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*Antara Saha*

## ABSTRACT

Converging upon the degradation of several sides of our environment and culture Arundhati Roy as an activist shows her concern in her novel *The God of Small Things* over all kinds of oppression resulted from the devastating consequence of the global market, development happened without sustainable thought and the locus of women in the postcolonial society. Roy highlights the necessity of social, economic and environmental justice for oppressed women, marginalised human beings and nature. Patriarchal categories always ignore productive and sustainable activities and adore unproductive activities and so development which creates uneven structures and environmental poverty is assessed as mal- development. Roy focuses on how hierarchical development and commercial development together damage the entire ecology of Ayemenem where Ammu and her twins' Rahel and Estha are victimised most. The emergence of westernisation not only affects Indian culture and nature leading towards profit-oriented viewpoint but seizes the purity and wilderness embedded in it also. Therefore, this novel aims at showing Roy's presentation of women, culture and nature from the viewpoint of ecology and feminism.

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# Interwoven Threads: Ecology, Feminism and Cultural Critique in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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*Converging upon the degradation of several sides of our environment and culture Arundhati Roy as an activist shows her concern in her novel The God of Small Things over all kinds of oppression resulted from the devastating consequence of the global market, development happened without sustainable thought and the locus of women in the postcolonial society. Roy highlights the necessity of social, economic and environmental justice for oppressed women, marginalised human beings and nature. Patriarchal categories always ignore productive and sustainable activities and adore unproductive activities and so development which creates uneven structures and environmental poverty is assessed as mal-development. Roy focuses on how hierarchical development and commercial development together damage the entire ecology of Ayemenem where Ammu and her twins' Rahel and Estha are victimised most. The emergence of westernisation not only affects Indian culture and nature leading towards profit-oriented viewpoint but seizes the purity and wilderness embedded in it also. Therefore, this novel aims at showing Roy's presentation of women, culture and nature from the viewpoint of ecology and feminism.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

As a concerned activist against environmental devastation, Arundhati Roy discloses the inhuman

practice of postcolonial patriarchal society over women, nature and the subaltern who are noticeable as victims. Roy has shown her concern found in her dealing of the subject concerning domination over the marginalized women and the subordinate people belonging to the lower caste in the postcolonial India. Underneath the patriarchal society, they are always maltreated and browbeaten in different ways. Roy's consciousness with all kinds of domination touches at the national and global levels. She depicts the devastating consequence of the global market in postcolonial India, where development conveys disaster to the natural environment and explores the need of social, economic and environmental justice for oppressed woman, marginalized human beings and nature. Therefore the crack between the empowered and the marginalized remains the same even after the colonial period. Roy illustrates how the woman characters in this novel are subjugated by the patriarchal organization so that they are obliged to obliterate their longings. Vandana Shiva states: "Patriarchal categories which understand destruction as production and regeneration of life as passivity has generated a crisis of survival" (*Staying Alive* 22). Development creates uneven social structures and environmental poverty. These calamities occur when progress in all circles of life is not sustainable.

## II. DEVELOPMENT AND ECOLOGICAL DEGRADATION

As dominance of human beings by other human beings because of the hierarchical development shatters the social ecology of a society, domination over nature on behalf of commercial development carries the same damage in the physical ecology as well as the local ecology of

Ayemenem. And, in the same way, Ammu and her twins' ecology are disturbed by the intrigue of their own people. It is Rahel who feels the changing scenario in the physical ecology of Ayemenem has been changed after 25 years: "Years later, when Rahel returned to the river, it greeted her with a ghastly smile, with holes where teeth had been, and a limp hand raised from a hospital bed" (*God* 124). Roy illuminates how the river becomes victimized by the influential paddy-farmer lobby who allow the construction of a saltwater barrage which pedals the inflow of saltwater from the backwaters which release into the Arabian Sea. Thus the production of more rice becomes possible through the two harvests rather than one: "More rice for the price of a river" (*God* 124). Rahel detects the narrowness of the river in the month of June, the time of the rainy season and each and everything underwater come to be wafted on the water surface whether it is dead fish or weeds and lily-trotters. Rahel ruminates that in the former years, this river had the enough strength to arouse fear. But now it has been transformed into something immobilised. The speaker narrates:

Once it had had the power to evoke fear. To change lives. 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. (*God* 124)

Roy has defined concisely the despoiled state of the river. Once while the bathers and the fishers were exactly steered by the suitable stone steps to their destination, now these guide them from "nowhere to nowhere" (*God* 125). The unhygienic and the distraught condition of the other side of the river she depicts, is worse than the previous one. The mud banks of the river not only gather the shanty hutments, the faecal wastes and the factory wastes but the dirt from bathing and washing clothes also contaminates river and ruins it. Garrard thinks: "pollution' is an ecological problem because it does not name a substance or class of substances, but rather represents an implicit normative claim that too much of something is present in the environment, usually

in the wrong place" (6). Cynthia Deitering says, "a shift from a culture defined by its production to a culture defined by its wastes... examines the way in which the toxic landscapes functions...as a metaphor for the pollution of the natural world" (196). Roy establishes the relationship between literature and nature by portraying how ecological change is greeted by the outcome of growth and expansion. The capitalist patriarchal power exploits Ayemenem's river by raising both barrage as well as the Heritage, the five-star hotel, an insightful amalgamation of colonial and postcolonial, the western and the Indian, progression and reduction. While on one hand the river is shrunk by the salt-water barrage, on the other hand, the hotel 'Heritage' brings reduction to the history of History House. Roy emphasizes how people were bestowing much importance to the history house rather than to the Earth Woman. Chacko tries to make them recognize that the creation of human life and civilization is just a twinkle for the Earth woman (*God* 54). But children were not interested in the Earth Woman rather they were interested in the History House. The author says:

Though the Earth Woman made a lasting impression on the twins, it was the History House – so much closer at hand - that really fascinated them. They thought about it often. The house on the other side of the river. Looming in the heart of Darkness. (*God* 54)

Actually the word 'Heart of Darkness' epitomizes the development that leads the whole civilization into the darkness. The novel illustrates how the natural splendour of God's Own Country is condensed to the country of the God of Loss where no God exists in the artificially established region. Actually, the phrase God's Own Country is used to enhance the attraction of the tourism department which hiding the foul flaws of the region is only demanding to demonstrate the elegance of nature draped by luxury. Thoreau Manes thinks that wilderness is not treated as a luxury but it is very essential for the human spirit, and as vibrant to human lives as water and bread (16). Indeed the earlier definition of wilderness is lost now. Greg Garrard's *Ecocriticism* referencing Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature*

(1990) demonstrates Cronon's representation of the purity of wilderness. He thinks that pollution and devastation are local occurrences and these common flaws come from the effect of DDT or the outcome from distinctive nuclear weapons' tests. But the emergence of anthropogenic climate change, or 'global warming', has skewed the condition primarily polluting the entire planet:

We have changed the atmosphere, and thus we are changing the weather. By changing the weather, we make every spot on earth manmade and artificial. We have deprived nature of its independence, and that is fatal to its meaning. Nature's independence is its meaning; without it, there is nothing but us (McKibben 54).

Garrard says that wilderness has its own worthiness as it renovates connection between human beings and earth. But that restoration is lost with the detachment of human beings from nature. Thus ecofeminism is presented here as a protest, as a movement, highlighted by the postcolonial writers' concerns about a society which is being victimized by different kinds of disparities and degradation. Roy says in her essay "The Greater Common Good" (1999) about the politics included in a dam project which bears a huge amount of cost of living of human lives and displacement in the postcolonial period. Carolyn Merchant shows in her book *The Death of Nature* how male dominant societal rules and male dominant knowledge trap both women as well as nature. In *Ecofeminism* Vandana Shiva also says that both patriarchal evolution and scientific revolution together reduce the identity of women and the identity of nature. Roy shows how the development of the History house to a five-star hotel alters the physical environment of Ayemenem and how the local ecology is disturbed by the modern arrangement of the entertainment. The author depicts the arrogance of modernity which knows no bound their material comfort and for which they can easily shut down the poverty by giving partition to the slum. The smelly paradise is named as 'God's Own Country' in spite of the smelliness of the region and the poverty of the people. It becomes an issue of order. What they plan to remove is the smell of shit that comes out

