

ECOFEMINIST PERSPECTIVES AND TRAUMA IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE GOD of SMALL THINGS*

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Abstract

This paper explores the ecofeminist dimensions and trauma narratives in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997). The novel, set in Kerala, interweaves ecological degradation with patriarchal oppression, highlighting how both women and nature are marginalized by socio-political and cultural structures. Through an ecofeminist lens, the paper examines how Roy portrays the interconnectedness of ecological and feminine suffering, while also analyzing the traumatic consequences of caste, gender, and colonial hierarchies. Drawing upon theorists such as Vandana Shiva, Val Plumwood, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, this study situates Roy's narrative within the global discourse of ecofeminism and postcolonial trauma. It argues that *The God of Small Things* offers a complex critique of domination and displacement, where nature, woman, and the subaltern share intertwined fates of exploitation and silencing.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Trauma, Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, Nature, Patriarchy, Postcolonialism, Identity

Introduction

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is a text of profound ecological and feminist resonance. Published in 1997, the novel chronicles the tragic lives of Ammu, Estha, and Rahel, against the lush yet suffocating landscape of Kerala. Roy's narrative invites a dual reading—ecological and feminist—where the degradation of nature parallels the oppression of women. Ecofeminism, as a critical framework, unites these dimensions, proposing that the patriarchal domination of women and the exploitation of nature stem from the same hierarchical mindset. The novel's political and emotional topography reveals how systemic power operates through gendered and ecological violence.

1. Ecofeminism: Theoretical Framework

Ecofeminism, a movement that merges ecological consciousness with feminist theory, argues that patriarchal societies exploit both women and the environment. Vandana Shiva asserts that the capitalist-patriarchal paradigm treats nature as inert and women as passive, both subject to domination. Val Plumwood extends this argument by identifying dualisms—reason/emotion, man/woman, culture/nature—that undergird Western thought. Within this framework, *The God of Small Things* emerges as a narrative of resistance and reclamation, challenging these binaries by giving voice to the silenced and the suppressed.

2. Nature as a Living Presence

In Roy's novel, the natural world is not a mere backdrop but an active presence—a sentient participant in human drama. The Meenachal River, the monsoon, the pickle factory, and the lush vegetation form a living ecosystem that mirrors the emotional states of the characters. When the river turns toxic, it becomes emblematic of social decay and moral corruption. The ecological imagery reflects the psychic trauma of the characters, particularly Ammu and Velutha, whose love defies caste and gender constraints. Nature, thus, becomes both sanctuary and witness to human suffering—a motif central to ecofeminist thought.

3. Women, Ecology, and Patriarchal Violence

Ammu's struggle against patriarchal oppression parallels nature's exploitation. Her confinement within domestic and social boundaries mirrors the degradation of the natural world around her. As a divorced woman, she embodies defiance and vulnerability—an embodiment of the ecofeminist principle that links the subjugation of women to environmental exploitation. Roy's female characters—Ammu, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma—each illustrate different responses to patriarchal power. Ammu's rebellion ends in isolation and death, symbolizing both ecological extinction and social erasure.

4. Trauma, Memory, and Environmental Displacement

Trauma theory, particularly as articulated by Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman, helps interpret the fragmented narrative structure of *The God of Small Things*. The novel's non-linear form mimics the workings of traumatic memory—repetitive, disjointed, and repressed. The trauma of caste violence and gendered oppression intersects with ecological trauma: the pollution of the river mirrors the psychic pollution of Ayemenem. The characters' return to their childhood home evokes a landscape of both nostalgia and decay, where the environment becomes a mnemonic site of collective and personal pain.

5. Velutha and the Politics of the 'Small'

Velutha, the 'God of Small Things,' stands at the intersection of nature, labor, and love. His name itself means 'white,' ironically suggesting purity and resistance amidst corruption. As a carpenter and communist, he represents a connection to both earth and community. His relationship with Ammu disrupts social hierarchies and challenges caste purity. Through him, Roy redefines ecofeminist ethics—valuing the small, the marginalized, and the natural. Velutha's brutal death at the hands of patriarchal and state power encapsulates the annihilation of ecological and human harmony under oppressive systems.

6. The River as Ecofeminist Symbol

The Meenachal River operates as a central ecofeminist metaphor in Roy's narrative. Initially nurturing and vibrant, it becomes sullied by human greed and moral decay. The drowning of Sophie Mol in the river transforms it into a site of both fertility and death—nature's cycle distorted by human violation. The river's decline parallels the degradation of Ammu's spirit, reflecting ecofeminism's assertion that violence against women and against the earth are intertwined acts of domination.

7. Postcolonial Ecofeminism: Caste, Gender, and Power

Roy's ecofeminism cannot be separated from her postcolonial critique. The hierarchies of caste and class reproduce the colonial logic of control over bodies and land. Ecofeminist theorists such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty have emphasized that feminist theory must account for cultural and economic contexts. In Roy's Kerala, the legacy of colonial capitalism merges with patriarchal feudalism, producing layered oppressions. The land, like the female body, becomes a contested terrain of ownership, purity, and pollution.

8. Healing, Resistance, and the Ethics of Care

Despite its tragic narrative, *The God of Small Things* gestures toward healing through connection, empathy, and memory. The twin reunion of Estha and Rahel embodies an ethics of care—a return to intimacy that defies societal taboos. This act,

though controversial, reclaims agency and emotional wholeness in a world fragmented by trauma. Ecofeminism, as Roy suggests, is not only a critique of power but a philosophy of interconnectedness and compassion that reimagines survival beyond domination.

Conclusion

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is a literary testament to the symbiosis of ecology, gender, and trauma. Through an ecofeminist framework, the novel exposes the shared vulnerabilities of women and nature under patriarchal and colonial regimes. The trauma embedded in both human and environmental experience underscores the ethical urgency of care, empathy, and resistance. Roy's narrative suggests that healing begins when the small things—the marginalized, the forgotten, the natural—are reclaimed as central to human existence. The novel thus contributes powerfully to the global ecofeminist discourse, urging a reevaluation of how we inhabit both body and earth.

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