

## The God of Small Things: An Analysis from 'Green Studies' Perspective

In spite of an awakening in respect of environment which has given rise to a number of organisations including political parties popularly known as Greens in the west, it has not found an organized expression in India. In such a state, Arundhati Roy has shown her serious commitment with her writings and activities by joining like-minded people on vital issues related to environment. In 1998 she participated in a seminar on the Hiroshima Day and presented a paper where she said, "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- the sky, the air, the land, the wind and water- will all turn against us. Their wrath will be terrible..."<sup>1</sup> She showed her solidarity with the Chaliyar Human Rights Samithi fighting against pollution caused by Grasim industry at Mavoor in Kojhikode, Kerala. She opposed "a new development plan for the Panchmarhi area in which hotel building would be allowed at the cost of despoiling the beauty and sylvan backdrop of"<sup>2</sup> the hill station. She also associated herself with the Narmada Bachao Andolon considering the adverse effect of the Narmada valley development project which "will alter the ecology of the entire river basin of one of India's biggest rivers. For better or for worse, it will affect the lives of twenty five million people living in the valley. It will submerge and destroy 4000 square kilometers of natural deciduous forest."<sup>3</sup> With all these activities regarding environmental issues "Arundhati Roy will continue to stir the world's conscience"<sup>4</sup> as hoped by the Veteran Gandhian social workers. She did it perfectly which is evident from the bitter criticism against her for developing a social conscience suddenly by the central government, the state governments of Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, and Maharashtra and their supporters. She brilliantly answered these critics in an interview published in the Frontline: "Is it a crime to develop suddenly a social conscience? ...But the critics you mention should take a look at my earlier work- for instance they could begin by reading *The God of Small Things*."<sup>5</sup> Her suggestion certainly indicates that she has delineated environmental issues in this novel to stir the conscience of human beings in Indian society and to make Indian readers realise their sensitivities about the importance of preserving the harmonious relationship between the people and the physical environment.

It is an undeniable fact that only a few Indian writers have committed themselves to exploring the environmental issues through their works. Ruskin Bond, whose works show ecology as an important or dominant theme, expresses his deep concerns about depletion in natural environment. The natural scenic hills of Dehradun and Mussoorei almost invariably form the setting of his works and reflect his ardent faith in the healing powers of nature. In *An Island of Trees* (1992) he shows his worries about the unthoughtful actions of man towards nature. The

grandmother reveals to her granddaughter, Koki, the deep bond that grows between humans and non-humans if only there is love and compassion. His another short story *No Room for a Leopard* (2007) presents a pathetic conditions of the animals due to deforestation and its aftermath. Through most of his fictional works, Ruskin Bond has shown a chain that binds man and nature like the balance of eco-system and his pity for the unsympathetic and cruel actions human beings have done towards nature. Nature including animals, plants, and birds has a strong presence in almost all the works of Anita Desai who uses external landscapes to portray the interior states of mind. In *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) the complexities of the inner life Maya (who compares herself with the peacock in the jungle) resulting from her resentment against her husband for his inability to communicate with her, are brought out through the landscape. Kiran Desai in her *Inheritance of Loss* (2006) brings out the inhumanity of the human world whose actions ruin the other creatures. She also uses the natural world to describe the mood of human beings. The story of the novel starts with the description of the mountain Kanchenjunga that reflects the unhappy mood of the child who has lost her parents. Kanchenjunga is also presented as a part of nature which pays for the brutality of humans and whose beauty is destroyed in the war for power. Amitav Ghosh's the *Hungry Tide* (2005) portrays the interrelationship among man, nature and animal world. Nature is seen here with its full beauty and ugliness. He presents the wrath of nature and fragility of humans at the mercy of the former. Thus natural world has been portrayed with its beauty offering a true bond with human beings and destructive power for their merciless action. But Arundhati Roy in *The God of Small Things* has presented natural environment as a victim of the human greed and callousness that put forward a clear threat to the existence of all living beings. Therefore, 'Green Studies' approach may be a viable one to show how the natural environment is disturbed in Indian society by people from top of the government to the individuals with a view to drawing their attention to the fact that they should dwell in a harmonious relationship with natural environment.

