

An Ecocritical Perspective of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

SAGE Open
April-June 2017: 1–6
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DOI: 10.1177/2158244017712767
journals.sagepub.com/home/sgo


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Abstract

This study is an ecofeminist reading of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* focusing on how the novelist utilizes various techniques signaling modes of revolt of Nature in terms of the muted group theory and backchannel communication motifs. The novelist also apostrophizes Nature to blur dialectical pairs. Cartesian dualism is extended to the culture/nature dichotomy. Roy encompasses the subaltern of the human race within the downtrodden, the predominant being the image of woman imprisoned in the presets of immanence. On another level, the author refers to animals and plants that required a voice that told the story of Nature or of innate instinct through the medium of human beings: an inverted form of apologies where the story of humans was told through animals. Symbiotic relationships of nature gather strength as they are foregrounded by Roy through relations of metaphor and metonymy exhibiting underlying principles of kinship. The survival instinct of the female characters is delineated through the language of ecology and emblemizes the dismantling of boundaries in the culture/nature dialectical pair.

Keywords

Asia, area studies, humanities, cultural anthropology, anthropology, social sciences, race/gender, arts and humanities, curriculum, education, gender/sexuality and politics, intersectional politics, literature

The popularity of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* rests in manifold possibilities for interpretations of the novel as a polysemic text. This article is an ecofeminist reading of the novel with special focus on how the novelist utilizes various techniques reflecting modes of revolt of Nature in terms of the muted group theory and backchannel communication motifs. Another strategy utilized by the novelist is to apostrophize Nature and even the Earth at various instances with a view to communicate the pathos to the readers and dismantle dichotomies. Ammu stands analogous to the river that functions as a microcosm of the ecosystem. The survival instinct of female characters against patriarchy is outlined in the language of ecology, in a stance that emblemizes the dismantling of boundaries in the culture/nature dialectical pair. Roy encompasses the subaltern of the human race within the downtrodden, the predominant being the image of woman imprisoned in the presets of immanence, as the boundaries of civilization correspond to the constraints imposed by man on woman. Cartesian dualism is extended to the culture/nature dialectical pair. On another plane, the author refers to animals and plants that required a voice that told the story of Nature or of innate instinct through the medium of human beings: an inverted form of apologies where the story of humans was told through animals. Symbiotic relationships of nature gather strength as they are foregrounded by Roy through relations of metaphor and metonymy exhibiting underlying principles of kinship.

Concerns pertaining to ecofeminism are underscored in the novel, as the subjugation of women and the degradation of Nature function on a parallel plane. Ecofeminism, as a theory, has been widely advanced as one which argues that “the current global environmental crisis is a predictable outcome of patriarchal culture” (Salleh, 1988, p. 138). On a broader scale, the theory emphasizes the importance of interrelationships between humans and the natural environment (animals, plants, and the earth), and is now viewed in a larger perspective as a movement working against the interconnected oppressions of gender, race, class, and nature. In a bearing that blurs all these demarcations, the river in the novel stands as an eloquent metaphor for Ammu in its uncharted potential, potential undercurrents and its dormancy. In “The Power and the Promise of Ecological Feminism,” Karen J. Warren (1990) ascertains that any feminism, environmentalism, or environmental philosophy that fails to recognize important women–nature connections is simply inadequate. Although the word *river* is of neuter

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gender in the English language, it has always been attributed with feminine qualities in India, owing to its features of sustenance, creativity, and fertility. The motif appears to subvert the notion of man being the sole creator in the image of the transcendent God as signified by the creative pen–penis. The kinetic principle of the river stands for the fluidity and multiple possibilities inherent in the female genitalia as postulated by Luce Irigaray.

Numerous instances are cited by the novelist that illustrate the association between Ammu and the river. After the death of Ammu, the novelist asserts,

You couldn't see the river from the window anymore. You could, until Mammachi had the back verandah closed in with Ayemenem's first sliding-folding door. Though you couldn't see the river from the house anymore, like a seashell always has a sea-sense, the Ayemenem house still had a river-sense. (Roy, 1997, p. 31)

The wild instincts Ammu inherited from her ancestors thrived in the genes and are transmitted to Rahel. Aleyootty Amma found it difficult to abandon the river, the author says. "Through the holes in her ears, you could see the hot river and the dark trees that bent to it" (Roy, 1997, p. 30). Even the vehicle they owned, the Plymouth, is characteristic of a fish. There are more evidences to demonstrate the river to be a metaphor of Ammu, the wronged woman:

The river was no more than a swollen drain now. (p. 124)

