

# Reimagining Ecological Harmony and Dissonance: With Special Emphasis on “The God of Small Things”

Muhammad Ibrahim Khokhar<sup>1</sup>, Abdul Ghafoor<sup>2</sup> and Ihsan Ahmed<sup>3</sup>

<https://doi.org/10.62345/jads.2024.13.1.60>

## Abstract

*The 21st century's climate change has become an eminent threat to humanity, the cosmos and the earth. Homo sapiens, in their pursuit to achieve the quality of life, have conducted irreversible and irreparable damage to the habitat as the good environment of it. This study comprehensively and extensively analyses Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things (1997). She gives a detailed account of nature in her novel and describes nature in the present and past scenarios. The study will be based on the theoretical framework of ecocriticism (Garrad, 2004). The ecocritical theory explicitly looks into the relationship between literature and the physical environment in terms of their influence on each other (Glotfelty, 1996). This paper represents how Arundhati Roy has presented her concern for the environment, which human beings have mercilessly misused in the garb of civilization, development and modernization. It also highlights how the deteriorated and detrimental effect of human exploitation of nature directly affects the environment and living space.*

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism, Arundhati Roy, The God of Small Things, Environment and Living.

## Introduction

The study of literature and the environment from an interdisciplinary perspective, known as ecocriticism, brings together experts from several scientific fields to examine the environment and devise potential remedies to improve the current state of the environment.

Ecocriticism examines how humans and the natural environment interact in literature. Barry (2020) defines nature as a powerful force that shapes us and is vulnerable to our actions (p. 250). According to this view, ecocriticism examines how environmental issues, cultural beliefs about nature, and human behavior towards the environment are interconnected. A core aspect of ecocriticism is understanding human responses and interactions with the natural world.

Growing concerns about environmental damage and technological advancements have fueled interest in ecocriticism, a novel approach to analyzing literature. Ecocriticism, also known as "green studies," "ecopoetic," or "environmental literary criticism," offers a broad lens for reading, evaluating, and interpreting literary works, expanding the scope of literary theory and research.

Previous literary and cultural studies emphasized the importance of class, race, gender, and geography as standards and "subjects" for critical examination. The ecological disaster has emerged as a new concern in the late 20th century. The most significant environmental issues that humanity as a whole faces include nuclear war, the depletion of priceless natural resources, the

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Institute of English, Shah Abdul Latif University, Khairpur, Pakistan. Email: [mike@sahu.edu.pk](mailto:mike@sahu.edu.pk)

<sup>2</sup>MPhil Scholar, Department of English, Air University, Islamabad, Pakistan. Email: [aglashari2206@gmail.com](mailto:aglashari2206@gmail.com)

<sup>3</sup>Master in English Language Education, Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia.

Email: [ihsanahmedlaghari@gmail.com](mailto:ihsanahmedlaghari@gmail.com)



population explosion, the spread of technologies used for exploitation, the conquest of space before it is used as a landfill, and pollution and the extinction of species is not a human issue.

In light of this, literary and cultural theory has started to discuss the matter in scholarly studies. Around the world, a plethora of green movements have emerged, with some even managing to secure government participation.

In its current situation, the world is under the serious effects of what humans have done to the world for decades to make way for their standard of living. In their yearning to have a perfect life, withstand sophistication and be comfortable, they consciously and unconsciously defaced nature substantially. Every step to development, urbanization, and modernization has nonetheless largely damaged every component of nature. The present picture of the environment makes the world understand the bitter realities that are imminent ahead in these adverse climatic changes. Although all innovations and developments fostered human living conditions for betterment, they have an equal share of disadvantageous and adverse effects, specifically related to ecological issues. Environmental problems bring their way to many other related issues that greatly affect humanity. Through the ages, the medium of literature and writers have been equally vocal about nature and its prevalent role in our lives. Writing about ecology and nature is important for illustrating nature's beauty, highlighting its importance, and telling stories about how these elements contribute to human well-being. According to Stewart (1995), nature writing, when done thoughtfully, challenges the idea of a separation between humans and nature, both biologically and culturally. Disciplines like ecology further reinforce this concept.

