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### Ecocriticism and the Non-Human in The God of Small Things: A Study of Environmental Memory and River Symbolism

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#### Abstract

*This paper examines Arundhati Roy's portrayal of the god of small things through the perspective of ecocriticism, with a specific focus on the symbolic and narrative importance of the natural environment, particularly the Meenachal River. While the novel has been extensively analyzed for its postcolonial, feminist, and sociopolitical themes, this study shifts the focus to the non-human elements that shape and reflect the emotional and psychological landscape of the characters. By analyzing how the river and its surrounding environment serve as conduits for memory, trauma, and resilience, the paper contends that nature in the novel is not a mere backdrop but an active participant in the unfolding of human history and the endurance of suffering. The study also integrates post humanist perspectives to emphasize how non-human entities, such as rivers, decay, insects, and weather, disrupt human-centric narratives and enhance the novel's critique of environmental deterioration and cultural decay. Through their research, the authors not only highlight the environmental awareness present in the story but also suggest a more comprehensive understanding of ecological memory and the interdependence of human and non-human beings.*

**Keywords:** *Ecocriticism, Non-Human Agency, Environmental Memory, River Symbolism, Postcolonial Ecology*

#### Introduction

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is often explored through its socio-political and postcolonial themes. However, its rich environmental setting especially the Meenachal River and the presence of non-human elements play a crucial symbolic and narrative role. This study proposes an Eco critical reading of the novel, focusing on how nature functions as memory, witness, and resistance in the face of human corruption, trauma, and cultural decay.

Arundhati Roy's debut novel, published in 1997, is considered a significant contribution to contemporary Indian English literature. The story takes place in the quaint town of Ayemenem in Kerala, India, and is told in a non-linear fashion, jumping between 1969 and the 1990s. It tells

the tragic story of fraternal twins estha and rahel, whose lives are profoundly shaped by a series of traumatic events stemming from rigid social structures, cultural taboos, and forbidden love. The narrative centers on the consequences of violating the oppressive "love laws" rules that determine "who should be loved, and how, and how much." their mother, ammu, engages in a socially condemned affair with velutha, an untouchable man, which ultimately leads to his brutal death and the unraveling of the family.

The book skillfully intertwines themes of caste discrimination, colonial influence, family issues, gender inequality, and political turmoil. Similarly, it is deeply connected to the physical and cultural landscape of Kerala, vividly depicting its abundant greenery, intense monsoons, and deteriorating colonial architecture. Roy's writing is poetic and vividly descriptive, imbuing the surroundings with deep emotional and symbolic significance. The natural world, particularly the Meenachal River, plays a significant role in the story, silently observing the characters' happiness, sorrows, and misfortunes. This significant presence of nature, along with the book's unique narrative style and its examination of established social structures, led to the book winning the Booker Prize in 1997. Since then, the god of small things has become a seminal text in postcolonial studies, feminist criticism, and trauma theory, though it's environmental dimensions are only recently receiving more scholarly attention making it a compelling subject for Eco critical exploration.

Ecocriticism is a field of study that analyzes the connection between literature and the natural world. In the 1990s, it emerged as a reaction to the increasing concern for the environment and the various ecological challenges faced during that time. Cheryl glotfelty, one of the pioneers of ecocriticism, defines it as 'the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment.' ecocriticism seeks to explore how texts represent nature, how they critique human interactions with the environment, and how they give voice to the non-human world. It challenges the human-centered perspective by examining the symbolic, ethical, and narrative value that landscapes, animals, plants, and ecological systems hold. By adopting this perspective, literature is not merely a representation of human issues but also a powerful tool that can foster ecological awareness and challenge environmental degradation.