It was choked with a succulent weed, whose furred brown roots waved like thin tentacles under water. Bronze winged lily-trotters walked across it splay-footed, cautious. (p. 124)

So now they two harvests a year instead of one. More rice for the price of a river. (p. 44)

Many years later as Rahel encounters the river, she is reminded of how Ammu was choked to death by the callous patriarchal society:

Both things had happened. It had shrunk and she had grown. (p. 124)

Symbiotic relationships are underscored by Roy through the motifs of metaphor and metonymy thereby revealing underlying principles of kinship. Ecofeminist practice is necessarily antihierarchical. It preaches that life on earth is an interconnected web, not a hierarchy. There is no natural hierarchy; human hierarchy is projected on to nature and then used to justify social domination (King quoted in Vakoch, 2011). In the novel, the twins' relationship with their mother and the river functions on a parallel plane as Ammu poses as the river, and the twins as frogs. Ammu's reference to the twins as frogs is significant, as frogs have semipermeable skin rendering frogs susceptible to dehydration, which is

why they either live in moist places or have special adaptations to deal with dry habitats. Just as the twins in spite of their vulnerability, adapted to circumstances to live without Ammu (the river). Noteworthy is that soon after the Orangedrink man episode, Estha longs for the river, as instinctively as he would crave for maternal protection. The river–women connection is also pronounced in the manner Roy likens Ammu to a river during the Velutha–Ammu union. Roy claims, "She was as wide and deep as a river in spate. He sailed on her waters" (Roy, 1997, p. 337). Nature as a pleasure-giver as well as a nurturer is clearly foregrounded in these images. The river is so close to the twins' hearts that they simultaneously dream of "their river" (p. 122), as they sleep cuddled together at Hotel Sea Queen. The experience serves as a nostalgic reminiscence of swimming together through "their mother's cunt" (Roy, 1997, p. 93) during their prenatal existence. The children's familiarity with the river and closeness to it is clearly evinced by Roy: "They knew the afternoon weed that flowed inwards from the backwaters of Komarakom. They knew the smaller fish" and it is here that they study "Silence (like the children of the Fisher Peoples), and learn(ed) the bright language of dragonflies" (Roy, 1997, p. 203). Thus, the river, on another level, serves as a surrogate mother to the twins, feeding them and teaching them.

The river motif also comes across as a microcosm of the ecosystem in Roy's works that reflects other components of the natural environment—the moon, the skies, and the trees. Ecofeminism is conceptualized as a sisterly bond, a fundamental rejection of all forms of domination, whose necessary goal is diversity rather than dualism (Vance, 1993). The river that once reflected the whole of Nature in its diversity and immaculate beauty is now a dismal picture, and is said to be

a slow sludging green ribbon lawn that ferried fetid garbage to the sea. Many years later as Rahel returns, she finds the river welcoming her with a 'ghastly skull's smile, with holes where teeth had been, and a limp hand raised from a hospital bed.' The spiritual essence endowed to the rivers is substituted with a sense of nihilism. Bright plastic bags blew across its viscous, weedy surface like sub-tropical flying flowers. (p. 124)

The fluidity of the river seems to be curtailed and its limpidness adulterated. Elsewhere the river is described to have "smelled of shit, and pesticides bought with World Bank loans" (p. 13). This concern for the river and the dispossessed is later seen to mark her works of nonfiction where her commitment to the River Narmada and its people are discussed in detail. Prof. I. Shanmugha Das (2011), a noted Indian critic, states how Arundhati Roy started her march toward the Narmada mission from the banks of another river in Kerala, the Chaliyar that has also been subjected to pollution by the effluents from Gwalior Ryons (p. 24). He ascertains that her clarion call to save Narmada is perhaps her plea to save the Meenachal of her childhood from succumbing to the

venomous pollution spewed out by the developmental process (Das quoted in Kunhi, 2014, p. 151). In her essay, “The Greater Common Good,” Roy (2002b) foregrounds the harm caused by Big Dams on rivers, “Ecologically, they’re in the doghouse. They lay the earth to waste. They cause floods, water-logging, salinity, they spread disease. There is mounting evidence that links Big Dams to earthquakes” (pp. 57-58).

