Paradise to Pollution: An Eco-Critical Study of Kerala's Environment in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract:

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* has been thoroughly examined through the perspectives of caste, gender, and postcolonial identity. This article advocates for an eco-critical interpretation of the novel, positioning it within the theoretical frameworks established by academics such as Cheryl Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell, and Greg Garrard. By emphasising the novel's portrayal of nature not merely as a passive backdrop but as an active participant in human experience, this analysis uncovers how environmental degradation reflects the collapse of familial bonds, cultural values, and childhood innocence. Ayemenem, which once felt like a lush, living paradise in the characters' childhoods full of warmth, colour, and a sense of belonging, gradually becomes faded, polluted, and broken. The trees do not seem as green, the air feels heavier, and the rivers that once carried secrets and dreams now carry waste. This slow decay mirrors the emotional unscrambling of the characters and the larger social fractures around them. This shows how time, loss, and cruelty can harm both people and their surroundings.

Through this lens, Arundhati Roy's "*The God of Small Things*" becomes a deeply insightful exploration of the interplay between ecological degradation and social inequality. The text shows how the degradation of the natural world parallels the systemic violence that is inherent within human hierarchies, implying that ecological degradation and social inequality have the same roots in power and domination. Through this focus, an eco-critical analysis highlights the continued relevance of the text in the contemporary moment, which is characterised by global ecological crises and humanitarian instability. Eventually, the text provides a deeply insightful exploration of

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the ways in which place, memory, and identity are intertwined and often fractured by both ecological and social forces.

Keywords: Ecological degradation, Environmental justice, Memory and landscape, Caste and ecology.

Introduction

Eco criticism can be generally described as “the examination of the connection between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996). It explores how literary works depict nature, environmental change, and the relationships between humans and nonhuman entities, while also questioning the anthropocentric viewpoint that prioritises human interests above all else. In The Environmental Imagination (1995), Lawrence Buell contends that environmental literature frequently blurs the line between human history and natural history, highlighting that human stories are profoundly linked with ecological truths.

In Indian literature, themes related to the environment are often intricately connected with social, political, and cultural matters. A notable illustration is Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, which presents the landscape of Kerala, often romanticised as “God’s Own Country” for its natural beauty and ecological decline. The novel’s nonlinear narrative contrasts vivid recollections of lush rivers and monsoon-drenched terrains with stark portrayals of industrial pollution, environmental disregard, and dying waterways. This contrast invites an Eco critical reading where nature is depicted not only as a passive observer but also as a victim of human aggression.

Buell's concept of the "environmental text," which emphasises the value of the natural world as more than merely a backdrop for human activity, and Greg Garrard's call to look into how

literature addresses issues like pollution, industrialisation, and environmental justice are the foundations of this article.

Lawrence Buell's Theory of the Environmental Text

In The Environmental Imagination (1995), Lawrence Buell identifies four essential characteristics that define what he calls an "environmental text." Firstly, such a text does not treat the natural world merely as a backdrop for human activities; instead, it presents the nonhuman environment as a vibrant presence, reminding readers that human history is deeply intertwined with the larger narrative of natural history. Secondly, it contests the idea that only human issues are significant, attributing importance to the interests of nonhuman life. Thirdly, it incorporates within its ethical framework a sense of human obligation towards the environment. Lastly, it depicts nature not as a static, unchanging backdrop but as a dynamic, evolving force (Buell 8).

When we apply Buell's framework to Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, it becomes evident that the Meenachal River transcends being a mere scenic feature; it is a living, breathing entity, complicatedly woven into the narrative. The river witnesses moments of joy and trauma, intimacy and violence. Over time, its evolution from a vibrant, life-sustaining force to a polluted and degraded body of water reflects the moral and social decline surrounding it. In this regard, the Meenachal serves as both a silent character, reflecting human decisions and holding them accountable. Through its changing states, Roy encourages readers to perceive the environment not as passive scenery but as an active participant in the human narrative, one that reacts, resists, and remembers.