from the river bank and pollutes the local ecology by furnishing the rooms with Air-conditioning "because they knew, those clever Hotel people, that smelliness, like other people's poverty, was merely a matter of getting used to. A question of discipline. Of Rigour and Air-conditioning. Nothing more" (*God* 126). In God's Own Country the river not only changes its direction towards Ayemenem but the History House also becomes isolated from the river. Even around the Ayemenem house, Rahel observes: "houses had mushroomed, and it was only the fact that they nestled under trees, and that the narrow paths that branched off the main road and led to them were not motorable, that gave Ayemenem the semblance of rural quietness" (*God* 128). The Heritage, the new name and the new structure of the History House does not disregard the aristocracy related to the house where there was the coexistence of "History and Literature enlisted by commerce. Kurtz and Karl Marx joining palms to greet rich guests as they stepped off the boat" (*God* 126). The pollution and filthiness in the ecology of Ayemenem are the consequences of using pesticides which are bought with the world-bank loans and create an obstruction in the Meenachal River. Rachel Carson says in her book *Silent Spring*:

This pollution is for the most part irrecoverable; the chain of evil it initiates not only in the world that must support life but in living tissues is for the most part irreversible. In this now universal contamination of the environment, chemicals are the sinister and little recognized partners of radiation in changing the very nature of the world-the very nature of its life. (*Silent Spring* 23)

The author says: "Most of the fish had died. The ones that survived suffered from fin-rot and had broken out in boils" (*God* 13). She tells about it in an interview with David Barsamian that the entire world is being controlled by the WTO, the IMF, and the World Bank. She thinks that these monetary funds do agreements with those governments who collaborate with the multinational companies. For Roy, the agreements are made secretly depriving the people of the information. She states, "Contracts



that governments sign with multinationals, which affect people's lives so intimately are secret documents" (*The Checkbook and the Cruise Missile* 12). Referring to the contract between Enron, the huge Houston-based organization and the government of Maharashtra, Roy asks for the document to be made public (*The Checkbook and the Cruise Missile* 12). Carolyn Merchant shows how grassroots globalization aims at corporate globalization through the global corporate power exhibited by WTO, World Bank and IMF. Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies state in their book *Ecofeminism* that the World Bank does not actually care for the welfare of the entire world's communities, rather it is regulated by the contributors who are economically and politically powerful and the real contributors who pay the real price become voiceless. Thus these institutions in the name of development create neo-colonialism through financing and debt-trapping to remove underdevelopment and poverty. Maria Mies states:

With increasing ecological destruction in recent decades, however, it becomes obvious that this subsistence — or life production— was and is not only a kind of hidden underground of the capitalist market economy, it can also show the way out of the many impasses of this destructive system called industrial society, market economy or capitalist patriarchy. (*Ecofeminism* 298)

### 2.1 Loss of Identity and Culture

Roy shows that the effect of capitalist patriarchy not only degrades natural environment but it degrades human culture also. Roy in her novel highlights Baby Kochamma's treatment of garden culture through the knowledge of Ornamental Gardening. After coming back from Rochester with a diploma in Ornamental Gardening, she is given the charge of the front garden of the Ayemenem house. But her ornamental knowledge about gardening converted it into "a bitter garden that people came all the way from Kottayam to see" (*God* 26). Her supremacist claim and her western learning could not bring her close to nature rather her domination over culture leads the garden towards cultural degradation. "Like a

lion-tamer she tamed twisting vines and nurtured bristling cacti. She limited bonsai plants and pampered rare orchids. She waged war on the weather. She tried to grow edelweiss and Chinese guava" (*God* 27). The entire garden carries the western taste, the mechanical sense and artificial decoration where there is very little touch of Indian culture: "it was 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....a marble cherub peed an endless silver arc are into a shallow pool in which a single blue lotus bloomed" (*God* 26). Chaya Heller says in her article "For the Love of Nature: Ecology and the Cult of the Romantic:

Societies increasing alienation from nature has left the idea of nature as fair game for romantic love. Increasing urbanization, suburbanization, and the demise of the family farm leave many of us with little direct participation in the organic cycles of planting and harvesting. Our relationship with the natural world is largely mediated by industries of production and consumption that shape our appetites, tastes, and desires (229)

In spite of Ammu's contribution to the pickle factory she never gets the importance rather she has to tolerate Chacko's monopoly claim "my factory, my pineapples, my pickles" (*God* 57). The author says: "Legally, this was the case because Ammu as a daughter, had no claim to the property" (*God* 57). Even Chacko tells the twins that "Ammu had no Locusts Stand I" (*God* 57). Bina Agarwal states that land identifies the social position and political influence in the village, and it builds relations both inside and outside the home. She thinks that the most influential economic factor which affects the status of a woman is the gender gap in control over the property. She also produces various instances in this regard where the brother does not provide the sister with her right to the inherited land and its production. Acharya and Bennett note:

Women's involvement in market activities gives them much greater power within the household in terms of their input in all aspects

of household decision-making. At the same time, confining women's work to the domestic and subsistence sectors reduces their power *vis-a-vis* men in the household. Two explanations are offered for this phenomenon. First, women who participate in the market activities make a measurable contribution to the household income and second, they are more likely to control their own production assets, while women working in subsistence agriculture are generally labouring on land controlled by the male household head. (*A Field of One's Own* 68).

Lori Gruen states that the Marxist feminists analysing the system advocate that the way of liberation must be lost for economic inequalities. They consider that the liberation of women is connected to the participation of women into production (Gruen "Dismantling" 76).

## 2.2 Commercialisation of Kathakali

Roy exposes how the significance and classic texture of Kathakali are commercialised by the hotel Heritage and it wants to present this dance form before the tourists to create attraction. Thus this classic dance form is commodified in the postcolonial environment. Indeed, Roy highlights how her native culture, going to be diminished due to the entrance of the western version into it. She highlights the lack of reasonable attendance of the lonely temple where two Kathakali men perform their dances secretly. The novel presents a consciousness of the survival of the Indian dance form (Kathakali) in the postcolonial India. If the Kathakali Man is considered the god of their art, the god suffers from an uncertain future.

In that evenings (for that Regional Flavour) the tourists were treated to truncated Kathakali performances ('Small attention spans, the Hotel People, explained to the dancers). So ancient stories were collapsed and amputated. Six-hour classics were slashed to twenty- minute cameos (*God* 127)

Thus the entire process divulges not only the nature/culture dualism but it also deals with the implanted crisis in this dualistic notion which is seen as common in the global south. Roy, in an

outstanding way, depicts the degradation of Ayemenem temple as well as the degradation of Kathakali dance which gifts the Great Stories from the Puranas. The author says, "The Great Stories are the ones you have heard and want to hear again. The ones you can enter anywhere and inhabit comfortably....To the Kathakali Man, these stories are his children and his childhood" (*God* 229). But these stories are being corrupted by the Kathakali Man who is obliged to perform their art for the tourists. They are forced to curtail their performances. The archaic form of Kathakali blends with the material comfort of the postcolonial ecology. In the Heart of Darkness, they perform their dance to be released of their degradation. They are ashamed of such dishonesty that they do "for encashing their identities. Misappropriating their lives" (*God* 229). So, during their coming back from the Heart of Darkness they stop at the temple to make an apology to God. Roy shows how reduction of culture separates them from their local culture and how Indian culture is being dominated by the western culture. During the performances, hotel guests play raucously with their children in the water and the couples are busy to rub suntan oil on each other. The grand scenes of the Great stories become diminished under the weight of modernization that the western culture introduces. She says:

While Kunti revealed her secret to Karna on the river bank, courting couples rubbed suntan oil on each other. While fathers played sublimated sexual games with their nubile teenaged daughters, Poothana suckled young Krishna at her poisoned breast. Bhima disembowelled Dushasana and bathed Draupadi's hair in his blood (*God* 127)

## 2.3 Identity Crisis of the Characters

In one way, she relates the Kathakali Man with Karna. Roy shows that both the Kathakali Man as well as Karna are separated from their own culture and own identity. Both are 'others' who are victimized by their own society. As an unmarried mother, Kunti is obliged to be separated from her son for her survival in the ancient society and the Kathakali Man is forced to

be separated from his mother art to survive in the postcolonial society. This separation brings a reduction in a relationship and in culture “the hidden fish of shame in a sea of glory” (*God* 230). Roy explains:

The Kathakali Man is the most beautiful of men. Because his body is his soul. His only instrument. From the age of three it has been planned and polished, pared down, harnessed wholly to the task of storytelling. He has magic in him, this man within the painted mask and swirling skirts. But these days he has become unviable. Unfeasible. Condemned goods. (*God* 230)

He is obliged to take a turn to tourism where he presents stories by which his body responses to become a ‘Regional Flavour’ (*God* 231). To survive in the Heart of Darkness, he tolerates the nudity of the tourists’ scornful attitudes and dances for them. He becomes professional giving up the artistry of art: “he collects his fees. He gets drunk. Or smokes a joint. Good Kerala grass. It makes him laugh. Then he stops by the Ayemenem Temple....to ask pardon of the gods” (*God* 231). Notwithstanding his abundant talent, the Kathakali Man’s identity is reduced like Karna who is obliged to take the side of Duryodhana. The Kathakali Man becomes the abandoned child of art like Karna:

But if he had had a fleet of make-up men waiting in the wings, an agent, a contract, a percentage of the \$DnK4h)6QVPt profits - what then would he be? An imposter. A rich pretender. An actor playing a part. Could he be Karna? Or would he be too safe inside his pod of wealth? Would his money grow like a rind between himself and his story? Would he be able to touch its heart, its hidden secrets, in the way that he can now? (*God* 231)

In this respect, Roy shows another kind of contrast where the twins, like Karna, have no identity, no ‘Locusts stand I’ as they are also abandoned by their father and Ammu keeps their identity as such: Rahel only because Ammu thinks that “choosing between her husband’s name and her father’s name didn’t give a woman much of a

choice (*God* 37). Velutha is victimized as paravan, as a subaltern like Karna who is brought up as a charioteer’s son. In spite of Velutha’s connectedness with Ayemenem family he is killed by the conspiracy of Baby Kochamma to whom the twins’ take oath to tell ‘Yes’ to save their Ammu as Karna promises Kunti to save her five sons. The twins’ oath murders Velutha and Karna’s oath murders himself. The twins and Karna both have taken oath for the sake of their mother. Roy says, “...the performance like this, separated by the breadth of the kuthambalam, but joined by a story. And the memory of another mother” (*God* 234). The Kathakali Man’s tattered skirt, hollow crown and bald blouse expose the exhaustion of both figures of myth and reality in spite of his knowledge that he will never become real Karna “a prince raised in poverty. Born to die unfairly, unarmed and alone at the hands of his brother. Majestic in his complete despair” (*God* 232). Roy shows how the logic of domination resides in the heart of the Kathakali Man who is himself dominated by the aristocratic class with their makeup and after removing their make up they show domination over their wives. An irony that the narrator wants to imply here is that the hand the Kathakali Man uses during performing their dance, their art and bring justice for Draupadi by killing Dushshasana, the same hand they use to beat their wives. Thus women of all ranks are dominated in patriarchal society. Roy delineates that no woman figure is introduced in performing the role of Kunti. Karna and Kunti both roles are played by men, women are excluded from performing this role. Philli Zarrilli says:

I don’t think women will make good performers because they have some limitations age-wise and so on. If they reach a certain age they will not be able to concentrate on this, especially when they get married. They may do it all right before their marriage. The physical capabilities also differ from that of a man. In *Kathakali* men can do all the difficult things, but not women. (*Kathakali* 70)

Karen Warren thinks that ageism is one of the social oppressions to be included in ecofeminist



issues. She says: “Racism, classism, ableism, ageism, heterosexism, anti-Semitism, and colonialism are feminist issues because understanding them helps one understand the subordination of woman” (*Ecofeminist Philosophy* 1).