'Green Studies' denotes a critical approach to explore the environmental issues in literary work. It is an emergent movement in the field of literary critical theory which appeared in the UK in the early 1990s and took its literary bearings from the British romanticism of 1790s. The term 'Green Studies' has come into view with the publication of Jonathan Bate's *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Physical*

*Environmental Tradition* (1991). Like its American variant of 'eco-criticism', 'Green Studies' refers to "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment."<sup>6</sup> But they differ from each other to a great extent specially in their ways of looking into the environment. 'Green Studies' "tends to be more 'minatory', that is, it seeks to warn us of environmental threats emanating from governmental, industrial, commercial, and neo-colonial forces"<sup>7</sup>, whereas the American variant tends to be 'celebratory'. Physical environment, however, includes pure nature-wilderness, the scenic sublime, and the countryside, and culture- the domestic picturesque and some sets of activities and behaviour shared by a community whereas both are responsive to each other. Nature, therefore, has become one of the crucial concerns for 'Green Studies' critics to whom "it really exists, out there beyond ourselves... actually present as an entity which affects us, and which we can affect, perhaps fatally, if we mistreat it."<sup>8</sup> In this regard, they also try to point out how human beings can dwell in a harmony with nature and how it (nature) is affected by the anthropocentric problems like pollution and urbanisation resulting in cultural decadence as well. 'Green Studies' critics also seek to find out the fatal problems faced by human beings when they try to belong to a trans-national or cross-cultural environment popularly known as the concept of self-transplantation by Rachel Azima. Therefore, the continuous misuse of the environment that threatens the ecological balance has recently caught the attention of the literary critics. It is this sense of concern and its reflection in literature that has given rise to 'Green Studies' literary theory seeking to study the close relationship between the natural and social worlds, and how this relationship has been textualised by the writers in their works.

Arundhati Roy, as a socially committed writer, shows her deep concern over environment in *The God of Small Things*. She has presented environmental problem as one of the small things which is neglected for a long time in Indian society. Like the Indian women who remain silent against the patriarchal social oppression, environment has been enduring a wanton destruction for ages which stirs Roy's eco-conscious mind. Jason Cawley, one of the five Booker Judges writes: "Roy's achievement... is never to forget about small things in life, insects and flowers, wind and water, the outcaste and despised."<sup>9</sup> In *The God of Small Things*, "you connect the very smallest things to the very biggest: whether it is the dent that a baby spider makes on the surface of water or the quality of the moonlight on a river or how history and politics intrude into your life, your house"<sup>10</sup> Arundhati says in an interview with David Barsamian. All these small things certainly stand for the environment which is the biggest concern for the 'Green Studies' critics.

One of the crucial concerns of "Green Studies" criticism is nature. It talks about how to preserve

nature, how to make people aware about it and how to dwell in a harmonious relationship with it. Although Arundhati Roy shows how nature has become a subject to destruction, her real intention in the novel is to take people back to nature for their own betterment. Therefore, she has set this novel in the 1960s in a village named Ayemenem in Kerala, an Indian State which is full of natural grandeur- trees, green fields and river. It is significant to mention here that Roy herself spent her childhood days here in this village in close harmony with nature. She describes this paradisaical world of village greenery and the river Meenachal:

"The nights are clear but suffused with sloth and sullen expectation. But by early June the south-west monsoon breaks and there are three months of wind and water with short spells of sharp, glittering sunshine that thrilled children snatch to play with. The countryside turns an immodest green. Boundaries blur as tapioca fences take root and bloom. Brick walls turn moss green. Pepper vines snake up electric poles. Wild creepers burst through laterite banks and spill across the flooded roads."<sup>11</sup>

The natural beauty of the village is exposed through Rahel and Estha upon their return to Ayemenem after a long gap of 23 years. The deplorable condition of the river Meenachal takes them back to their childhood memories of its beauty.

