticism takes an earth centred approach to literary studies. (xviii)

Garrard contends, “Ecocriticism is closely related to environmentally oriented developments in philosophy and political theory” (4). Highlighting the aim of ecocriticism, Richard Kerridge and Neil Sammells state, “Most of all ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as response to environmental crisis” (5).

Arundhati Roy is an environmental activist writer who raises her eloquent voice against merciless devastation of nature in her Booker winner book, *The God of Small Things* published in 1997. She displays the damaged and diminished form of nature on the pages of her fictional and non fictional works. She valorises nature and has respect and regard for non human beings. Everything in the environment equally attracts her. She celebrates every small thing in her novel from insects to flowers and from water to wind because she knows the

awful law of ecology that refers that interconnectivity and interdependence of everything on the planet provide good health to the globe and it constitutes. The ecocritical observation of *The God of Small Things* surfaces the following environmental issues.

River Pollution

Rivers have been the Gangotris of human civilizations all over the world. All our civilizations, cultures, religions and spiritual philosophy have grown and expanded near the banks of rivers. Rivers are our lifeline because they provide us with not only water to drink but they are the staple of our agriculture and provide us sustenance. They are the habitats of thousands of aquatic animals which play a significant part in biological processes to sustain ecological equilibrium. Unfortunately, our rivers are dying or it can be said that they are being a victim at the cruel hands of man for economic development. The ambience of *The God of Small Things* is Ayemenem, a pastoral area near Kottayam in Kerala where flows a river Meenachal. Roy presents the decay of river by portraying two contrast pictures of the river of today and the river twenty-three years ago. The river Meenachal is depicted in the background of 1969 and 1993. Sand mining is one of the foremost reasons for the death of a river. Roads are built in the middle of the river for mining and carry sand. This result in the receding of the subsoil water and ultimate drying of the wells on the river bed. Drawing our attention towards the ailing condition of the Meenachal, Roy writes, "Years later when Rahel returned to the river, It greets her with a ghastly skull's smile, with holes where teeth had been, and a limp hand raised a hospital bed" (124). The beautiful Meenachal of twenty-three years back has lost its glamour due to inadequacy of water in it. The anthropocentric mentality has sieved the breast of the river. When Estha returns to Ayemenem, Roy writes, "Some days he walked along the banks of the river that smelled of shit, and pesticide 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" (13). Roy depicts how the blind use of pesticides pollute the water and becomes the ground of dying the aquatic animals. The use of pesticides is the gift (?) of the western scientific culture of agriculture. The pesticide industries have the blessings of the western model of agriculture. Our traditional agricultural methods would promote the mix crops and crop rotation which had the inbuilt system for pest control. Modern agriculture motivates monoculture crops and invites many foreign pests. Further, traditional agriculture would use organic fertilizers like cow dung that enhance the fertility of the soil and seldom require pesticides. Use of chemical fertilizers weakens the immune power of the crops. They become vulnerable to pests. Thus, pesticides and industrial affluent decrease the pH value of

water. At low pH, the solubility of CaCO_3 is reduced that inhibits the shell growth in aquatic animals. Further higher acidity (higher concentration of H^+ ions) increases releasing of cations of heavy metals such as Pb, Cd, Cu and Al that increases the toxicity of the water. It affects the reproduction of fish. Fish and other aquatic animals cannot tolerate below 4 pH range and die. Roy describes that most of the fish of the river Meenachal have died. These fish are suffered from fungus infection in their fins. The building of large dams, dumping of chemical waste and polythene and plastic bags pose a threat to the survival of river.

Nowadays our holy rivers have become the trenching ground of plastic bags, and fetid garbage. People dump whatever wastage for them into the rivers. Our rivers are unable to breathe because they are choaked. They are gasping due to overburden of garbage. Their purity has been contaminated by human activities. The Meenachal river in *The God of Small Things* faces the inhuman atrocity of man. This river has lost its energetic and enthusiastic youth forever. Describing its flourished youth and pitiable old age, Roy writes, "Once it had the power to evoke fear. To changes life. But now its teeth were drawn, its spirit spent. It was just a slow, sludging green ribbon lawn that ferried fetid garbage to the sea. Bright plastic bags blew across its viscous, weedy surface like subtropical flying flowers" (124). Its ungratefulness from our part that instead of protecting and preserving our life saviour, we are annihilating them brutally. Instead of showing regards, we are humiliating them. we are a blot on the earth if we do not show concern to save non human entities. Roy raises the question of environmental awareness in the novel. People openly defecate on the banks of rivers and contaminate the water, which causes a threat to the life of the river. She writes, "Children hung their bottoms over the edge and defecated directly onto the squelchy, sucking mud of the exposed river bed" (125). We have to need to revisit the environmental education. There should be some alteration in the curriculum of environmental education. Currently, there is a lack of emotional and spiritual content in it. Environment cannot be saved unless we have moral obligation to it. Thus, Roy sheds light on river pollution in depth in her novel and raises moral question of our interaction with nature.