In the realm of the god of small things, ecocriticism offers a potent lens to reinterpret the novel, transcending its conventional socio-political and postcolonial themes. The natural environment in the novel particularly the meenachal river, the lush Keralite landscape, the monsoon weather, and the slow decay of nature and colonial architecture is not merely a backdrop but an integral part of the emotional, cultural, and psychological life of the characters. The Meenachal River serves as a recurring symbol in the novel, representing both its aesthetic allure and its underlying moral decay. It is where love takes root, where secrets are concealed, and where death and memory intertwine. The gradual deterioration of the river reflects the moral and cultural decay of the society that surrounds it.

Additionally, Arundhati Roy imbues the novel with vivid sensory details descriptions of decay, heat, insects, rain, and vegetation which lend a tangible quality to the natural world. These non-human elements frequently reflect the characters' internal struggles and silently observe instances of trauma and transgression. From an Eco critical viewpoint, Roy's depiction of nature is intricately intertwined with political implications. It examines not only the issues of casteism,

patriarchy, and colonial remnants but also the environmental impact of modernization and human negligence. The change in Ayemenem from a lively, verdant village to a polluted, commercialized town highlights the novel's focus on environmental degradation and the disconnection of humans from their natural environment.

This research utilizes a qualitative and interpretive approach, drawing on Eco critical and post humanist theoretical frameworks. The research begins with a comprehensive review of existing scholarship on the god of small things, with a particular focus on identifying gaps related to the novel's environmental and non-human dimensions. Drawing on ecocriticism, which examines the interplay between literature and the natural environment, as well as post humanism, which decouples human-centric perspectives to acknowledge the agency of non-human entities, this study also incorporates the concept of environmental memory to explore nature as a site of historical and emotional significance. A close textual analysis of the novel is conducted, emphasizing representations of the Meenachal River, weather phenomena, landscapes, and other non-human agents such as insects and decay. These components are examined for their symbolic and thematic significance, especially in relation to memory, trauma, love, and the breakdown of social structures. Through this Eco critical reading, the study demonstrates how Roy employs the natural environment not merely as a backdrop but as an active narrative force that deepens the novel's exploration of cultural and ecological decay. The results contribute to a broader comprehension of the deity of the minuscule and enhance ongoing scholarly conversations in postcolonial ecocriticism and environmental humanities.

This research concentrates on the Eco critical examination of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, with a particular emphasis on the portrayal and symbolic meaning of the natural surroundings in the novel. The book delves into the interplay between the Meenachal River, the surrounding landscapes, weather patterns, and other non-human elements like insects and decay, and how they shape the story's underlying themes. The study focuses on examining the ecological aspects of the novel and how they relate to memory, trauma, and social critique, rather than providing a comprehensive analysis of all socio-political themes present in the text. While recognizing the novel's intricate connections with caste, gender, and postcolonial concerns, this study emphasizes the role of nature as an active participant, both reflecting and shaping human experiences. The focus of this study is limited to a qualitative analysis of the text, without incorporating empirical data or comparing it to other literary works. This concentrated effort intends to make a significant contribution to the understudied field of ecocriticism in Indian literature and postcolonial studies.

**Research questions:**

- i. How Arundhati Roy depicts the natural environment of Meenachal River in his work *God of small things*?
- ii. What role do non-human elements like insects, weather, and decay play in reflecting the emotional and cultural experiences of the characters?

**Research objectives:**

- i. To know how Arundhati Roy depicts the natural environment of Meenachal River in his work *God of small things*.

- ii. To find out the role of non-human elements like insects, weather, and decay in reflecting the emotional and cultural experiences of the characters.

**Literature review:**

This novel has been studied by many researchers with so many perspectives. Here I have studied it by eco criticism perspectives. Some of past researches conducted on this text are listed below. (Rana, 2022) States that 'The God of Small Things' is a literary masterpiece by Arundhati Roy that showcases her unique and unconventional writing style. With a wide range of literary techniques utilized through the non-sequential narrative and a careful selection of dialect that enhances the authenticity of the characters. Highlight the distinctions that existed among the different social groups of Kerala during the 1960s. There are significant. The novel includes features such as the use of non-standard English, which emphasizes dialect and variations in syntax and structure. The author's choice of words in the novel reflects the rich cultural and linguistic diversity of India, as seen in the characters and setting. There: Are there many and detailed picturesque descriptions of the environment presented through a variety of language techniques in. The novel, which is the essence of the novel and also vividly portrays the interplay between social and cultural aspects of the setting. Life in India while exploring the themes of caste, love, and power.

