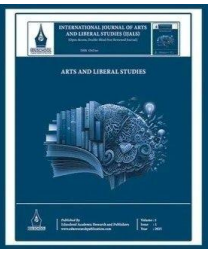
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Ecocritical Sensibility with a Feminine Twist in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract

This paper offers an ecofeminist reading of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) that locates the novel's environmental politics not merely in its themes but in its narrative form. Existing criticism has established the novel's ecological register the dying Meenachal River as an index of Kerala's development (Anand), nature's "muted revolt" alongside the subaltern (Kunhi and Kunhi), and the ecologies of uneven development (Mukherjee) but the formal device that fuses the novel's feminist and ecological critiques has received less sustained attention. This paper argues that the fusion is achieved through what may be called a poetics of the small: the same narrative attention that registers moths, beetles, darter birds, and a poisoned river also registers the crushed lives of Ammu, Rahel, and Velutha, so that woman and nature appear not as naturally akin but as co-victims of a single logic of domination. Reading the novel through the ecofeminist frameworks of Françoise d'Eaubonne, Greta Gaard, Karen Warren, and Vandana Shiva, the paper demonstrates this claim across three sites: the paralleled biographies of Ammu and the Meenachal; the entomological imagery that folds patriarchal law into the world of insects; and the caste and property relations that extend the same logic to Velutha. The novel, it concludes, dramatises the woman–nature association in order to indict the order that produces it.

Keywords: - Arundhati Roy, Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, Kerala, Meenachal River, Patriarchy, Poetics of Scale, *The God of Small Things*.

Introduction

Ecocriticism is the result of a rising realisation that unless tremendous care is taken, there will soon be nothing safe or beautiful left in nature to discuss. The analytical approach known by that name took shape in the United States in the early 1990s, when literary criticism first turned systematically to environmental issues and green politics. Ecocritics broadly share the conviction that culture and nature are interwoven, and the relationship between literature and the environment is the movement's primary focus. The term gained its canonical formulation in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996), edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, where Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty xviii). Among the approach's underlying objectives, she notes, is the restoration of professional respect to the long-undervalued genre of nature writing. In the three decades since, ecocriticism

has sought to revolutionise literary studies by integrating literary theory and criticism with wider ecological concerns including, crucially for this paper, the concerns of feminism.

The God of Small Things is by now one of the most heavily worked texts in Indian-English ecological criticism, and any new reading must say where it stands in that conversation. Divya Anand's early ecocritical study reads the Meenachal River as the novel's ecological barometer, its ebb and flow mapping the destinies of the characters and the transformation of Kerala's bioregion (Anand). Rukhaya M. Kunhi and Zeenath Mohamed Kunhi extend the reading through muted-group theory, showing how Roy gives voice to a silenced Nature alongside the human subaltern (Kunhi and Kunhi). Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee situates the novel within the environments of postcolonial "uneven development," where ecological damage and social injustice are two faces of the same economy (Mukherjee), and Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin have made the novel a touchstone of postcolonial ecocriticism more broadly (Huggan and Tiffin). What this substantial body of work tends to assert rather than demonstrate, however, is *how* the novel binds its two critiques of environmental destruction and of patriarchy into one. The parallel between Ammu and the river, or between women and nature, is repeatedly noted as a theme; the formal mechanism that produces it is rarely examined. This paper asks, accordingly: by what narrative means does *The God of Small Things* fuse its ecological and its feminist arguments? It answers that the fusion is effected by a poetics of the small announced in the novel's very title: a disciplined narrative attention to minute lives insects, fish, birds, a river's slow death — that is identical in kind to the attention the novel pays to socially "small" human lives, the women and the untouchable whom the Big order crushes. The argument proceeds in four movements: a theoretical framework; a reading of the twinned biographies of Ammu and the Meenachal; an analysis of the novel's entomological imagery, in which patriarchal law itself is folded into the world of insects; and an extension of the ecofeminist logic to caste and property through Velutha, Mammachi, and Chacko.