"It was warm, the water. Grey- green. Like rippled silk.

With fish in it.

With the sky and trees in it.

And at night, the broken yellow moon in it."<sup>12</sup>

They also dream of the coconut trees bending on the river where there were up-streams in the morning and down-streams in the evening. They also come to know some smaller fishes of the river-the flat, foolish pallathi, the silver paral, the wily, whiskered koori and the karimeen. Moreover, they dream of the dull, sullen sound of the boatmen's bamboo poles as they thudded against the dark and oiled boat-wood. On the way to Cochin along with their mother, uncle and grandmother Rahel and Estha look at the scenic sublime and the beautiful countryside of Ayemenem and its neighbouring places: "It was a sky-blue day in December sixty nine... A sky-blue Plymouth, with the sun in its tailfins, sped past young rice-fields and old rubber trees, on its way to Cochin. Further east, in a small country with similar landscape (jungles, rivers, rice-fields)... It was peace time and the family in the Plymouth travelled without fear or foreboding."<sup>13</sup> Certainly, there was peace, happiness and a sense of satisfaction among the people who lived in the lap of

nature. The enchanting greenery and the natural scenario of Ayemenem are linked with the gift of God in the form of river Meenachal which flows through a broad landscape that has meadows, hills, hillocks, narrow water-ways, swamps, and marshes:

“Meenachal river is the part and parcel of the life of the rural areas as it is the source of water in wells and for vegetation on the banks. It is the source of water supply to the urban centres in Kottayam Taluk also. In November and December rural people from Karnataka region come and settle here for a few days. They have traditional system of preparing net on a large scale which is merged in the river. They usually get big catch and will sell it in the markets. Thus the Meenachil River literally means “river of meen”[fish]. There are 78 varieties of fish in the river.”

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The passage portrays the life of the fishermen living in the village of Ayemenem in close proximity with natural world. Velutha, an Untouchable, lives in a little laterite hut downriver from the Ayemenem house. He catches fish in the river and cooks it on an open fire. He sleeps outdoors, on the bank of the river. He makes Rahel her luckiest ever fishing rod and teaches her and Estha how to fish. The best fish curry in the world, according to Estha, is the red fish curry cooked with black tamarind in Velutha's house. Velutha here obviously represents the downtrodden people of the society who depend on the river in many ways to live their life smoothly and serves the aristocratic people who maintain a clear distance from the poor untouchable paravans. On the other hand, Ammu, mother of Rahel and Estha and the central figure of the novel returns to the lap of nature to forget the patriarchal oppression after divorcing her husband. She loves Velutha disregarding the social norms, spends hours on the river bank and swims in the midnight. A parallel can be made between Ammu and Uma of Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra* (1993). Uma is tortured and exploited by her father in her childhood and even sold to a brothel since she is a misfortune, ie. her mother died at her birth. But this girl is saved by a monk Naga Baba and taken into the deep jungle far away from locality and finally taken across the Narmada. There she begins a new life in the lap of nature and learns to live in tune with trees and creatures. Ultimately, Narmada becomes her home and she becomes the daughter of Narmada. M.K. Ray rightly says, “The woman so long as she is under the clutches of the mechanical, cynical society is tortured and crushed. But once she is allowed to come to nature as recluse, she is restored to the process of being, becoming and fulfillment in which she becomes a replica of the great river itself.”<sup>15</sup> Like Uma, Ammu is tortured and

exploited by her father and husband. But she finds peace and happiness on the bank of the River Meenachal. At this stage Ammu really seems happy since she fulfills her biological desire with Velutha and dreams to start a new life. She could have become really happy if the social norms had not put any hindrance. Ammu's contact with nature indicates a harmonious relationship with it that can make life secure and serene.