(Pandya, 2017) The research paper has been undertaken to investigate the fundamental principles of feminism in Arundhati. Roy's novel The God of Small Things. The paper attempts to examine the job of Arundhati. Roy, often referred to as the 'god of small things', is a prominent figure in the realm of 'feminine writing'. She has excelled and. Effectively demonstrated the predicament of women in Indian culture. Arundhati has embraced the issue. Feminism is a movement that aims to empower women in their pursuit of self-discovery and to achieve economic and social freedom. She is a woman. The characters in the novel the god of small things are portrayed as individuals rather than as characters with specific roles. Through this novel, she sheds light on some significant aspects of life, such as the concept of love. Is often associated with sadness, as a person's childhood experiences can greatly impact their development and behavior. Perspectives and whole life.

(Chhachhia, 2022) Arundhati Roy's debut novel, the god of small things, created a significant buzz and garnered attention. It was the winner. Awarded in 1997. The god of small things was the sole novel until the 2017 release of the. The Ministry of utmost happiness after twenty years. The novel 'The God of Small Things' delves into, as its title suggests. Shows, how seemingly insignificant events in our daily lives can have a profound impact on the lives of individuals. It also examines the dominant. The caste system in India, which has its origins in the minds of orthodox and traditional individuals, continues to influence society even today. Arundhati: 1. what are the implications of Roy's writings on social issues? In 1992, Arundhati Roy started writing the god of small things and completed it in 1996. When the novel is finished. Just before the publication, Roy was extremely confident in the novel's potential to become popular and successful. It registered immense. Sales worldwide. The book has been translated into approximately forty languages. In the initial phase, Roy made a visit. Around 80 cities worldwide were chosen to promote the book. Arundhati Roy expressed her dissatisfaction with the situation. Existing social norms and recorded her dissent against views and opinions that are

outdated, irrelevant, and no longer applicable. Unimportant for the current social structure. This book is a thought-provoking and realistic analysis of a society's dynamics. Double standard response towards different people based on their social status and power. The purpose of this article is to examine various issues, such as human exploitation and the ongoing struggle for justice. Women, who are often marginalized and silenced, are subjected to various forms of discrimination, including patriarchal systems, abusive childhood experiences, and other forms of oppression. Throughout this novel, Arundhati Roy skillfully weaves together all these themes, creating a beautifully crafted literary work. Narrative that presents society in its true color. The study focuses on individuals in society who have experienced victimization. Injustice, crimes, unfairness, and discrimination. She expresses her ideas and viewpoints in her book. It employs a subjective. The research methodology involved analyzing and gathering data using the textual analysis method.

(Sacksick, 2010) The question of borders, and how they are constantly blurred, lies at the heart of the god of small things, not only as regards the identity of the main characters and the social boundaries of castes, but also with respect to the novel's narrative pattern and Roy's creative experimentations with the English language. In the god of small things, the horizon can be apprehended as a boundary, a line separating the land and the sea from the sky, but also joining them, since it is the place where they seemingly meet. The horizon will be examined as a geometric line in its connection to both horizontality and verticality, as well as a boundary. Although the horizon is not physically present in the novel, it is metaphorically reinstated, and subsequently becomes a site for transgressions and creations, allowing language to break free and reinvent itself.