Ecocriticism and Ecofeminism: A Critical Framework

The idea of ecofeminism arose from the confluence of several movements — environmental, anti-nuclear, labour, animal-liberation, and peace movements among them — as they intersected with feminism. The term *écoféminisme* was coined in 1974 by the French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in *Le Féminisme ou la mort*, to name both a method of thinking and a movement created by the blending of feminist and ecological concepts (d'Eaubonne). Its core premise has been stated most influentially by Greta Gaard: ecofeminism's "basic premise is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature" (Gaard 1). Karen Warren gives that shared ideology a name — the "logic of domination" — a value-hierarchical pattern of thinking that first constructs difference (man/woman, culture/nature, high caste/low caste) and then reads difference as entitlement to subordinate (Warren). On this account, the exploitation of nature and the subjection of women are not analogous accidents but products of a single conceptual structure; being a woman under patriarchy and being nature under extractive modernity are positions created by the same act of hierarchy.

Vandana Shiva historicises this structure for the colonial and developmental contexts that Roy's Kerala inherits. In *Staying Alive*, she argues that the scientific revolution's construal of nature as passive matter and the construction of femininity as passivity legitimated one another:

> As nature came to be seen more like a woman to be raped, gender too was recreated. Science as a male venture, based on the subjugation of female nature and female sex provided support for the polarisation of gender… While on the one hand the ideology of science sanctioned the denudation of nature, on the other it legitimised the dependency of women and the authority of men. Science and masculinity were associated in domination over nature and femininity, and the ideologies of science and gender reinforced each other. (Shiva 17)

Shiva's point is not that women are closer to nature but that a particular history colonial science, extractive "development" has positioned them together on the losing side of the same dualism. Sherry Ortner's classic anthropological analysis explains why the positioning proves so durable: "women are being identified or symbolically associated with nature, as opposed to men, who are identified with culture. Since it is always culture's project to subsume and transcend nature, if women were considered part of nature, then culture would find it 'natural' to subordinate, not to say oppress, them" (Ortner 73). Ortner, it must be stressed, describes this association in order to expose it as a cultural construction, not to endorse it and, as this paper will show, Roy's novel operates in exactly the same register: it dramatises the woman–nature association with great intimacy precisely in order to indict the order that produces it.

Why should the novel literature at all matter to such a critique? Joseph Meeker's foundational answer in *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* remains the sharpest:

> Human beings are the earth's only literary creatures If the creation of literature is an important characteristic of the human species, it should be examined carefully and honestly to discover its influence upon human behavior and the natural environment to determine what role, if any, it plays in the welfare and survival of mankind and what insight it offers into human relationships with other species and with the world around us. Is it an activity which adapts us better to the world or one which estranges us from it? (Meeker 3–4)

Meeker's question does literature adapt us to the world or estrange us from it? supplies this paper's test for Roy. A novel that merely aestheticised Kerala's landscape would estrange; a novel that trains its readers to attend to small lives, human and non-human, as bearers of value and of history, adapts. The readings that follow argue that *The God of Small Things* does the latter, and that its instrument is scale.

"More Rice, for the Price of a River": Ammu and the Meenachal

The novel announces its poetics of the small on its opening page. When Rahel returns to Ayemenem, the description that greets her is worth restoring in full, because its precision is the argument:

> It was raining when Rahel came back to Ayemenem. Slanting silver ropes slammed into loose earth, ploughing it up like gunfire. The old house on the hill wore its steep, gabled roof pulled low over its ears like a hat. The walls, streaked with moss, had grown soft, and bulged a little with dampness that seeped up from the ground. The wild, overgrown garden was full of the whisper and scurry of small lives. (Roy 1)

Three moves in this passage organise everything that follows. First, violence enters through simile before it enters through plot: rain ploughs the earth "like gunfire," so that the land is figured as a body under fire from the first sentence. Second, the house is personified it wears its roof "pulled low over its ears like a hat," its walls "grown soft" like ageing skin collapsing the boundary between built culture and organic nature that the novel will keep collapsing. Third, and decisively, the paragraph ends by directing attention downwards, to "the whisper and scurry of small lives": the narrative camera is calibrated, from the outset, to register what is small. That calibration is ecological (the garden's creatures are the sentence's protagonists) and it is political (the novel's human victims a divorced woman, two children, an untouchable are precisely those whom society deems small). The title's theology of "small things" is thus a theory of attention, and attention, in this novel, is where ethics begins.

