

Eco-feminist Delineations in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract. The present paper explores Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* in the context of Ecofeminism. A large and growing body of literature on ecofeminist issues in the west relates gender and environment mainly in ideological terms. In our country however, growing protest against environmental destruction and struggles for survival and subsistence point the fact that caste, class and gender issues are deeply interlinked. *The God of Small Things* interrogates the ways such hierarchies operate through mechanism such as patriarchal ideology and apparently rational economic logic. Roy's critique of environmental exploitation reveals the interconnectedness of ecological deterioration and operation based on gender class and race. Roy has highlighted the interconnection of feminist perspective along with nature and foregrounds the hierarchical dualism and rationalized economic logic that have been used to legitimize the exploitation of natural environment and subordinated people in Indian society. Roy successfully intermingled the exploitation of women and nature in the patriarchal Indian society. In *The God of Small Things* there are several instances which focus on the eco-feminist approaches adopted by Roy. She exposes the structural and ideological interconnectedness of Indian society's oppressive systems which dominates small with the deplorable environmental surroundings.

Keywords : Eco-feminism; environmentalism; hierarchical dualism; inter-connectedness; nature; destruction.

Eco-feminism describes movements and philosophies that link feminism with ecology. The term is considered by a large and growing body of literature on ecofeminism in the west relates gender and environment mainly in ideological terms. Growing concern over the destruction of natural environment have spurred on environmental movements at local and global levels. As Laura Pulido points out:

Environmental movement have
uncovered, structural forces that produce
conditions of environmental degradation,
and the development-oriented agenda

and prevailing forces of the global economy have caused ecological destruction and the displacement of people from their livelihood. (Pulido 12)

Eco-feminism connects the exploitation and domination of women with that of environment and argues that there is historical connection between women and nature. Eco-feminists believe that this connection illustrated through the traditionally 'female' values of reciprocity, nurturing and co-operation, which are present both among women and in nature. Women and nature are also united through their shared history of operation by the patriarchal western society.

Eco-feminism emerged in the west as a product of peace, feminist and ecology movements of the late 1970s and the early 1980s. The term "Eco-feminism" was coined by the French writer Francoise d'Eaubonne in 1974. It was further developed by Ynestra King in 1976 and became a movement in 1980 with the organization, in the same year of the first ecofeminist conference, "Women and life on Earth: Eco-feminism in the 80s", Massachusetts, US. The conference explored the connection between feminism, militarism health and ecology. It was followed by the formation of the women's pentagon action, a feminist, anti- militarist, anti-nuclear war weapons group. According to ecofeminist Ynestra King:

Eco-feminism is about connectedness and wholeness of theory and practice..., the devastation of the earth and her beings by the corporate warriors and the threat of nuclear annihilation by military warriors as feminist concern. It is the same masculinist mentality which would deny our right to our bodies and our own sexuality and which depends on multiple system of dominance and state power to have its way. (King 18)

Whenever women protested against ecological destruction, threat of atomic destruction of life on the earth grew, developments in biotechnology, genetic engineering and reproductive technology, they discovered the connection between patriarchal domination and violence against women, in India the most visible advocate of ecofeminism is Vandana Shiva. One would tend to categorize her work with the

ecofeminists of the radical mode, but her critique of the entire development model and its effects on the environment, places her more among the ecofeminist of the socialist framework.

Vandana Shiva critiques modern science and technology as western, patriarchal and colonial project and perpetuates this violence against women and nature. Pursuing this model of development has meant a shift away from traditional Indian philosophy which sees *Prakriti* as a living and creative process the 'feminine principle' from which all life arises. Under the grab of development, nature has been exploited mercilessly and feminine principle was no longer associated with activity, creativity and sanctity of life, but it was considered passive and as a 'resource'. This activity has led to marginalization, devaluation, displacement and ultimately the dispensability of women.