However, the physical environment that includes nature in the beginning, finally moves to culture. When people live in tune with nature, a tendency of civic sense and social hygiene reflects in their mind. Baby Kochamma, Ammu's aunt, exposes her aesthetic sense making and looking after a garden in front of Ayemenem house in the midst of nature. After having a diploma on Ornamental Gardening from Rochester, she has turned a piece of land ‘into a lush maze of dwarf hedges, rocks and gargoyles’ where there are different ‘Anthuriums’, ‘Rubrum’, ‘Honeymoon’ and ‘a host of Japanese varieties’. She used to spend her afternoon in the garden and worked in it: “Like a lion-tamer she tamed twisting vines and nurtured brisling cacti. She limited bonsai plants and pampered rare orchids. She waged war on the weather. She tried to grow edelweiss and Chinese guava.”<sup>16</sup> Aurdhati thus intends to show a physical environment in the novel where human beings can dwell in a harmonious relationship with nature leading to grow a sound culture that strengthens human ties. Ayemenem, therefore, is known for its freshness, unpolluted river and matchless greenery which make life pleasant for the people.

But this natural world is threatened with extinction by the governmental, industrial and commercial forces and individual human interests. The environment which Rahel and Estha enjoyed 23 years ago in their childhood is completely destroyed. The river “greeted her with a ghastly skull's smile, with holes where teeth had been, and a limp hand raised from a hospital bed.”<sup>17</sup> Roy here criticizes the imprudent policy of the government which has built a saltwater barrage down river in exchange for votes from the influential paddy-farmer lobby. Though there is a commercial purpose behind building this barrage regulating the inflow of saltwater from the back-waters that opened into the Arabian Sea, it eventually killed the river. It is true that people are now getting two harvests and more rice but they are getting them at the heavy cost of a river which in no way can be supported. Environmental science does not support building barrage on the river for the purpose of agricultural activities. But the government is doing this for the sake election politics. In fact, the government is controlled by the votes of the paddy-farmer lobby that puts the environment into threat which contradicts **Article 48-A** in the Indian Constitution where it is enacted that “The state shall endeavour to protect and improve the environment and to safeguard the forests and wild life of the country.”

However, despite the fact that it was June, a time of rain, the river was no more than a swollen drain: "A thin ribbon of thick water that lapped wearily at the mud banks on either side, sequined with the occasional silver slant of a dead fish. It was choked with a succulent weed, whose furred brown roots waved like thin tentacles under water," and the river was no more than "a slow slugging green ribbon lawn that ferried garbage to the sea."<sup>18</sup>

'Green Studies' critics talk about environmental pollution which is reflected in *The God of Small Things* with unique importance. When Estha walks along the bank of the river, he smells of shit and pesticides bought with World Bank loans. Most of the fish have died. The ones that survive suffer from fin-rot and have broken out in boils. The novelist is here critical of the hands behind polluting the river and the government policy of buying pesticides with World Bank money, both of which ultimately contribute to making the life of the people miserable. Roy paints a very realistic picture of how river pollution is caused by human insensible act. Children defecate directly onto the riverbed and by evening "the river would rouse itself to accept the day's offerings, and sludge off to the sea, leaving wavy lines of thick white scum in its wake. Upstream clean mothers washed clothes and pots in unadulterated factory effluents."<sup>19</sup>

Urbanisation is another factor that precipitates the environmental degradation in Ayemenem. The population of the village has "swelled to the size of a little town", where only a "fragile façade of greenery"<sup>20</sup> is left. The houses nestle under trees along unmotorable narrow paths that branch off the main road giving the village a "semblance of rural quietness."<sup>21</sup> Estha finds "the new, freshly baked, iced, Gulf-money houses built by nurses, masons, wire benders and bank clerks who worked hard and unhappily in faraway places."<sup>22</sup> The money that flows from the Gulf countries has totally changed the complexion of the houses. The Gulf culture takes its toll and the lifestyle in the village is changed drastically. However, to give a real Indian touch to the process of urbanization "small fish appear in the puddles that fill the PWD potholes on the highways"<sup>23</sup> which enhance the misery of the people living there. Thus, the contemporary society appears in the novel in a rather realistic way. People have changed their life styles and they bid good-bye to conventional houses only to enjoy a totally new life.