Westling (2013) argues that Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), which exposed the dangers of pesticides, played a crucial role in the rise of both the environmental movement and ecocriticism as a literary theory. Barry (2020) pinpoints the late 1970s as the emergence of ecocriticism, tracing its roots to meetings of the western literature association, a group focused on American western literature (p. 48). Ruckert (1996) may have first used the term "ecocriticism" in his paper, and it became the basis of advocating the school of thought dealing with human nature relationships.

Garrard (2014) highlights a key feature of ecocriticism: its unique link to the science of ecology (p. 120). He argues that, at its broadest, ecocriticism delves into the historical relationship between humans and the natural world, even questioning the very definition of "human" (Garrard, 2014). This focus on human-nature connections aligns with Bandyopadhyay's (2011) view of ecocriticism's role. He emphasizes the responsibility it places on literary scholars to address the critical environmental challenges of our time.

### **Research Objectives**

The present research attempts to investigate how Arundhati Roy has articulated her apprehensions for nature, which is subsequently deteriorated by humans in the name of development, civilization and urbanization and how the adverse effects of nature's exploitation directly affect living space. This paper also analyses how the selected work of Arundhati Roy's 'The God of Small Things' comes under the framework of ecocriticism in literary theory.

### **Research Questions**

1. What is the overall merit of Arundhati Roy's novel 'The God of Small Things' regarding present ecological issues?
2. How are real issues of ecology subtly presented in the text?
3. What are the ecocritical elements in the novel?

## Literature Review

This literature review carefully summarizes and analyzes earlier works relevant to the particular topic being studied in this paper. By examining past research, a literature review establishes the context for your current investigation (Jalbani et al., 2023; Amin et al., 2023). The literature review acts as a map, charting the existing research on the specific theme (Maitlo et al., 2023; Maitlo et al., 2024). It provides a thorough overview of this research's existing body of literature to identify important trends, insights, and knowledge gaps related to this study topic.

Anand (2005) deftly examines the ecological aspect of this Indian literature in the setting of Kerala, India. Anand explores the issues of environmental exploitation and consequences portrayed in the novel and Roy's skillful use of vivid ecological imagery to "elicit sensory sensations and express deeper ecological implications" through ecocritical analysis (Anand, 2005). Anand's analysis of Kerala's cultural and social contexts reveals the complex relationship between environmental concerns, social justice, and identity. Mukherjee (2010) emphasizes the value of literature in raising environmental awareness and provoking critical thought about the ecological issues facing modern society by highlighting the narrative techniques used by Roy to convey ecological allegory. This makes the study a pertinent and wise addition to ecocriticism.

Abro et al. (2024) offer an engaging Althusserian analysis of the repressive state apparatuses (RSAs) and ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) in Roy's work. By applying Althusser's theoretical framework, the writers provide a sophisticated analysis of the novel's portrayal of social class ideas and their contestation. Their research contributes to broader literature conversations on power, ideology, and resistance by illuminating how characters negotiate and challenge dominant class hierarchies. This approach deepens comprehension of Roy's work and shows how applicable it is to challenging societal structures and promoting social change.

Chae (2015) extensively analyses the ecofeminist themes in Roy's widely read novel. Chae examines Roy's depiction of the relationship between gender, environment, and colonialism in Kerala, India, using a postcolonial perspective. The article sheds emphasis on the intersections between patriarchy, capitalism, and environmental destruction by highlighting how the novel's protagonists traverse various oppressive and exploitative institutions. Chae's work contributes to larger conversations within ecofeminist and postcolonial scholarship by providing insightful analysis of Roy's ecofeminist critique of power relations and colonial legacies. The understanding of ecofeminist literature and its implications for social transformation and environmental justice has greatly benefited from this work. Additionally, Khokhar and Mashori (2018) extensively analyzed the different narratives of this perspective.

Lourdusamy (2024) explained the ecofeminist themes in Roy's *The God of Small Things*. The study analyzes how characters in the book deal with environmental exploitation and degradation while navigating and resisting patriarchal hierarchies, drawing on ecofeminist theory. Their research highlights the critical need for gender and environmental justice and Roy's sophisticated critique of interlocking oppressive structures.