The survival instinct of other female characters against patriarchy is delineated through the medium of ecology that serves to efface boundaries in the culture/nature dichotomy. Gruen places dichotomies against the background of feminist and animal liberation theories and suggests that these traditional views promote and perpetuate unnecessary and unsustainable dichotomies (between nature and culture, between reason and emotion). She underscores that ecofeminist theory can provide an alternative, inclusive framework for liberation struggles. (Gruen, 1993, p. 7), from a linear, fragmented, and detached mind-set to a more direct, holistic appreciation of subjective knowing (Gruen, 1993, p. 61). Margaret Kochamma’s affinity toward Chacko is expressed in terms of the phenomenon of phototropism, as “she found herself drawn towards him like a plant in a dark room towards a wedge of light” (Roy, 1997, p. 248), while the phenomenon of Etiolation would be more apt as comparison in this regard. Chacko tells Rahel and Estha that Ammu had no *Locusts Stand I* with reference to her lack of share in the inheritance, as she is likened to the gregarious nomadic-like locust owing to her wild instincts, with references to her migrating from place to place. The parallel between the man/woman, culture/nature dichotomies is evident in the similes utilized to describe woman. Baby Kochamma’s physical attraction for father Mulligan throughout her life is reflected in the flower she loved the most: the “anthurium.” The anthurium is also called the “boy flower” in accordance with its phallic shape. The flowers on the spadix are often divided on the basis of sex, with a sterile band separating male from female flowers. Gender difference theories also emphasize how, as in the realm of gender, the territory of human life has been divided into “the external world” and “the domestic world,” with women having speech rights in one but not in the other (Zhu, 2011, p. 64).

The dismantling of boundaries in the culture/nature dialectical pair functions parallel to the thematic aspects of the novel. Ammu strives to dismantle preset boundaries for women, caste, and an immanent existence, in her relationship with Velutha. Velutha and Ammu unite as man and woman on the site of the River Meenachal transgressing all man-made barriers of caste and class. Roy’s language also registers an attempt at effacing boundaries as the language “guides us to those who are often excluded from our vision. Her use of short sentences, use of metaphors alluding to smallness and her emphasis on solitary, pregnant words are all the devices she uses to highlight her vision” (Ch’ien, 2004, p. 156). The language appears to be employed with a view to subvert the inherent sexism in language, as Roy claimed in an interview, “I Don’t Believe There Are Only

Two Genders. I See Gender As a Spectrum” (Roy, 2015). Ecofeminists insist on a gender-sensitive language, theory, and practices that revolt against the exploitative experiences and insensitive patriarchal culture that thwart women and nature, as Susan Griffin, a distinguished ecocritic, calls for a “nurturing femaleness to speak, chant and sing so that people might live” (quoted in Elliott, 1988, p. 1067).

As per the muted group theory, that is generally used to refer to ethnology and the study of cultures, marginalized groups (a) do not have a voice in the culture—not only do they not have a say explicitly but in fact are silenced—and do not have the right to speak, and (b) these groups tend to develop alternate ways of communicating what is sometimes postulated as “back-channel” communication. Robin Lakoff states that women use backchannel communication with specialized ways of communicating, and so do men who speak from marginalized situations—the poor, the powerless (Zhu, 2011, p. 613). In keeping with this theory, suppression manifests in terms of silence or in terms of revolt against the unnatural in the novel. Roy in *The God of Small Things* speaks of strange insects that appeared like ideas in the evening and burnt themselves before evening. These original ideas were suppressed and did not see the light of day due to the rigid constraints of communism where people were asked to be politically right. Individualism was relegated. Epistemic violence is found in the rejection of ideas that were non-Western. So native ideas that emerged from inherent instinct burnt themselves like the fireflies than survive on borrowed light of a superficial English culture. Epistemic violence conceptually relates to the Subaltern, wherein the “Subaltern must always be caught in translation, never truly expressing herself,” because of the colonial power’s destruction of her culture, and the marginalization of her way of understanding and knowing the world (Spivak qtd in Briggs and Sharp, 2008, p. 664); particularly significant is the concept of colonialism being always perceived as a masculine phenomenon. The muted voice of nature is discerned in this kind of suppression.

The second aspect, revolt functioning as a backchannel communication motif, is found in the unnatural union of the twins. The twins express dissent against their unnatural separation. Mortensen in his essay “Civilization’s Fear of Nature” argues that *The God of Small Things* voices the consequences of exploiting nature in the name of progress. He states, “Nature, is not so much absent as simply repressed, and the brilliance of Roy’s approach consists precisely in showing that the postmodern denial of nature produces a threatening return of the repressed” (Mortensen, 2003, p. 188), in line with Usha Jesudasan’s retaliation of the suppressed. Coined by Freud, Jean-François Rabain (2005) describes the phrase as a process whereby “repressed elements, preserved in the unconscious, tend to reappear, in consciousness or in behaviour, in the shape of secondary and more or less unrecognizable ‘derivatives of the unconscious’” (Kunhi, 2014, pp. 159-160). The unnatural union of the twins toward the end of the novel comes across as an attempt on the part of the twins

to revert to their zygotic form by means of fusion. The term *zygotic* is utilized here to refer to their spiritual oneness at birth though they are not identical twins. The separation of the twins who were inextricably linked was unquestionably unnatural according to the author. Roy states,