There are many other instances of urbanisation in the novel. The dish antenna, the Ooty cupboards, the plastic basket chairs, the Delhi beds, the dressing table from Vienna with cracked ivory knobs, and paint-flaking fridge in the Ayemenem house are all symbol of urbanisation. The modern comforts, such as high heels, puffs sleeves, and lipstick in the houses of foreign returnees can also be considered as instances of urbanisation in the Ayemenem village. Another

important step towards urbanisation is the renovation of the History House by a five star hotel chain. Though the hotel people used to call it God's own Country, the reality was something different:

"The view from the hotel was beautiful, but here too the water was thick and toxic. No swimming signs had been put up in stylish calligraphy. They had built a wall to screen off the slum and prevent it from encroaching on Kari Saipu's estate. There wasn't much they could do about the smell...They knew, those clever hotel people, that smelliness, like other people's poverty, was merely a matter of getting used to."<sup>24</sup>

Though urbanisation is a symbol of progress, Arundhati is critical about its process. In no way she can welcome it in exchange of environmental degradation. She complies with the Green Studies critics who believe that urbanisation disregarding environmental issues leads to cultural decadence as well. The novel contains a lot of evidences that cultural life has suffered a setback in and around the village of Ayemenem. Baby Kochamma, for example, instead of looking after her garden, has become addicted to satellite TV. "Recently, after enduring more than half a century of relentless, pernickety attention, the ornamental garden had been abandoned. Left to its own devices, it had grown knotted and wild, like a circus whose animals had forgotten their tricks."<sup>25</sup> On weekends she watches "The Bold and The Beautiful and Santa Barbara, where brittle blondes with lipstick and hairstyles rigid with spray seduced androids and defended their sexual empires."<sup>26</sup>

Another instance of cultural decadence is the cultural program arranged for the tourists of Heritage by the the Kathakali, an art form of Kerala. In the evening the tourists of the Heritage Hotel are entertained with truncated Kathakali performances to give them a regional flavor. According to the suggestion of the hotel staff, six- hour classics are slashed to twenty-minute cameos by the artists where ancient stories are collapsed and amputated as well. But the vilest thing regarding this cultural program is that instead of showing the original cultural heritage they present distorted sexual scenes: "While Kunti revealed her secret to Karna on the river bank, courting couples rubbed suntan oil on each other. While fathers played sublimated sexual games with their nubile teenage daughters, Pothana suckled young Krishna at her poisoned breast."<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, the porn magazine is sold in the ration shop bears the sign of cultural decadence in Ayemenem.

When Estha walks by the side of the ration shop, he sees “cheap soft-porn magazines about fictitious South Indian sex fiends were clipped with clothes pegs to ropes that hung from the ceiling. They spun lazily in the warm breeze, tempting honest ration buyers with glimpses of ripe, naked women lying on pools of fake blood.”<sup>28</sup>

Therefore, the cultural decadence that is going on hand in hand with rapid urbanisation in Ayemenem is certainly a consequence of not paying heed to keep the natural environment safe and sound. As the novelist remarks, the feeling one gets is that India (and of course Kerala) is going to the dogs. It is worth-saying that people are loosing their innocence, love, family bond, and above all, relationship with natural world.