The literature review offers clarity and provides a greater grasp of the theoretical and empirical foundations supporting the current investigation through the systematic organization and analysis of sources. Moreover, this study intends to address a large gap in the existing research literature through an in-depth analysis of environmental components within the current ecological context.

## Research Paradigm and Theoretical Framework

The interpretivist research paradigm is chosen because it strongly emphasizes comprehending and interpreting the subjective experiences, meanings, and perspectives connected to the intersection

of ecology and environmental themes. Ecological theories can be applied to this study to enhance comprehension of this selected novel, *The God of Small Things*. With a focus on ecocritical elements, the study adds to the rich body of ecological theories already in existence, such as Ecocriticism, as advanced by Garrad (2004), which will be the basis for this researcher's study and interpretation.

## Analysis and Discussion

### Ecocritical Elements in Arundhati Roy's 'The God of Small Things'

Human miseries, sufferings, and tragedies cannot be ostracized, so as the environmental effects, humans and the environment are perpetually dependent on each other. As an environmentally committed Arundhati Roy gravely extends her serious apprehensions for nature. Her literature, be it fictional or non-fictional, is the loudest cry of past and present conditions of nature. In *The God of Small Things*, Roy incorporates the subject matter of the environment. She has extensively presented the problems of the environment, which are nonetheless disregarded in our society. She strikingly depicts how modern man exploited nature and the biosphere in the name of modernization and urbanization. Roy, with artistic skills, presents that nature is subjected to the speechless victim of the inordinate greed of humans.

The *God of Small Things* opens with a vivid portrayal of Ayemenem in May. Arundhati Roy's evocative language paints a picture of the changing seasons and the vibrant natural world. We see the "river shrink" and "black crows gorging on bright mangoes in still dust green trees" (Roy, 1997, p. 5).

### The River

The river is always associated with civilization; men end their vagrant lives when they settle beside river banks. It is the life-sustaining element on earth. When Rahel and Estha went to receive Chacko's former wife, they stayed in a hotel, and while sleeping, they dreamt of 'the river'. The river was in full bloom, abounding with fish. The river is so deep that everything by it is reflected in it, but the current deteriorative condition of the river is so remorseful, that Roy writes, "The river has a sick appearance", and she adds, "It had shrunk" (Roy, 1997, p, 124). Thus, the rains cannot revamp it and bring back life to the river. Roy aptly stresses the terrible effects of pollution by mentioning that people and big corporate companies pollute the environment. So, other environmental factors are too polluted if the river is polluted.

In Arundhati Roy's "The God of Small Things," the Meenachal river is in Estha and Rahel's memories. Their childhood dreams were often filled with images of this river. "It was warm, the water. Graygreen. Like rippled silk. With fish in it. With the sky and trees in it. And at night, the broken yellow moon in it" (Roy, 1997, p. 123).

Upon returning home after twenty-three years, Rahel finds the Meenachal river vastly changed. Once a powerful presence, it resembles "a ghastly skull's smile" – a mere trickle choked with weeds (Roy, 1997, p. 126). The life-giving rain of June offers no relief; the water is a "thin ribbon" polluted with garbage and smelling of "shit and pesticides" (Roy, 1997, p. 13). Estha confirms the devastation, witnessing diseased fish and the river's reduced state to a sluggish waste carrier. Once a source of awe and fear, the river is now a symbol of environmental degradation.

The text blames pollution for the Meenachal river's decline, with sources like raw sewage from riverside slums and "unadulterated factory effluent" contaminating the water (Roy, 1997, p. 125). This is unsurprising, as Estha mentions the overpowering stench of sewage during the summer. The environmental damage extends beyond the river. Ayemenem, once known for its idyllic

charm, has transformed into a crowded town. Now, Estha observes the jarring presence of "gulf-money houses," symbols of wealth that disrupt the previous tranquility.