Dense Population

Increasing human population is also a grave environmental issue. Growing human population in the world and its blatant ignorance and disregard for non humans leads to a serious problem which affects the delicate balance in the ecosystem of the planet. More people will need more space to live which motivates the transformation of agrarian land into

a residential place. Thus, the encroachment of humans into habitats of birds and wild animals leads to the loss of biodiversity and rupture the rhythm of the ecological symphony. Likewise, the dense population requires more resources and enhances the exploitation of natural resources beyond their regenerating capacity and causes an ecological crisis. Roy, in *The God of Small Things*, underscores the issue of the growing population of Ayemenem which has swallowed the greenery and quietness of a placid rural area. Twenty three years ago, Ayemenem was enveloped in the green sheet. It was not a condensed and crowded place. But the complexion of Ayemenem has changed with the introduction of hospital, schools and banks. Roy exposes, "Ayemenem the semblance of rural quietness. In truth, its population had swelled to the size of little town" (128). Deep ecology contends to reduce human population to avert ecological crisis.

Technological Dominance over Eco-world

Roy portrays a deplorable sketch of nature's devastation owing to the increasing impact of technology in the text. She examines how modern technology has changed our perspective of nature. Enjoying the inventions of technology, man is gradually distancing from nature. He has so much involved and engaged with electronic devices that he has no time to view the nature around him. Modern man's preferring techno world to eco world is marginalising nature. Roy brings forth this issue by sketching two contrast pictures of the Ornamental garden in the front part of the Ayemenem house of Ipe family. Baby Kochamma has done her diploma in the ornamental garden. In 1969, she develops a garden and cultivates it by planting a vivid variety of flower-bearing plants. Her garden was so charming that people from Kottayam would visit Ayemenem to see her garden. At that time the preoccupation of Baby Kochamma was to look after her garden. Depicting the beauty of Baby Kochamma's garden Roy writes, "It was a circular, sloping patch of ground, with a steep gravel driveway looping around it. Baby Kochamma turned it into a lush maze of dwarf hedges rocks and gargoyles. The flower she loved the most was anthurium. *Anthurium andraeanum*. She had a collection of them, the 'Rubrum' the 'Honeymoon' and a host of Japanese varieties" (26). Till 1993 the situation is reversed as T.V. has entered in the life of folks. The entry of technology shows exit to nature from the common man's life. Now Baby Kochamma's interest shifts from gardening to watching T.V. She with her maid, Kochu Maria spends the whole day in switching T.V. channels. Roy writes about her, "She presided over the world in her drawing room on satellite TV. . . . And in Ayemenem where once the loudest sound had been a musical bus horn, now whole wars, famines, picturesque massacres

and Bill Clinton could be summoned up like servants. And so, while her ornamental garden wilted and died” (27). Thus, Roy exhibits how modern technology mars eco values and isolates us from nature.

Environmental Injustice

Environmental justice a prominent ecocritical issue has been discussed by Roy in *The God of Small Things*. Adamson defines environmental justice as “The right of all people to share equally in the benefits bestowed by a healthy environment” (4). It blames the unequal distribution of environmental hazards and blessings based on colour caste, creed and status. Arundhati Roy puts forward the issue of environmental injustice in *The God of Small Things*. First, she highlights the construction of a barrage on the river Meenachal so that the rich farmers who have large irrigation area may be benefitted. She writes, “Downriver, a saltwater barrage had been built, in exchange for votes from the influential paddy-farmer lobby. . . now they had two harvests a year instead of one. More rice, for the price of a river” (124). This barrage had no worth for poor farmer as they had meagre land. Therefore, the barrage satisfies the interest of prosperous farmers. The second example of environmental injustice is building of a high wall in the middle of the river to prevent the filthy flow of the river in the area of five-star Heritage hotel. The people of Ayemenen suffer from environmental burden caused by the shitty river but the elite staying in the hotel is free from it. So, this reflects the unequal distribution of environmental threats.

Conclusion

Roy’s *The God of Small Things* concludes that the root cause of environmental problems is human actions which pollute the air and water and dismantle ecological equilibrium. She underscores the crucial issue of dying river. Unveiling the issue of increasing population, Roy seems to appeal that the human population should be reduced to maintain ecological physic of the globe. She highlights the issue of sustainable development by portraying the dense population of Ayemenem. Man’s indifference and disregard for nature have broken his emotional and spiritual bonding with nature. He is devaluing nature by considering it a commercial source of economic gain. Modern technological equipment and devices are fracturing the emotional bond of the man with nature. Man’s illegitimate and irrational behaviour can be curbed by legislation, changing public policy, education and emphasizing moral obligation to serve the earth. Environmental study of the literary text reveals that nature has its worth hence, humans have moral obligations to non humans like

plants, animals, birds, rivers, mountains and the ecosystem. This text offers a needed corrective to our anthropocentric mindset and asserts that eco centrism is more important than egocentrism.

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