Nowhere is the method more sustained than in the twinned biographies of Ammu and the Meenachal River. The river is introduced with a life of its own, remembered from twenty-three years earlier in a syntax of short, breathing fragments: "Greygreen. With fish in it. The sky and trees in it. And at night, the broken yellow moon in it" (Roy 202). The fragments matter: each is a frame in which the river holds another life — fish, trees, sky, moon the river as medium and mother of an entire world. It is this maternal river that has fed the fisherfolk of Ayemenem for generations, and it is on its banks that Ammu sits with her radio, seemingly at peace. But the pastoral is a façade on both registers at once, for Ammu carries within her "the infinite tenderness of motherhood and the reckless rage of a suicide bomber" (Roy 44) Roy's most famous characterisation of her, and one whose two halves (nurture and detonation) map exactly onto the river's own doubleness, life-giver in the dry months and drowning force in the monsoon. The novel does not say that Ammu is like the river; it constructs the two out of the same materials and lets the reader discover that they share a grammar.

They also share a death, administered by the same order. Twenty-three years later the river that held the moon is a corpse in a hospital bed: "it greeted her with a ghastly skull's smile, with holes where teeth had been, and a limp hand raised from a hospital bed" (Roy 124). The simile deserves close reading, because Roy could have reached for any image of pollution and chose a terminally ill patient: the river is not merely damaged but *dying in an institution*, passive, attended, beyond cure which is, very nearly, how Ammu herself dies, alone in a lodge room, her body returned in a bundle. What killed the river is specified with documentary precision: "Downriver, a saltwater barrage had been built, in exchange for votes from the influential paddy-farmer lobby… So now they had two harvests a year instead of one. More rice, for the price of a river" (Roy 124). The zeugma of that final sentence rice and river weighed in the same ledger is the novel's indictment of developmental economics in nine words: the sentence performs the very act of accounting it condemns. And the consequences are rendered, characteristically, through the senses and the small: the river now "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" (Roy 13). Shiva's analysis is here made narrative: colonial-developmental science, arriving

as World Bank credit and saltwater engineering, subjugates "female nature" (Shiva 17) the mother-river while the same social order breaks the novel's actual mothers.

Ammu's biography is constructed to run parallel, wound for wound. Because her father, Pappachi — the novel's Imperial Entomologist believed that a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl, Ammu was denied one (Roy 38); the man who would lash out at little Ammu in his rage and disappointment reserved his investment for his son. Her attempt to escape through marriage collapses when her alcoholic husband tries to lend her to the sexual appetite of his English manager; when she returns to Ayemenem with her twins, she must endure her relatives' regard for them as unwelcome burdens, without claim or standing. Like the barraged river, Ammu is dammed at every point where she might have flowed — education, marriage, home, love — and, like the river, she is then blamed for her own stagnation. The parallel is completed at the level of narrative structure: the novel gives the river a before and an after separated by twenty-three years, and gives Ammu exactly the same temporal architecture, her vitality in the "before" chapters and her expulsion and death in the "after." Anand is right that the river maps the characters' destinies (Anand); the present reading adds that the mapping is bidirectional — Ammu's fate is also the reader's instrument for grasping the river's, each biography making the other legible.

Small Lives: Moths, Insects, and the Poetics of Scale

The novel's second great ecofeminist device is entomological. Its insects are never decorative; they carry the plot's deepest injuries. The founding instance is Pappachi's moth. As Imperial Entomologist, Pappachi discovers a new species of moth; the discovery is credited to another man, and the denial of the *name* the patriarch's form of immortality curdles into the household's heirloom of bitterness. The moth thus enters the novel as a small life onto which a man's thwarted ambition has been displaced, and it is the women and children who inherit the displacement: "a cold moth with unusually dense dorsal tufts landed lightly on Rahel's heart. Where its icy legs touched her, she got goosebumps. On her careless heart" (Roy 112). The taxonomic detail "unusually dense dorsal tufts" is doing precise work: fear arrives in Rahel's body wearing the exact scientific description of her grandfather's loss, so that patriarchal grievance is transmitted down the generations *as an insect*, landing on the heart of a girl whenever she feels unloved. It is difficult to imagine a more compact image of intergenerational patriarchy, and it is constitutively ecological: the instrument of transmission is a specimen from the colonial archive of nature.