They were a rare breed of Siamese twins, physically separate, but with joint identities. (Roy, 1997, p. 2)

In the Orangedrink Lemondrink incident, Rahel is aware of what happened to Estha even without his telling her. Besides, Rahel has a memory of waking up one night giggling at Estha's funny dream. (p. 2)

She remembers the taste of the tomato sandwiches—Estha's sandwiches, that Estha ate—on the Madras Mail to Madras. (p. 3)

She didn't notice the single Siamese soul. (p. 41)

Before the twins were separated they were thought of together as Me and separately or individually as Us or We. (p. 2)

A further revolt of Nature against what was deemed unnatural can be perceived in the unnatural sexual relationship between the twins even while they were children. The act appears to be an emotional requite directed against the sexual abuse of Estha by the Orangedrink Lemondrink man. Writers have always likened child sexual abuse to the premature plucking of a bud from a plant. The twins revolt against this early unnatural act by indulging in a sexual act while they were still young. An evocative scene points to a sexual encounter between Rahel and Estha with references to the rupture of the vagina, and sperms floating on the water:

Two happy hearts soared like coloured kites in a skyblue sky but then, in a slow green whisper, the river . . . a pair of two-egg twin hearts sank and settled on the step above the sixth . . . The deep swimming fish covered their mouths with their fins and laughed sideways at the spectacle . . . A white boat-spider, struggled briefly and drowned. Her white egg sac ruptured prematurely, and a hundred baby spiders . . . stippled the smooth surface of the green water. (Roy, 1997, p. 204)

To further attest this fact, *before they transgress as adults* later in life, the author remarks,

Perhaps Ammu, Estha and she were the worst transgressors. But it wasn't just them. It was the others too. They broke all the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tampered with the rules that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much. The laws that make grandmothers grandmothers, uncles uncles, mothers mothers, cousins cousins, jam jam and jelly jelly. (p. 31)

Also, immediately after they transgress as adults, the author remarks, "Only that once again they broke the Love Laws. That lay down who should be loved And how. And

how much" (Roy, 1997, p. 328). Readers must take note of the *once again* and *they* that point to an earlier instance of transgression.

Backchannel communication is also found in the dismantling of walls that are prototypical of civilization. The countryside is said to turn an immodest green as it forebodes the doom to come. Nature makes a desperate attempt to establish itself as "boundaries blur as tapioca fences take root and bloom. Brick walls turns moss green. Pepper vines snake up electric poles. Wild creepers burst through laterite banks and spill across the flooded road" (p. 1). Man forgets that modernization can never insulate itself to the effects of Nature. Mortensen in his essay "Civilization's Fear of Nature" argues that *The God of Small Things* voices more than just emphasize the consequences of exploiting nature in the name of progress. It also signals the revolt of nature.

Survival instinct of the downtrodden functions as a backchannel communication motif and is highlighted through parallels with nature as both function on the plane of the subaltern. Estha is said to have a difference defense mechanism to survive, similar to a lungfish that estivated through dry seasons. The lungfish remains unusually dormant and survives extreme conditions just as Estha remained unusually silent and sailed through situations. He is also said to blend into the background of whichever place he was: into bookshelves, gardens, curtains, doorways, and streets, to appear inanimate. There is an allusion to his chameleon-like quality here in his survival instinct. The author also talks of an octopus residing within Estha. An octopus's main (primary) defense is to hide, either not to be seen at all, or not to be detected as an octopus. An octopus's camouflage is aided by certain specialized skin cells which can change the apparent color, opacity, and reflectiveness of the epidermis. Like an octopus had three hearts, Estha also struggled against the conflicting emotions within himself. He grew accustomed to the octopus that grew inside him and squirted inky tranquilizers on his past to escape from his abusive past. We find other instances where Estha called Rahel a Refugee Stick Insect during their fights owing to her tendency to go into exile. The history house becomes a refuge later as lizards inhabit the house. Lizards were characteristic of autonomy as they deserted/amputated tails as a self-defense mechanism. Later, the readers find the lizard on the adult Rahel's t-shirt as well, as she was emotionally cut off from Estha. "Amputees suffer pains, cramps, itches in the leg that is no longer there. That is how she felt without him, feeling his presence where he no longer was," says Márquez (1998) in *Love in the Time of Cholera*. This move on part of the novelist to introduce correspondences in terms of nature proves to be effective. Particularly in lieu of arguments of ecocritics that to separate the environment as an isolated phenomenon is to revitalize not only the sovereignty of humans over nature but also the inequities that sovereignty entails (Johnson, 2009).