Women's special knowledge of nature and their dependence on it for 'staying alive', where systematically marginalized under onslaught of modern science. Vandana Shiva however, notes :

Third world women are not only victims of the development process but also possess the power for change. She points to the experience of women in Chipko Movement of the 1970s in Uttarakhand, where women struggle for the protection and regeneration of the forests. Shiva's counter development ideas are in alignment with environmental agendas as well as ecological feminist concern. (10)

Suzanna Arundhati Roy was born on 24th December, 1961. She is an Indian author and social, political activist. Her Man Booker Prize winning novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997) and her involvement in human rights and environmental causes made her non expatriate Indian author. Eco-conscious as Arundhati Roy is, and her concern for the environment finds an adequate expression in *The God of Small Things*. The novel lays bare how the environment is subjected to decay and destruction and points out the reasons that lie behind it too :

Once Ayemenem was reach in vegetation. Eshta and Rahel dreamt of the river Meenachal in their childhood,

It was warm, the water grey green, Like
ripped silk with fish in it. And at night,
the broken yellow moon in it". (*The God
of Small Things* 40)

Neeru Tandon, a celebrated feminist writer observes, "A feminist is one who is awakened and conscious about women's life and problem." (28). However, an ecofeminist is one who believe in the fact that, "an end to the oppression of women should be bound up with ecological values, and that women should be centrally concerned with ending the exploitation of the eco-system." (56) Chandra Nisha Singh, another feminist writer opines in this respect :

To feminism, patriarchy is the key word:
patriarchy as that social organization
which produces and guarantees superior
status for the male and inferior for the
female, a political concept that governs
power-structured relationships in which
one group is controlled by another. (3)

The novel *The God of Small Things* delineates interconnection between subordinated human beings, non-human nature, furnishes such a view point, although it has been mostly understood as a part of her environmentalist view point, rather than as evidence of an ecofeminist stance. After 23 years Rahel returned :

The river greeted her with a ghastly
skull's smile, with holes where teeth had
been and a limb hand raised from a
hospital bed. Though it was a month of
June and raining, the river was no more
than a swollen drain now. A thin ribbon
of thick water that lapped wearily at the
mud bank on either side, required with
the occasion silver slant of dead fish it
was choked with a succulent weed,
whose furred brown roots waved like
thin tentacle under water. Bronze-
winged lily-trotter walked across it. This
river was no more than 'A slow slugging
green ribbon lawn ferried fetid garbage
to the sea now'. (*The God of Small
Things* 124)

Estha too, found that “the river smelled of shit and pesticides bought with World bank loans. Most of the fish had died. The one that survived from fin-rot and had broken out in boils”. (13) Besides the river Meenachal, the village Ayemenam once known for freshness, matchless greenery and rural quietness has changed. Its population has swelled to the size of town. Estha finds, ‘The new freshly baked, iced gloomy houses built by nurses, masons, wire benders and bank clerk who worked hard and unhappily in far away places. State of Karri Saipu, known as history house has been renovated and converted into five-star hotel. Heritage, but the locality is quite hygienic because of its bad smell. As the locality is described as god’s own country in hotel brochures. The Ayemenam House, ‘A grand old house’ having history of its own is in a miserable condition.

There is affluence in Ayemenam but its scenic beauty and natural harmony have gone. Later a dismal scene of pollution and decay is visible everywhere. By observing both nature and civilization Roy has presented a true picture of India through Ayemenam. In hot and senseless pursuit of immediate gain, Man has broken relations with living being and inanimate themes. In quest of material pleasure and comfort future is rejected, there is a clarion call from Arundhati Roy to preserve nature and save future.