The law itself receives the same treatment. When Chacko wishes to remind Ammu that the family's property is his, he reaches for legal Latin: Ammu, as a divorced daughter, has no *locus standi* — no standing to claim. But the novel refuses to transcribe the phrase in the language of the courts. Filtered through the twins' ears, it becomes "Locusts Stand I" (Roy 57): the Latin of dispossession is misheard into an insect. The malapropism is one of Roy's most brilliant small things. At the surface it is a child's error; underneath, it converts the legal machinery that disinherits women into a plague-insect the locust, devourer of harvests standing where Ammu should stand. Patriarchal law, the novel suggests, is a kind of infestation, and the joke lodges the suggestion more deeply than any editorial could. That the phrase recurs in the twins' private language, capitalised like a title, shows Roy building her critique into the novel's smallest linguistic organisms exactly the scale at which, this paper argues, her ecofeminism operates.

Even the novel's ecological pedagogy is gendered and Roy makes sure we notice. It is Chacko, the Oxford Rhodes scholar and the family's self-appointed intellectual, who gives the twins their lesson in deep time:

> he told them about the Earth Woman. He made them imagine that the earth four thousand six hundred million years old was a forty-six-year-old woman… It had taken the whole of the Earth Woman's life for the earth to become what it was. For the oceans to part. For the mountains to rise. The Earth Woman was eleven years old… when the first single-celled organisms appeared. The first animals, creatures like worms and jellyfish, appeared only when she was forty… The whole of human civilization as we know it, began only two hours ago in the Earth Woman's life. (Roy 53–54)

The passage performs the classic ecocritical decentring: measured against the Earth Woman's forty-six years, human civilisation shrinks to a two-hour drive from Ayemenem to Cochin the human is revealed as the smallest thing of all. But the vehicle of the lesson repays attention as much as its tenor. The earth is figured, once again, as a woman — and the figuration is voiced by the novel's most articulate patriarch, the man who will shortly dispossess his sister with "Locusts Stand I" and dismiss his mother as a "sleeping partner." Chacko can imagine the earth as a woman and revere her age; he cannot extend standing to the women at his own table. Roy thus stages, within a single character, the central ecofeminist contradiction that Ortner and Shiva anatomise: the same culture that sentimentalises Mother Earth/Mother Nature subordinates actual mothers, actual women (Ortner

73; Shiva 17). The Earth Woman passage is not the novel endorsing the woman–nature equation; it is the novel showing who profits from making it.

Against these freighted insects and figures, Roy sets passages of pure attention, in which the non-human world is catalogued with a naturalist's precision: "tall grass… Brown millipedes… Wet mud parted under their feet as they squelched through the swamp… darter birds on the tops of trees, drying their sodden wings spread out like laundry against the sky… egrets… a banana flower sheathed in claret bracts" (Roy 296). The catalogue form is significant: each creature receives its own clause, its own moment of narrative regard, exactly as the novel's marginal humans receive theirs. The darter birds' wings "like laundry" domesticate the wild at the same time as the opening page's house grew moss like skin the two realms are continuous. Life in all its forms is honoured, and the honouring is technical, patient, and specific. This is Meeker's adaptive literature in action (Meeker 3–4): the reader trained by such sentences leaves the novel more able, not less, to see the small lives around them.