Kerala as a childhood paradise

In the childhood recollections presented in *The God of Small Things*, Kerala emerges as a vibrant, almost magical land with colour, fragrance, and sound. For Rahel and Estha, the natural surroundings are not remote or abstract; they are immediate, familiar, and rich in sensory experiences. The river carries a scent so unique that it becomes synonymous with its identity: “The River was warm, and the water green. The smell of the water was the smell of the river” (Roy 202). This gentle replication conveys not only a childlike awe but also a profound, almost instinctive bond with the environment. Nature is not merely a backdrop; it serves as home, companion, and educator simultaneously.

Children fill their universe with intimate interactions with the natural world. "Dragonflies hover above, compared to 'little helicopters' gliding over the river's surface" (Roy 12). Jackfruits hang “like knobbly yellow footballs,” and bananas cluster in “huge green bunches” (Roy 17), presenting a tactile, almost unusual depiction of abundance. Even the monsoon is depicted with remarkable strength, described as “slanting silver ropes slammed into loose earth, ploughing it up like gunfire” (Roy 6). These striking images do more than establish a setting; they forge a living, breathing ecosystem in which the children are completely engaged.

Nature, in this case, is not just for show; it is an integral part of the children’s world. Nature symbolises the energy and ever-changing emotions that define childhood. Nature, in this environment, is a source of comfort and security, providing room for creativity and emotional expression. Nature provides for the children by allowing them the liberty of imagination and growth. But the allure of the land is also tied to the social structures that exist beneath the surface,

hinting at conflict to come. Even in these early stages, nature symbolises innocence, precious and vulnerable, but already threatened.

The Fall: From Eden to Pollution

As *The God of Small Things* progresses into its later chapters, the once-vibrant landscape of Ayemenem is shown to be significantly altered. Upon Rahel's return as an adult, the river that once sparkled with the magic of childhood has become unrecognisable. “The river was no longer the same. Now it was slow, thick, and dark. The smell of shit and pesticides brought on by the pickle factory mixed with the smell of the river” (Roy 124). The sensory transition is startling: what was previously green, fresh, and alive is now stagnant, polluted, and suffocating under layers of filth and decay. The river, once a haven of joy, now carries the odour of human neglect and industrial pollution.

This ecological decline is not merely theoretical; it is grounded in the decisions and actions of individuals. “Invasive water hyacinth spreads without restraint, covering the surface and symbolising the unchecked proliferation of toxicity; both literal and metaphorical” (Roy 124). The river that once beckoned children to swim, explore, and dream has become perilous, its flow impeded, and its strength diminished. It is no longer a space of freedom, but rather a site of caution.

This environmental degradation carries profound symbolism. The dying river mirrors the gradual disintegration of the Ipe family: the erosion of innocence, the burden of unspoken trauma, the toxicity of societal constraints. Just as the river is suffocated by weeds and waste, the characters find themselves entangled by cultural taboos, fractured relationships, and irreversible decisions. The natural world is not distinct from their existence; it reflects their struggles, absorbs their anguish, and deteriorates in tandem with them.

In this manner, Roy transcends mere depiction of environmental decline as she employing it as a potent narrative instrument. The river's metamorphosis serves as a structural thread that connects the novel's emotional trajectory to the physical landscape, illustrating how the well-being of the environment and the characters' lives are intricately intertwined.

Memory, Loss and the Ecology of Emotion

Lawrence Buell notes that environmental literature frequently urges readers to "envision human responsibility towards an environment that both predates and endures beyond them." In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy compellingly illustrates this concept through the lens of memory. Upon Rahel's return to Ayemenem after many years, the landscape she once recognised has transformed beyond all recognition. The river, previously lively and welcoming, has now become an inactive, heavily polluted body of water, tainted by the odour of "shit and pesticides."(Roy 124). This scene represents not merely ecological decline; it serves as a tangible embodies of sorrow, remorse, and the gradual, irreversible loss of innocence.