Aravind's ancestral home, "history house," has been transformed into a luxury hotel named "Heritage," catering to tourists with brochures of Kerala's natural beauty. However, this facade masks a harsh reality. The "thick and toxic" river water and the slum hidden behind a wall belie the idyllic image (Roy, 1997, p. 126). Even the stench of pollution proves difficult to conceal. These scattered glimpses paint a grim picture of environmental degradation caused by human indifference towards nature and the relentless pursuit of wealth.

### **Technology as a Distraction From Nature**

When technology enters people's lives, they subsequently tend to neglect nature. The character of baby Kochamma, the aunt of Ammu, was very involved in gardening and nature earlier. She possessed expertise in gardening and had a diploma in gardening. Roy writes about baby Kochamma's garden. "At each corner of the pool lolled a pink plaster-of-Paris gnome with rosy cheeks and a peaked red cap" (Roy, 1997, p. 26).

But later, baby Kochamma lost her interest in gardening when 'Satellite TV' entered her life; it was a 'new love' to her, and she utterly shunned her 'lotus bloomed' garden. In this way, Roy contextualizes our society metaphorically that when technology plunged into our lives, we abandoned our proximity to nature.

### **Rapid Escalation of Population and Man's Relationship with Nature**

Rapid population growth and economic prosperity drive the conversion of farmland and natural spaces into urban sprawl. This expansion, as Roy illustrates with the "gulf-money houses" built by migrant workers (Roy, 1997, p. 13), comes at a cost to the environment. Increased urbanization translates to fewer trees and more air pollution, ultimately harming human health. Even in a seemingly idyllic village like Ayemenem, Roy describes a surge in development, with houses "mushroomed" and the population booming (Roy, 1997, p. 128). This is a stark reminder that population pressure is a universal challenge, even impacting rural areas. The population density being compared to that of a town also highlights the extent of human habitation and its effects on the environment, such as increased resource consumption, habitat degradation, and ecological disruption. It highlights the connection between the dynamics of the human population and environmental deterioration, encouraging critical thought about the necessity of sustainable practices and conscientious resource management.

The novel explores the relationship between humans and nature, a central theme in Ecocriticism. Each character interacts with the natural world differently. Velutha, despite his humble background, possesses remarkable craftsmanship. As a child, he crafted intricate toys from natural materials (Roy, 1997, p. 74) and later became a skilled carpenter. The Iype family values his talent at Ayemenem's house. Roy emphasizes Velutha's connection to nature through his birthmark, described as "a light brown birthmark, shaped like a pointed dry leaf" (Roy, 1997, p. 73). Velutha even believes it influences the monsoons. However, his talent is restricted to manual labor, highlighting a social disparity.

The character finds solace in nature when conflict arises at home. He lives a simple life, "catching fish in the river and cooking it on an open fire" and sleeping outdoors (Roy, 1997, p. 77). This comfort in nature allows him to adapt to homelessness, turning the Meenachal riverbank into his temporary dwelling.

### Animals' Plight and Ecology

Roy's evocative descriptions frequently highlight how vulnerable animals are to human actions like pollution, deforestation, and industrialization. As an illustration of the negative effects of human interference on ecological balance, consider how wildlife's lives are disrupted by the loss of rivers and the intrusion of urban development into natural ecosystems. Roy is equally vocal about animals. In the catastrophic effects of modernization, animals are the most vulnerable entities. In the novel, this aspect of animals' plight is presented. After receiving the Kochamma and Sophie Mol, the family comes to see a dead elephant. "Near Ettumanoor they passed a dead temple elephant, electrocuted by a high-tension wire that had fallen on the road" (Roy, 1997, p. 83).

She integrates irony of the irony that human carelessness towards animals is out of the question in our society. Care for human beings is highly taken, but the animals are neglected. Generally, the wires are not laid near residential areas, but they are for the facilities of human beings, and the lives of animals are at stake. This shows how, in times of modernization, the safety of animals is apparently ignored, and their lives are at the threshold in the hands of heedless society.