(Sk, 2016) Darkness engulfs the society in the world, whether it is physical darkness or mental darkness. People are enslaved by various vices, which corrupt the very essence of human nature. There are instances of oppression, lack of knowledge, exclusion, violence against marginalized groups, including children, youth, women, and untouchables. Roy, the deity of the little things, pays attention to the injustices of the society, such as the caste system, gender discrimination, and superstitions. It depicts extreme sufferings of ammu, velutha, rahel and estha, patriarchal domination of pappachi and chacko, domestic violence against mammachi and ammu, childhood exploitation, pain and sorrow of rahel and estha. It also sheds light on the challenging circumstances faced by individuals belonging to lower castes and untouchable communities. Paravans, a lower caste, untouchable, were not permitted to touch anything that touchable touched. They were compelled to remove their footprints so that they couldn't leave any marks or defile themselves. Velutha endured brutal torture at the hands of the upper-caste police inspector Thomas Mathew because he had developed feelings for a Syrian Christian woman named Ammu. Marxism, which advocates for a new world order, is gradually losing its influence in society. It became a tool of exploitation for Mr. Pillai, a Marxist. He not only took advantage of the labor of the Ayemenem but also the lower untouchables.

(Rawat, 2022) Human relationships are essential for individuals to have a companion and also to strengthen their own resolve. In the tempest of existence. Family is the foundation of a person, providing support and resilience during both the highs and lows of life. One's existence is incomplete without. If there is a lack of unity and empathy among family members, it will

inevitably lead to the disintegration of the family unit. This: The novel is rich in exploring the complexities of human relationships, particularly within a large and interconnected family. *God of Small Things* is a novel that revolves around an Ipe family and the dynamics of their relationships. Among the family members, caste and the political system of India. In this book, we encounter intricate relationships within the Ipe family. Members and dysfunctional families seized peace and happiness, leading them down a path towards darkness and despair. We also discover love laws. Those assigned by society or caste and gender discrimination are the main cause of destruction in the novel, as they play a significant role in shaping the story. The captivating characters in the book are the twins, who seem to be one person in two separate bodies. We observe hues of various. The book delves into various family dynamics, evoking both laughter and tears as we witness the characters' joys and sorrows. Roy's each. Each individual possesses a distinct character that narrates their own personal tales of sorrow.

(Alexandru, 2009) Aims to show that language performativity and performance (with direct references to the mythical traditions of Indian theatre) pervade Arundhati Roy's writing and that the kathakali scene in chapter 12 is pivotal to her novel *the god of small things*. In this context, the different types of exclusion observed in the novel are revealed as cultural practices of role-playing and performative language, which shape reality rather than merely describing it.

(Ranjith, 2024) The objective of this study is to critically analyze the human-nature relationship in Arunachal Pradesh's environment, as depicted in Arunachal Roy's novel, *The God of small things* is written to make readers more aware of the importance of the small things in life relationship: The main source of information is the text that the god of small things. Internet is the origin for scholarly sources and academic papers. The existing research serves as the foundation for qualitative research. This paper aims to examine the connection between individuals and their surroundings, increasing readers' awareness of this relationship in order to enhance the environment and foster harmony, it is crucial to nurture the relationship between the two Livings in harmony with the environment.

(Shrivastwa, 2024) Aims at analyzing the contours of sexuality, obscenity and incest in Arundhati Roy's debut novel, *the god of small things* to mark how the novelist deconstructs the naturalized and normalized social, ethical, and cultural values in the Indian society. The illicit relationship between the central character of the novel and a divorced woman, ammu and the servant of her family, velutha, the incest between estha and rahel, an incident where an old man forces estha to masturbate, and the sensual affair of baby kochamma with father mulligan are some of the highly charged obscene details in the novel that invite a keen rationale for the research. The research utilizes the theoretical framework of psychoanalysis and radical feminism that deal with sexuality, feminine sexuality, and sibling incest to observe Roy's motive for emphasizing on pornographic drives. Both Freudian psychoanalysts and radical feminists deal with the sex overtly taking it as the basic human instinct. The research finding is that Roy emphasizes the graphic description of sexual acts among members of family and different castes to cherish beauty found in 'small things', to mystify the mundane, to examine the issues of unethical sex in revolutionary south-Asian societies. It is expected that people interested in researching libidinal issues in Roy in particular, and south-Asian literature in general, can take the paper as a reference.