Roy establishes a striking contrast between the sensory abundance of the twins' childhood and the isolated, polluted environment of their adulthood. "The once-bright air, filled with the fresh, sweet aroma of the river, the hum of dragonflies, and the tactile delight of warm, green water, has now been replaced by the incessant buzzing of mosquitoes over stagnant water"(Roy 125). This transformation transcends mere atmosphere as it signifies a deep emotional shift. What was once a realm of wonder and play has morphed into a haunted space, imbued with memories of suffering: the loss of Sophie Mol, the violent death of Velutha, and the quiet fracture of Rahel and Estha's relationship.

In this context, the environment evolves into an emotional cartography, and its alterations mirror the characters' internal fractures. An affective ecology, or an "ecology of emotion," is constructed by Roy, in which the landscape is not seen as distinct from human experience but is intricately intertwined with it. The river does not simply observe trauma, but it absorbs, retains, and reflects it. Its deterioration parallels the silencing of the twins' voices and the forfeiture of their ability to experience joy, connection, and freedom.

From an eco-critical standpoint, Roy's methodology challenges the idea that nature serves merely as a backdrop for human narratives. Instead, she depicts the natural environment as an engaged participant in the narrative's emotional and ethical dimensions. In the contemporary segments of the novel, the transformed environment emerges as a living archive, a storehouse of grief, recollection, and unresolved trauma. The stinking river is not merely a sign of environmental disregard; it acts as a sensory catalyst, drawing the past into the present and compelling a confrontation with what someone has concealed.

By integrating environmental change into the very fabric of memory, Roy obscures the distinction between internal and external area, illustrating how landscape and mind are mutually constitutive. In her novel, nature does not merely encircle the characters; it influences, mirrors, and mourns alongside them. Through this profound interaction between ecological and emotional deterioration, *The God of Small Things* presents a poignant and intricately layered portrayal of human sorrow as part of a larger environmental disintegration: one that prompts us to reevaluate our role in the natural world and the quiet, enduring effects of our deeds.

Environmental exploitation and social inequality

In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy intricately connects her environmental imagery with a critique of caste and class oppression. The character of Velutha, the Paravan carpenter, most vividly demonstrates this connection**,** as his existence unfolds in serene harmony with the natural environment. He resides by the riverside with a profound familiarity, repairing boats with skilled hands, swimming across the Meenachal with "hard brown arms slicing through the water" (Roy 71), and instinctively interpreting the river's fluctuating moods. His bond with nature is not a romanticized concept but a lived experience, a generational wisdom transmitted through physical labour and closeness to land and water.

Nevertheless, despite this profound connection to the environment, Velutha, much like the river he intimately understands and is prone to exploitation and systemic neglect. The river, once a source of beauty and nourishment, has been transformed into a dumping ground for industrial waste, with its vitality sacrificed for profit. Similarly, society only values Velutha within rigid social confines. The community quietly depends on his skills, strength, and labour, yet overlooks his humanity. When he dares to transcend the caste barrier by loving Ammu, the consequences are dire: he is pursued, brutalised, and ultimately killed.

The parallels between Velutha and the river are profoundly symbolic and tragic. Both are vital to the community's existence, offering support, movement, and connection, but neither receives dignity or protection. They are idealised in moments of convenience or nostalgia, only to be discarded when they threaten the established order. Both endure lasting, irreversible damage at the hands of those who assert control over them.

Roy does not present this parallel as a mere coincidence, but rather as a critique. The exploitation of the river and the violence directed at Velutha are not distinct tragedies; they are

manifestations of the same social and moral failure. This relationship directly addresses Lawrence Buell's fourth criterion for recognising an environmental text: the environment should be depicted as a process, a force intertwined with human history, rather than as a mere static backdrop. In Ayemenem, the deterioration of nature reflects the decline of human life under caste oppression. The river is not simply dying; it is being murdered, just as Velutha is not by chance, but by the decisions of a society founded on hierarchies of power and purity.

Through this intricately woven narrative, Roy emphasises the interconnectedness of ecological and social ethics. She illustrates how caste injustice and environmental degradation are two facets of the same issue, both propelled by systems that commodify, control, and discard what they rely upon. By giving equal narrative significance to Velutha and the river, Roy ensures that no one overlooks either of them. Instead, she crafts a compelling depiction of loss and resistance, reminding us that healing must commence not only with remembrance, but also with reimagining our coexistence with one another and with the natural world.