### Conclusion

Roy (1997) besides social, political and cultural issues, is equally aware of the environmental problems. Her deep concern for nature is aptly present in her work. Roy exhibited nature, including rivers, trees, mountains, and animals. Through her novel, she tries to make people aware of ecological problems. How are the environment and our living conditions mutually connected? She tries to make the readers realize the impact of the damage caused to the environment. She presented the plight of animals, rivers, the environment and the biosphere very picturesquely.

The uncalled intervention of humans into the established environment of nature has caused unfathomable damage to the ecology overall. Thus, the writer has implied in the text that it is the need of the hour to realize the pertinent threat of climate change. It is the collective responsibility of the global inhabitants to conserve our ecology and save the future for coming generations.

Arundhati Roy's novel delves into environmental and social critiques. She criticizes development approaches that overlook ecological concerns and the impact of human domination over nature. By weaving solutions and highlighting the consequences of environmental degradation, Roy aims to raise global awareness and inspire eco-conscious action. Her core message, delivered through a captivating narrative, is to urge the public to acknowledge the urgency of environmental issues for the well-being of all life on earth.

### References

- Abro, B. A., Khokhar, M. I., & Shaheen, R. (2024). Reading Ideology of Classism: Althusserian Analysis of ISAs and RSAs in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. *Journal of Arts and Linguistics Studies*, 2(1), 53-70.
- Amin, S., Farhat, P. A., Maitlo, S. K., & Soomro, A. R. (2023). Transformation of Creative Process Through Self-Translation: A Comparative Analysis of Abdullah Hussain's Novels. *Pakistan Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 11(3), 3469-3478.
- Anand, D. (2005). Inhabiting the Space of Literature: An Ecocritical Study of Arundhati Roy's "God of Small Things" and OV Vijayan's "The Legends of Khasak". *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 12(2), 95-108.
- Bandyopadhyay, D. (2011). *Arundhati Roy: Environment and Literary Activism*. Institute of Development Studies.

- Barry, P. (2020). *Beginning theory: An introduction to literary and cultural theory* (4th edition). Manchester university press.
- Carson, R. (1962). *Silent Spring*. Houghton Mifflin
- Chae, Y. (2015). Postcolonial ecofeminism in Arundhati Roy's the God of small things. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 51(5), 519-530.
- Garrard, G. (2004). *Ecocriticism*. Routledge.
- Garrard, G. (2014). *The Oxford handbook of ecocriticism*. Oxford University Press.
- Glotfelty, C. (1996). Introduction: Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis. In C. Glotfelty & H. Fromm (Eds.), *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (pp.18-25). University of Georgia Press.
- Jalbani, A. N., Ahmad, A., & Maitlo, S. K. (2023). A Comparative Study to Evaluate ESL Learners' Proficiency and Attitudes towards English Language. *Global Language Review*, VIII, 446-455.
- Khokhar, M. I., & Mashori, G. M. (2018). Marxist Analysis of to Kill A Mockingbird According to Peter Barry. *Grassroots*, 52(2), 179-191.
- Lourdusamy, P. (2024). An ecofeminist reading of Arundhathi Roy's The God of Small Things. *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities*, 4(11), 302-311.
- Maitlo, S. K., Shah, S. A. A., & Ahmed, A. (2024). Use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) In Teaching English as a Second Language (ESL). *Journal of Arts and Linguistics Studies*, 2(1), 1-26.
- Maitlo, S. K., Soomro, A. R., & Lashari, A. A. (2023). The Impact of Picture Series Learning on the Creative Writing Skills of ESL Learners. *Global Digital & Print Media Review*, VI, 211-223.
- Mukherjee, U. P. (2010). Arundhati Roy: Environment and Uneven Form. In B. Roos & A. Hunt (Eds.), *Postcolonial Green: Environmental Politics and World Narratives* (pp. 17-31). University of Virginia Press.
- Roy, A. (1997). *The God of Small Things*. Harper Collins.
- Rueckert, W. (1996). Literature and ecology: An experiment in ecocriticism. In C. Glotfelty & H. Fromm (Eds.), *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (p. 108). University of Georgia Press.
- Stewart, F. (1994). *A natural history of nature writing*. Island Press.
- Westling, L. (2013). *The Cambridge companion to Literature and the Environment*. Cambridge University press.