Patriarchy, Property, and Caste: The Logic of Domination

If the novel stopped at women and rivers, it would be an ecofeminist text of a familiar kind. Its distinction is that it extends the same analysis to caste and property, vindicating Warren's claim that sexism, casteism, and the exploitation of nature share one "logic of domination" (Warren). The masculine characters embody that logic in complementary modes. Pappachi's is the violence of the thwarted patriarch, beating his wife with a brass vase and his daughter with riding crops of rage. Chacko's is subtler and therefore more instructive: he expropriates through language and law. Mammachi founds and runs the pickle factory; Chacko, returning from Oxford, informs her that she is merely the "sleeping partner" and refers to the factory as "my factory, my pineapples, my pickles" (Roy 57) possession performed in pronouns before it is enforced in law. His declaration that Ammu has no *locus standi* completes the pattern: within a single family, women's labour is absorbed, women's claims are voided, and both operations are dressed in the neutral vocabulary of partnership and standing.

The same ledger that records "more rice, for the price of a river" records Velutha. A Paravan and an "Untouchable," Velutha is the factory's most skilled worker carpenter, mechanic, the man who actually makes things run and Mammachi pays him less than she would pay a Touchable carpenter for identical work (Roy 77), reasoning from caste as the barrage-builders reasoned from votes. Mukherjee's account of uneven development names the economy at work here: in the postcolonial ecologies Roy describes, the cheapening of nature and the cheapening of subordinated human labour are one process, not two (Mukherjee). Velutha's fate confirms the identification at the level of plot. The novel's transgressive love affair Ammu and Velutha, the disinherited woman and the untouchable man is consummated by the river and destroyed by the social order; the History House on the river's far bank, where the lovers meet and where Velutha is beaten to death, later becomes a five-star heritage hotel, its lawn manicured, its river already dying. Every element of the novel's ending is thus ecofeminist in construction: the woman, the untouchable, and the river are broken by the same hands in the same season, and the site of their breaking is redeveloped for tourism. What the Kunhis call nature's muted voice (Kunhi and Kunhi) speaks here through structure: Roy does not need to state the identity of the three victims' oppressor, because the plot has already demonstrated it.

It is in this light that the novel's women–nature associations must be read. Rahel is shadowed by her grandfather's moth; Ammu shares her biography with a river; the earth itself is offered to the twins as a woman. A naïve reading would conclude that Roy essentialises that she, too, sees women as nature. The structure of the novel forbids the conclusion. Every association between a woman and a natural thing in *The God of Small Things* is either produced by a patriarch (Pappachi's moth, Chacko's Earth Woman) or produced by shared victimhood (Ammu and the Meenachal, broken by the same order). The novel dramatises Ortner's cultural equation while exposing its machinery, and in doing so it performs the precise task Gaard assigns to ecofeminist critique: revealing that the ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature and the ideology which authorises oppressions of gender, caste, and class are the same ideology (Gaard 1).

Conclusion

This paper set out to answer a specific question: by what narrative means does *The God of Small Things* fuse its ecological and its feminist critiques? Three findings emerge. First, the fusion is formal before it is thematic. The novel's poetics of the small announced in its title, calibrated on its opening page, and sustained in its naturalist catalogues applies one and the same quality of attention to non-human lives and to socially diminished human lives, so that the reader learns to perceive moths, rivers, women, and untouchables within a single economy of value. Second, the novel's central parallels are constructed as shared biographies rather than asserted resemblances: Ammu and the Meenachal are given the same temporal architecture, the same doubleness of tenderness and rage, and the same death by administration, so that each renders the other legible. Third, the novel consistently attributes the woman–nature association to its patriarchs Pappachi's moth, Chacko's Earth Woman,

the misheard law of "Locusts Stand I" thereby dramatising the association as an instrument of domination rather than an essential truth. Read against the frameworks of d'Eaubonne, Gaard, Warren, and Shiva, *The God of Small Things* emerges not simply as a novel that contains ecofeminist themes, as prior criticism has amply shown (Anand; Kunhi and Kunhi; Mukherjee), but as a novel whose narrative technique *is* an ecofeminist argument: an education, sentence by sentence, in attending to the small and an indictment, plot line by plot line, of the Big order that prices rivers in rice, women in standing, and men in caste. To Meeker's question — whether literature adapts us to the world or estranges us from it Roy's novel returns an answer that is also a demand: adaptation begins when the small things become visible, and visibility is precisely what her prose refuses to let the reader withhold.

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