Survival instinct is also manifest in the theme of preservation in the novel. Nature desperately attempts to be preserved for posterity in the eloquent symbol of Paradise Pickle Preserves. Analogous to the same, Ammu strives to uphold her individuality. The fear of losing nature in its pristine form brings in the need for it to be artificially preserved. The author states that Nature and history were prevalent in the form of bleached bones indicating artificial preservation yet again. In the chapter, “The God of Small Things,” Ammu senses the vinegary fumes that rose from the cements of Paradise Pickles—“fumes that wrinkled youth and preserved futures” (Roy, 1997, p. 224). Ursula Heise (2008) creates new ecocritical perspectives in *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*, in which she urges ecocritics to look beyond the immediacy of place and envision the Earth as “our place, our locus,” as a place that deserves loyalty and preservation (p. 46).

The picture Roy conjures up of Earth as a Woman giving life to Man subverts the theory of Semitic religions professing woman to be created from the ribs of Man.

The earth—four thousand six hundred million years old—was a forty-six-year-old woman—as old, say, as Aleyamma Teacher, who gave them Malayalam lessons. It had taken the whole of the Earth Woman’s life for the earth to become what it was. For the oceans to part. For the mountains to rise. (p. 27)

Chacko presents an objective and impersonal Earth Woman as opposed to *Mother Earth* stripping the earth of its humane qualities. Carolyn Merchant (1993), a noted ecofeminist, says that in olden days, “The image of the earth as a living organism and nurturing mother had served as a cultural constraint restricting the actions of human beings,” and she stresses, “As long as the earth was considered to be alive and sensitive, it could be considered a breach of human ethical behaviour to carry out destructive acts against it” (p. 276). As with the case of Chacko, the modernization process lessened man’s reverence for Mother Nature and ecological destruction proved to be as rampant as the subordination of women.

Virginia Woolf (1929) in her *A Room of One’s Own* states, “Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history.” Roy’s assertion of “Man’s subliminal urge to destroy what he could neither subdue nor deify” (Roy, 1997, p. 308) functions parallel to the same. Carolyn Merchant’s (1990) outstanding *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* traces the Renaissance shift toward patriarchal authority that expunged the female presence in an Aristotelian, God-permeated universe. In keeping with Roy’s subversive tactics, when Roy states, “The whole of contemporary history, the World Wars, the War of Dreams, the Man on the Moon, science, literature, philosophy, the pursuit of knowledge was no more than a Blink of the Earth Woman’s eye” (p. 27), she renders the whole of (his)story to a mere

blink of the earth woman’s eye. As earth is apostrophized as the mother, the act of defilement proves to be as deceitful and dishonorable as working against one’s own mother.

Roy, thereby, succeeds in presenting an ecocritical perspective through humanizing nature in a way that appeals to our emotions as well, and justifies the title of the novel. The move to blur the boundaries between nature and the human world not only works as a stylistic strategy that echoes the theme but communicates with the sensibilities and sentiments of the readers. The ecofeminist dilution of duality works as a subversive strategy questioning the conceptualization of hierarchies where for “the anthropocentric feminists, the ‘other’ is nonhuman animals and nature; for radical feminists, ‘other’ is culture and man; for the animal liberationists, ‘other’ is human emotion and collectivity” (Gruen, 1993, p. 80). Efficacious incorporation of the various motifs to signal revolt in an age of anthropocene proves to be successful. The author underscores that “literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but rather, plays a part in an immensely complete global system, in which energy, matter and ideas interact” (Glottfelty & Fromm, 1996, p. xix). The foregrounding of the personal despair of the downtrodden like Velutha, Ammu, and the suppression of other natural elements in the novel, work by extension through intertextuality and activism in Roy’s prose works, extending the theme of revolt beyond the purview of the characters and text. She extends it to the state of the dispossessed tribals and the displaced farmers affected by the “Big Dams,” which Roy claims in her essay, “The Greater Common Good,” are a brazen means of taking water, land, and irrigation away from the poor and gifting it to the rich, as “their reservoirs displace huge populations of people, leaving them homeless and destitute” (Roy, 2002b, p. 42). And this “public turmoil of the nation” is further extended to the earth as a whole when she voices her concern over the amassing of nuclear weapons:

If there is a nuclear war, our foes will not be China or America or even each other. Our foe will be the earth herself. The very elements—sky, the air, the land, the wind and water—will all turn against us. (Roy, 2002a, p. 6)

The voice of *The God of Small Things*, thus, works through extension.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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