However, along with the river Meenachal, and the Ayemenem village in general, the Ayemenem house particularly presents a dismal scene of pollution and decay. It has fallen from its golden days to the bottom of its destruction. The old house on the hill stands like an old man with rheumy eyes watching children play, seeing only transience in their shrill elation and their whole-hearted commitment to life. The house itself looks empty. The doors and windows are locked. The front verandah is bare and unfurnished. The floor is sticky. White walls have turned an uneven grey. Arundhati aptly says, “Filth had laid siege to the Ayemenem house like a medieval army advancing on an enemy castle. It clotted every crevice and clung to the window panes.”<sup>29</sup> K.V. Surendran observes: “A dreamy house full of life was on its deathbed and it seemed to appear to wait for the last breath...putting an end to decades of its eventful existence. Ayemenem house had only a past and not even a meaningful present to boast of. All the hopes of a life full of sounds had been shattered.”<sup>30</sup>

The fate to which the ‘Sky-blue Plymouth’, the proud possession of Ayemenem House, has fallen is another symbol of destruction as Estha sees a dead sparrow on its back seat. In every monsoon it settles down more firmly to the ground like an angular arthritic hen setting stiffly on her clutch of eggs. Grass has grown around its flat tyres which indicate that it is of no more use. ‘The Paradise Pickles and Preserves’, another proud possession of the house which once added glamour to it, is now a mere signboard ‘rotted and fell inwards like a collapsed crown.’ When Rahel stepped in the factory, she finds: “The air was heavy with moisture, wet enough for fish to swim in. The floor under her shoes was slick with monsoon scum. A small, anxious bat flitted between the roof beams.”<sup>31</sup>

‘Green Studies’ critics also seek to find out the fatal problems faced by human beings when they try to belong to a trans-national or cross-cultural environment. Rahel, Ammu, Baby Kochamma and Chako are all confronted with this problem. Rahel transplants herself to Larry MacCaslin from America

and goes there to stay with him. It is true that Larry loves her very much and considers her a precious gift. But they cannot understand each other well: “When they made love he was offended by her eyes. They behaved as though they belonged to someone else... he didn’t know what that look meant. He put it somewhere between indifference and despair.”<sup>32</sup> Ultimately their marriage does not last long. Ammu, in the same way, marries a person from another religious and cultural background. She too receives the same fate. Even after giving birth to two children, Ammu has to divorce her husband for his mean incorrigible mentality. Again, she tries her luck with Velutha, a pariah, with a view to starting a new life but it ends in utter failure. Velutha is brutally killed for crossing the socio-cultural boundary which widens Ammu’s path to her death. Baby Kochamma, Ammu’s aunt, loves Father Mulligan, an Irish monk who belongs to Roman Catholicism. To be in touch with him, she does not mind converting to Roman Catholicism against the wish of her father and joins a convent in Madras as a novice. But she realises the futility of her endeavour to get him and remains unmarried throughout her life. Chacko, Ammu’s intellectual and self-absorbed elder brother, is a charming but very untidy Rhodes Scholar at Oxford who tries to transplant himself with an English girl. He meets Margaret while she was working in an Oxford café. Deeply in love with her, partly because she never depends on him or adores him like a mother, he marries her without the consent of his family. She grows tired of his squalor within a year, divorces him around the time that their daughter is born and marries Joe, her brother’s friend during school life. Thus, almost all the major characters of the novel try to transplant themselves with persons from other countries, cultures, or religions which ultimately lead them to their miseries and sufferings. This is how *The God of Small Things* reflects the theory of Azima’s self-transplantation, one of the major concerns of recent ‘Green Studies’ critics.

*The God of Small Things* thus reflects all the issues and concerns the ‘Green Studies’ critics look for. Arundhati essentially raises her voice of protest against almost all forms of environmental degradation around Ayemenem- massive urbanisation, pollution, cultural decadence and futile self-transplantation leading human beings to danger. She also draws our attention to the unscrupulous activities of the governmental agencies and the basic faults of the individual social behavior causing a fatal threat to our natural environment. With her strong agitating spirit she comes forward to emphasise the importance of preserving natural environment in India with a view to saving the people from Nature’s fierce consequences.

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