#### 2.4 Truth Revealed through Story-Telling

Roy shows how the Kathakali Man plays a significant role as a storyteller who tells the Great stories through dances. These stories are taken from *The Mahabharata* and *The Ramayana*. The storyteller uses his Kathakali dance which he presents as a representative art, takes the audiences at the core of their emotional level from where they try to connect themselves to their own ecology and reconnect themselves to the stories of their survival: “an emotional investment in the locality where the storytelling takes place, so that people will care what happens to it” (*Storytelling and Ecology* 25-26). Anthony Nanson documents that storytelling works as a means to make knowledge more reachable, pleasurable and impressive. The storyteller resurrects the hidden truth from the mind of the audience who watch the performance. The storyteller presents his story to the live spectators in an unplanned way so that his tale can easily reconnect them with the ancient ecology and they are able to understand the difference between the degradation of present ecology and the strength of past ecology. Roy shows Kunti’s deep relation with the Sun God whose power makes her fertile. But for the fear of the opposing forces, Kunti is compelled to be alienated from her son. Rahel and Estha also think their alienation from their father at first and later from their mother because of the external forces and also perceive how modern forces alienate human beings from nature and keep her infertile. Deepika Bahri in her book *Native Intelligence: Aesthetics, Politics and Postcolonial Literature* say:

Arundhati Roy’s incorporation of the Kathakali Man (*Katha*, story; *kali*, performance) in *The God of Small Things* introduces the framework of the novel the figure of a Benjaminian storyteller to revivify the relation of the novel form to fecund

tradition of Great Stories and that of mimesis to experience”( *Native Intelligence* 202)

Roy’s depiction of the Kathakali dance and the Kathakali Man not only highlights the effect of capitalist patriarchy through the degradation of culture and its conversion into commodity but also creates a sense of harmony by which the twins connect themselves with the story that tells the story of a helpless mother, a helpless child, a helpless woman. The tattered dress of the Kathakali Man indicates the uneven status of the great stories which are cut short during a presentation before the tourist people. Thus Kathakali is dominated by western culture. Though the Kathakali Man performs the Great stories, they are not attached to it wholeheartedly. In spite of being an artist his artistic sense cannot expand the philosophy of the Puranas to their domestic world, rather he beats his wife after removing the makeup. One thing is very clear that Arundhati Roy has created two kinds of the world: the world before makeup and world after makeup.

### III. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* serves as a powerful commentary on the intersections of ecology, feminism, and cultural identity. Through her vivid portrayal of Ayemenem, Roy illuminates the devastating impacts of hierarchical and commercial development, revealing how these forces contribute to the degradation of both the environment and marginalized communities. The struggles of Ammu and her twins epitomize the broader plight of women and the oppressed, emphasizing the urgent need for social, economic, and environmental justice.

Roy’s narrative not only critiques the oppressive structures that perpetuate inequality but also celebrates the resilience of those who resist them. By intertwining personal and political stories, she highlights how individual lives are inextricably linked to larger ecological and societal frameworks. The loss of purity in nature mirrors the loss of agency for women in a patriarchal society, suggesting that the fight for gender equality is also a fight for ecological preservation.

In her vision, the reclamation of cultural identity becomes essential for nurturing both the environment and the marginalized. Ultimately, her work invites readers to reflect on the importance of sustainability and equity, urging us to envision a world where the threads of ecology, feminism, and cultural integrity are harmoniously interwoven. In this interconnected struggle, every small action contributes to a larger movement toward justice, challenging us to reconsider our roles in both our communities and the planet.

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