Nature as witness to social injustice

In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy depicts the natural environment not merely as a passive setting but as a subtle, constant observer of the social injustices that influence her characters' lives. The riverside, dense underbrush, oppressive heat of Kerala, and the languid Meenachal River serve not just as background, but they silently witness everything, from instances of childhood amazement to acts of profound cruelty. In this context, nature transforms into a living evidence of human suffering, particularly that inflicted by strict caste, class, and gender hierarchies.

A particularly moving illustration of this is the riverbank where Ammu and Veluthasecretly meet. Their love, gentle, defiant, and fleeting, unfolds beneath the open sky, observed by swaying banana trees, humming dragonflies, and the rain illuminated by the moon. Roy captures the scene with nearly sacred beauty: “Black cat-shaped shadows of palm fronds slanted across the slanting silver of the slanting rain” (Roy 176). In this instance, nature provides sanctuary—a space where love can flourish, albeit briefly. While society rejects them, the landscape welcomes them, quietly safeguarding their secret.

However, the same natural world also bears witness to acts of violence. Following Velutha's wrongful accusation and punishment for contravening caste boundaries, he is brutally beaten near the very river that once provided him with joy and freedom. The Meenachal, which previously mirrored playfulness and defiance, becomes a silent arena for cruelty. Nature remains unresponsive as it simply endures. The river that once represented life and potential now bears the burden of betrayal and sorrow.

By situating these profoundly human experiences within vividly depicted natural environments, Roy illustrates the intricate connection between personal suffering and the landscapes that surround it. Nature is not impartial. It may not clear its thoughts, but it retains the memories of past events. The river remembers. The trees remember. In a reality where injustices are swiftly concealed or dismissed, it is the natural world that preserves the truth.

This perspective resonates with eco-critical theory, which perceives landscapes as more than mere physical locations; they embody emotional, historical, and ethical dimensions. Just as individuals influence their environment, the environment, in turn, shapes individuals' inner lives and experiences. In Roy's narrative, the landscape does not merely frame the plot; it experiences the plot. It nurtures joy, laments violence, and quietly safeguards what others attempt to erase.

Roy's vision encourages readers to recognise the silent complicity of nature and its profound emotional resonance. Its silence is haunting, not void but filled with the memories of what it has witnessed but cannot articulate. In this manner, *The God of Small Things* envisions a reality in which the natural and moral landscapes are intertwined, where rivers, trees, and rain silently bear the weight of memories individuals would prefer to forget.

Conclusion

In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy offers more than just a narrative of a fractured family; she provides a mournful reflection on a deteriorating world, where the scars of human brutality and environmental disregard intertwine. The Meenachal River, which once represented life and liberty during the twins' youth, transforms into a lethargic, viscous, and dark entity; a poignant symbol of lost innocence, muted love, and denied justice.

Through this change, Roy illustrates that nature does not simply mirror our decisions; it bears the burden of them. Utilising Ecocritical frameworks such as Lawrence Buell’s notion of the “environmental text” and Greg Garrard’s explorations of pollution and environmental justice, we observe how Roy challenges the romanticised notion of Kerala as an unspoiled paradise. Instead, she offers a profound and sobering depiction of how landscapes are like individuals, influenced, harmed, and at times obliterated by the systems that govern them. In Roy’s narrative, a dragonfly, a rainfall, or the shifting scent of a river are never merely trivial details. They represent the delicate connections that bind memory, place, and emotion.

Ultimately, Roy’s novel compels us to be attentive not only to the significant tragedies but also to the minor aspects we often neglect: the gentle rhythms of a thriving ecosystem, the quiet dignity of a marginalised existence, and the fragile equilibrium between care and destruction. *The*

God of Small Things serves as a reminder of what we stand to lose if we neglect to safeguard both our environment and our humanity. It emphasises that the river retains its memories even when we attempt to forget.

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