(R. Krishnaveni, 2014) This paper deals with Postcolonial issue and the intersection of different discourses of marginality such as feminism, caste segregation and untouchability. The main theme is how the untouchable along with the woman as a subaltern are facing various problems by the higher class and to bring the awareness of caste system in the society. It reveals a widowed woman is rendered destitute by everyone in the society. It finds colonial heritage, local realism, cultural complex and identity. It also implies that people get severe punishment for their transgression. It might reflect the possibility of radical political and social change.

(Kumar, 2020) Arundhati Roy's Booker Prize renowned novel deals with the ravages of caste system in South Indian state, Kerala. Roy portrays both the sad predicament of untouchables and also the struggle of a woman trying to have accomplishment in life in a patriarchal society. Velutha transgresses the established norms of society by having an affair with a woman of high caste. The final upshot of this love affair is the tragic death of an "Untouchable" by the "Touchable Boots" of the state police, an event that makes a mockery of the idea of God is no more in control of "small things" rather the small things have a crucial power over God, turning him to "The God of loss"

(Afzal, 2022) Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* is a political manuscript which conveys Marxist approach and throws the light on the fact that the Indian society is so much primitive that there is still the caste system in it. There is class struggle in the society and on the base of the resources the society has been divided in two main groups; bourgeoisie and proletariat. Bourgeoisie is the upper class of society that creates an ideology for the benefits of its own and tries to exploit the lower class for its own benefits. At the same time there have been given so many suggestions to improve the present state of affairs. However, the study argues about the communism, its impacts, false ideology of the bourgeoisie, exploitation of the lower class by the upper class, feminist perspective and the colonial impacts and mainly the Marxist thoughts. In the same way to novel also illustrates the view point of writer that how the Indian society should be. This study is qualitative in approach with Marxist theoretical perspective in the background of Indian society. The study is delimited to the text of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* by using Karl Marx approach towards society.

#### **Research gap:**

By analyzing all of the above researches mentioned in the literature review section, a research gap can easily be seen that no one had worked on specifically Ecocriticism perspectives of the novel *The God small things*. So, I have tried to cover all the aspects so that the researchers and the students who want to study this work can be able to get a deep insight of this novel by Arundhati Roy.

#### **Methodology**

##### **Research design:**

The research adopts a qualitative design based on literary analysis, focusing on the Eco critical interpretation of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. This design is appropriate for exploring the symbolic and thematic roles of nature and non-human elements within the narrative.

##### **Data collection:**

The data for this research is collected through close textual analysis of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. The primary source is the novel itself, from which selected passages are examined for their environmental descriptions, symbolic use of natural elements, and references to ecological decay and non-human presence. These excerpts serve as the core textual data for analysis. Additionally, secondary data is collected from scholarly books, journal articles, and critical essays on ecocriticism, post humanism, and postcolonial theory, which help support and contextualize the interpretations made in this study.

**Data analysis:**

The data analysis in this study is conducted using a thematic and interpretive approach, grounded in Eco critical and post humanist frameworks. Selected passages from *The God of Small Things* are analyzed for recurring images, metaphors, and descriptions of the natural environment particularly the Meenachal River, weather patterns, landscapes, and non-human elements such as insects and decay. These elements are examined in relation to key themes such as memory, trauma, resistance, and social decay. The analysis focuses on how nature functions not merely as a backdrop but as an active narrative force that reflects and interacts with the emotional and cultural experiences of the characters. The study also identifies how environmental imagery aligns with the novel's critique of casteism, colonial legacy, and patriarchal control. Relevant theoretical concepts from ecocriticism and post humanism are applied to interpret the symbolic roles of the non-human world, revealing how the novel challenges anthropocentric perspectives and gives agency to nature. By synthesizing textual evidence with theoretical insights, the analysis aims to construct a deeper understanding of the novel's environmental dimensions.