Roy believes in action. She knows that women and environmental both are exploited as passive pawns in race of domination. People, who are in power are capable of taking advantage of them distinctly because they are seen passive and helpless. But Roy is neither passive nor helpless. As an ecofeminist she wants to convey the message that women must create a healthy atmosphere and environment and end the destruction of land that most women rely on to provide harmony to nature. In the effort of ‘Narmada Bachao Andolan’, Roy was arrested with many women and put into jail. During her interview to David Barsamio, she narrates:

It was absolutely fantastic. I was in village Sulgaon. All night, all over the valley, people started arriving, by tractor, by motor car, on foot. By 3 in the morning there was about 5000 of us. We started walking in the dark side would be captured but they didn’t know from where the people would come. There is a huge area of devastation there. So, we

walked in the dark. It was amazing. 5000 people, mostly villagers, but also people from cities- lawyers, architects, journalists- walking through these byways and crossing streams in absolute silence. There was not any person that lit a bidi or cough or cleared their throats, occasionally, a whole group of women would sit down and pee and then keep walking. Finally at dawn, we arrived and took over dam side. Four hours the police surrounded us then there was a baton charge. They arrested thousand of people including me. The jail was full.

(Barsamio, Interview)

Roy's critiques of destruction of natural environment, patriarchal violence and domination of marginalized women and low caste groups are extended to economic sphere. In *The God of Small Things*, 'Capitalist patriarchy' and 'male dominated power structure' are the root cause of the operation of women and non human nature and considered ideological justification for the exploitation of subjugated women and lower castes such as untouchables.

As an ecofeminist, she desires to end the patriarchal domination, Ammu calls it an ideological believe in "male chauvinist society" (*The God of Small Things* 56) thus revealing not only her opposition to inequalities and the injustice inflicted on women in patriarchal society but also her feminist consciousness. The older generation traditional patriarchal views of male privilege heighten Ammu's sense of injustice, as Mammachi's preferential treatment towards Chacho and Ammu reveal.

Even though Mammachi has always been abused and beaten by her husband, she endorses this patriarchal ideology and utilizes Ammu labor in the pickle factory. Ammu is economically exploited by Mammachi and her brother Chacko even Mammachi looks down upon her if she is beneath human status. Chacko's and Mammachi's judgement of Ammu is irrational and Ammu's views of Velutha is based in her sound judgement which transcend societies rigid hierarchy.

Ammu's relationship with Velutha lasting only two weeks, she finds an attachment to and sense of solidarity with the subjugated others

who are treated as lesser being in society, and after she finds that her family discriminated against her children believing them to be illegitimate. Ammu's twins are treated by Ammu's aunt Baby Kochamma as, "doomed, fatherless waifs" (*The God of Small Things* 44) with no right to be in the house. The arrival of Sophie Mol, Chacko's daughter in Ayemenam, following the death of her step father in a car accident, is celebrated as a great family event and Sophie is treated as special. A few scenes are apparent that Ammu feels how her children are looked down upon by her family members during to her status as a divorced woman. And her children in the absence of their father find Velutha their father, Ammu feels a sense of affinity with him.

However, Ammu's and Velutha's defiance, shown through their inter caste relationship is viewed as subversive. Velutha is fired from the factory and Ammu is locked up in her bedroom treated as lunatic one. At last both of them meet their tragic death. Roy displays in novel how men's need to dominate women and oppress the powerless corresponds to the ideology of authoritarian patriarchy, which Roy extends to the disenfranchised Indian caste system.

As an embodiment of Roy's politics of opposition, *The God of Small Things* poignantly portrays the interconnectedness between human beings and nature and foregrounds their hierarchal dualism and rationalized economy logic that have been used to legitimize the exploitation of the natural environment and subordinated people in Indian society.

Roy successfully intermingled the exploitation of women and nature in the patriarchal Indian society. In *The God of Small Things* there are several instances which focus on the eco-feminist approaches adopted by Roy. She exposes the structural and ideological interconnectedness of Indian society's oppressive systems which dominates small with the deplorable environmental surroundings. *The God of Small Things*, in this sense, is notable accomplishment epitomizing her zeal for social and economic justice for Indian subordinate people and non-human nature. Environmental and gender issues need to be handled seriously and the exploitation of both must be stopped. Women and nature, both are mothers, therefore, they must not be maltreated and oppressed.

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