**Textual analysis:**

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is rich with environmental imagery and symbolic use of nature that reflects both individual trauma and broader social decay. A central focus of this analysis is the Meenachal River, which plays a vital symbolic role in the novel. Initially, the river is described with lyrical beauty: "The River shrinks and black crows gorge on bright mangoes in still, dust green trees." This natural imagery paints an idyllic landscape that mirrors the innocence of childhood. However, as the novel unfolds, the river becomes a site of contamination and death, symbolizing the disintegration of both ecological balance and human values. The place where Sophie Mol drowns becomes a site of permanent emotional and ecological trauma linking nature to memory and loss.

The transformation of the landscape in Ayemenem over time reflects the novel's theme of cultural and environmental decline. Where once "the countryside teemed with the sounds of crickets and the rustle of coconut palms," it is later replaced by "sludge" and "industrial waste." This decay is not only physical but deeply symbolic; the polluted river serves as a metaphor for a society corrupted by casteism, patriarchy, and the remnants of colonial rule. Through this lens, the river is no longer a passive backdrop but a silent witness to generational trauma and forbidden love especially in the relationship between Ammu and Velutha, which transgresses caste boundaries and ends in tragedy.

Roy also imbues non-human elements such as insects, rot, rain, and vegetation with narrative significance. For example, scenes often begin with the description of moldy air, sour smells, and



the slow encroachment of decay. The “smell of old roses and urine” in the Ayemenem house evokes not just physical neglect but emotional stagnation. In Eco critical terms, these details assign agency to the environment, suggesting that nature responds to human suffering. The monsoon, a recurring presence, acts as a natural force that both nurtures and overwhelms, symbolizing emotional turbulence and transformation.

A poignant example of environmental memory is how Rahel and Estha remember their childhood through sensory experiences of place through the smell of rain, the texture of mud, or the sound of the river. These memories are stored not just in the mind but in the landscape itself. The natural world, therefore, becomes an archive of trauma and lost innocence. In this way, Roy challenges anthropocentric narratives by suggesting that landscapes hold and transmit memory, much like human characters do.

Finally, from a post humanist perspective, the novel disrupts traditional human-centered storytelling by granting the environment an active role in shaping emotional and narrative outcomes. The Meenachal River, for instance, does not merely reflect what has happened it participates in the novel’s climactic moments, including Sophie Mol’s drowning and the lovers’ secret meetings. Nature is not silent; it is deeply entwined with every act of love, shame, resistance, and punishment.

### **Conclusions**

This research has revealed that *The God of Small Things* is not only a deeply personal and political novel but also a profoundly ecological one. Through an Eco critical lens, Arundhati Roy’s portrayal of the natural environment especially the Meenachal River emerges as central to the novel’s thematic structure. The river, once a symbol of childhood freedom and natural beauty, transforms into a site of death, decay, and emotional trauma, reflecting the collapse of innocence and the corruption of societal values. Roy’s depiction of environmental degradation in Ayemenem parallels the breakdown of human relationships, particularly those strained by caste, gender, and colonial legacies. Nature in the novel is not simply a backdrop but an active presence a repository of memory, a silent witness to injustice, and at times, a participant in the emotional and social lives of the characters.

The analysis also highlights the role of non-human agents such as insects, rot, monsoons, and vegetation as carriers of symbolic meaning. These elements reflect the psychological conditions of the characters and emphasize the interconnectedness between the human and non-human world. Through her richly layered environmental imagery, Roy challenges anthropocentric narratives and gives voice to a landscape scarred by both ecological and emotional violence. By recognizing the agency of nature and its capacity to store and transmit memory, the novel invites readers to rethink their relationship with the environment, especially in postcolonial contexts where cultural trauma and ecological damage are deeply entwined.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing body of postcolonial ecocriticism by offering a nuanced reading of Roy’s novel that situates nature as a vital force within both the narrative and the ideological fabric of the text. It demonstrates that literature can serve as a powerful medium for exploring the deep entanglement between environment, history, and human emotion.

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